

DETERRENCE ON NATO'S EASTERN FLANK

HEARING BEFORE THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

November 17, 2025

Printed for the use of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

[CSCE119-3]



Available via www.csce.gov

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE
WASHINGTON : 2026

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION

U.S. SENATE

ROGER F. WICKER, Mississippi *Chairman*
SHELDON WHITEHOUSE, Rhode Island
Ranking Member
JOHN BOOZMAN, Arkansas
KATIE BRITT, Alabama
JOHN FETTERMAN, Pennsylvania
JEANNE SHAHEEN, New Hampshire
TINA SMITH, Minnesota
THOM TILLIS, North Carolina
MIKE ROUNDS, South Dakota

U.S. HOUSE

JOE WILSON, South Carolina *Co-Chairman*
STEVE COHEN, Tennessee *Ranking Member*
ROBERT B. ADERHOLT, Alabama
EMANUEL CLEAVER II, Missouri
RUBEN GALLEG0, Arizona
RICHARD HUDSON, North Carolina
MICHAEL LAWLER, New York
VICTORIA SPARTZ, Indiana
MARC VEASEY, Texas

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

Department of State - to be appointed
Department of Defense - to be appointed
Department of Commerce - to be appointed

C O N T E N T S

Page

COMMISSIONERS

Hon. Roger Wicker, Chairman, from Mississippi	1
Hon. Joe Wilson, Co-Chairman from South Carolina	2
Hon. Steve Cohen, Ranking Member, from Tennessee	13
Hon. John Boozman, from Arizona	14
Hon. Greg Murphy, from North Carolina	16

WITNESSES

Margus Tsahkna, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Estonia	4
Seth Jones, President, Defense and Security Department, Center for Strategic and International Studies	6
Peter Rough, Director, Center on Europe and Eurasia, Hudson Institute	8

DETERRENCE ON NATO'S EASTERN FLANK

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE, U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

Monday, November 17, 2025.

The hearing was held from 3:35 p.m. to 5:06 p.m., Room 222, Russell Senate Office Building, Senator Roger Wicker [R-MS], Chairman, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Committee Members Present: Senator Roger Wicker [R-MS], Chairman; Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Co-Chairman; Representative Steve Cohen [D-TN], Ranking Member; Representative Greg Murphy [R-NC]; Representative Jake Ellzey [R-TX]; Senator John Boozman [R-AR].

Witnesses: Margus Tsahkna, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Estonia; Seth Jones, President, Defense and Security Department, Center for Strategic and International Studies; Peter Rough, Director, Center on Europe and Eurasia, Hudson Institute.

OPENING STATEMENT OF ROGER WICKER, CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATE, FROM MISSISSIPPI

Chairman WICKER: This hearing of the Helsinki Commission will come to order. We convene today to discuss a timely and important matter, deterrence on the eastern flank of NATO.

This fall, Russia violated the sovereign airspace of four countries on NATO's eastern flank in quick succession. Putin's drones crossed into the airspace of Poland, Romania, Estonia, and Lithuania. These provocations are not accidents, and they are not isolated. They are part of a coordinated campaign to probe NATO's defenses, gauge allied reactions, and test how far Moscow can push before meeting a firm response.

This is a taste of Russia's shadow war, a war that extends far beyond airspace, across Europe. Russia has executed cyberattacks and engaged in sabotage and arson. The dictator Vladimir Putin has attacked critical infrastructure and ordered targeted assassinations. He has interfered in elections and weaponized migration. Moscow hopes the West will treat each of these crimes as a separate incident instead of seeing the broader pattern. Today, we hear about the broader pattern.

Ukraine stands at the center of the confrontation between Russia and the West. Valiant Ukrainians are holding back the very forces that would otherwise be at NATO's doorstep. The Kremlin is very interested in how we and our allies support Ukraine's defense.

In September, I joined Senator and Commissioner Jeanne Shaheen to introduce the Eastern Flank Strategic Partnership Act. That legislation would formalize the United States commitment to our frontline allies and ensure U.S. security assistance is directed where the threat is greatest. It is worth noting that the bill would prioritize assistance for countries that are already investing in their own defense. Ultimately, we want our allies to have the tools they need to deter Russian aggression.

Just three weeks ago, the Pentagon announced plans to reduce the U.S. rotational presence in Romania at the very moment when Russian drones are crossing into NATO airspace. House Armed Services Chairman Rogers and I made it clear that such a move sends a strong signal and sends the wrong signal. Rather than withdrawing troops from Europe, we should seek to impose costs on Vladimir Putin. If we do not, we invite further acts of aggression. We risk undermining deterrence in Europe.

Credible deterrence ultimately depends on effective and decisive responses. On NATO's eastern front, Moscow must be shown that any violation of allied territory by drone, aircraft, or other means will meet a unified, rapid, and, if necessary, lethal reaction. In this, the United States must continue to lead with strength.

I would also like to note that tomorrow, the people of Latvia will celebrate their independence day. The festivities are a powerful reminder that the freedom of many of the countries we will discuss today was hard-won and must be steadfastly defended.

We are highly honored to begin today's panel with Margus Tsahkna, the Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs. We are also joined by two American experts. Seth Jones is the president of the Defense and Security Department at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS. Peter Rough is the director of the Center on Europe and Eurasia at the Hudson Institute. I thank these distinguished witnesses for appearing before the Commission today, and I look forward to their testimony.

Now I turn to a longtime friend, my colleague from the House of Representatives and a steadfast supporter of the free people of Eastern Europe, as well as those who wish to be free, Joe Wilson.

**STATEMENT OF JOE WILSON, CO-CHAIRMAN, U.S. HOUSE,
FROM SOUTH CAROLINA**

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Chairman Roger Wicker. Thank you for your leadership and thank you for the extraordinary staff of CSCE who are so effective in working together as we work together—bipartisan, too, and House, Senate, bicameral and bipartisan. This is such a meaningful organization.

With that in mind, I am grateful to appreciate Foreign Minister of Estonia Margus Tsahkna, as well as our distinguished witnesses.

We are in a war we did not chose, a war between dictators with rule of gun, invading democracies with rule of law. Ukrainian soldiers are bravely holding the line on the front, but this war is not confined to Ukrainian trenches. Its consequences are felt across the democratic world, including and especially our NATO eastern flank, where the memory of brutal occupation by the totalitarian Soviet Union is still recent and threatens to return with planning by war criminal Putin to restore the failed Soviet Union.

Strong and secure borders are a cornerstone of democracy and a preserver of peace. It should always be appreciated the United States never recognized the occupation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as Soviet republics. America has always recognized that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are sovereign states, not Soviet republics. Despite being small countries by population and geographical size, the will of the people to live in prosperity and freedom is demonstrated by their tangible commitments to defense and investments in security technologies to protect their borders.

President Trump made the decision to deploy troops to Poland, bolster defense of the eastern flank, because the reality is clear. War criminal Putin has consistently stated his designs on sovereign eastern flank territory. These are countries that have the strongest voice for America internationally, have invested the most in their defense proportionate to GDP [Gross Domestic Product]. There is no substitute for U.S. presence to maintain credible deterrence, and these rotational deployments provide critical readiness training in countries eager to host American troops.

I have visited firsthand at Novo Selo base in Bulgaria, MK[Mihail Kogălniceanu] Airbase in Romania, additionally the bases of Lithuania and Poland. I am so grateful that it has always been true that President Trump understands the threats, in that he was the first to put American troops, for the first time in history, in Poland to stop war criminal Putin. He sent Javelin missiles to the people of Ukraine to stop war criminal Putin's tanks. To stop the funding of war criminal Putin, he stopped Nord Stream 2, which was so significant, as we have a president who understands peace through strength.

War criminal Vladimir Putin is driven by an imperial ambition and a desire to recreate the failed Soviet empire. Our eastern flank allies know better than anyone, deterrence is the first and best line of defense against an enemy with an insatiable appetite for invasion. Airspace and maritime violations are only part of his effort to probe NATO defenses, test our unity, and undermine the institutions he despises.

Russia's not acting alone. The Kremlin is sustained by a coalition of hostile dictatorships, from the regime in Tehran, which supplies drones and weapons, to the Chinese Communist Party, which fuels Russia's rearmament, to the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, which provides artillery and manpower. These dictatorships share one goal, infiltrating and weaken free countries.

Last year, I chaired a Helsinki Commission hearing on, "Russia's Shadow War on NATO," where we examined the spectrum of Moscow's overt and covert attacks on the Western world. These tactics have only grown more brazen and more coordinated and more insulting and more mocking, especially along the eastern flank. Reasserting deterrence and countering these capabilities is costly and requires serious challenges to be made in areas of production and procurement, but will make us more prepared and efficient.

The bottom line: Free countries and the free world cannot wait until a full-scale invasion is at its borders. Last month, Ranking Member Steve Cohen and I introduced the Eastern Flank Strategic Partnership Act in the House. The companion is the bipartisan bill led by Chairman Roger Wicker and Senator Jeanne Shaheen. The

legislation ensures the United States treats the eastern flank as a priority theater and that allies investing in their own defense receive the support they need. We want to make it unmistakably clear America stands with the dynamic frontline partners. Their security is American security.

The people of Estonia and all of Central and Eastern Europe know the price of freedom, and they understand the stakes. Putin's imperialist agenda does not stop at Ukraine—by occupying Transnistria of Moldova, by occupying and invading Georgia, and then rigging elections in the Republic of Georgia—and neither can our resolve. The sick symbiotic relationship between war criminal Putin, the Chinese Communist Party, and the murderous dictatorship of North Korea, and the regime in Tehran, requires deterrence in American and European theaters to prevent aggression in the Indo-Pacific as a warning to the Chinese Communist Party that there is resolve.

There is broad bipartisan support to continue programs like the Baltic Security Initiative, which supplements the significant financial contributions made by Baltic allies. This initiative puts money back into American defense companies and is a great return on investment. These are model allies as—are the foundation of the defense of American families and against U.S. adversaries.

Thank you to the witnesses, and I look forward to your insight. I yield back.

Chairman WICKER: Thank you very much, Congressman—Co-Chairman Wilson, for your very fine statement.

At this point, we will hear testimony from our three distinguished witnesses. We will begin, of course, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia, Margus Tsahkna. Sir, did I say your name somewhere near correctly?

Mr. TSAHKNA: Thank you, Chairman. You said it more correctly than normal in Estonia. Thank you for that.

Chairman WICKER: You are recognized, and we appreciate you coming and sharing your knowledge with us.

TESTIMONY OF MARGUS TSAHKNA, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA

Mr. TSAHKNA: Mr. Chairman, distinguished commissioners, Members of Congress, first of all, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to you, and to the entire U.S. Congress and to the American people, for your steadfast and longstanding political and military support to Estonia. The United States never recognized the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania after the Second World War. You have been there with us every step of the way since 1991. Your unwavering support of us informs our unwavering support of Ukraine.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine is about to enter its fourth year. President Putin's maximalist objectives have not changed: To conquer Ukraine, to dominate its near abroad, to divide the West, and to push the U.S. out of Europe. Russia's attempts to weaken the West follow this old Soviet playbook, fostering division and fear. Russia remains convinced that it can outlast both Ukraine and the West, but President Putin has miscalcu-

lated. Ukraine has not fallen, the West has not crumbled, and our unity endures.

Commissioners, Russia's war is not just about Ukraine. It is a threat to and an attack on the entire transatlantic security architecture. Estonia, like many other NATO allies, has witnessed Russia ramping up its shadow war against the West over the last couple of years. I would like to bring a couple of examples.

First, on September 19 of this year, three Russian MiG-31 fighter jets, armed with air-to-air missiles, violated Estonian and NATO airspace. The aircraft remained in our airspace for 12 minutes, flew a depth of six miles and across a distance of 60 miles, and were as close as 10 miles from the Estonian capital of Tallinn. Ten miles is the distance from this meeting room to Tysons Corner in Virginia. The incursion in September was the fourth violation of our airspace this year alone, and 83rd violation since 2003—yes, 83rd violation since 2003.

Second, in August, we expelled the first secretary from the Russian embassy in Estonia for deliberately undermining our constitutional order and for sanctions violations.

Third, we have seen Russian naval ships and Russian fighter aircraft escorting its shadow fleet vessels in the Baltic Sea. A very concrete incident took place on May 13 when, again, Russia's fighter jet violated Estonian airspace, escorting the shadow fleet vessel.

Fourth, in late 2023, Russian intelligence executed a sabotage operation in Estonia that targeted individuals and private and public property.

Fifth, starting in late 2023, Russia started sending waves of migrants to Estonia and Finnish borders, and we stopped them.

Sixth, in April 2024, Russian GPS jamming of civilian air traffic forced the Finnish airline, Finnair, to suspend flights between the Finnish capital of Helsinki and the Estonian city of Tartu.

Seventh, in May 2024, the Russian border guard unilaterally removed from the Narva River the buoys that demarcate the border between Estonia and Russian. I know that several of the few esteemed commissioners have seen the Narva River firsthand.

None of these acts occurred in isolation. Similar incidents have occurred across Europe, unfortunately.

Dear commissioners, the Russian threat is real, and Russian aggression knows no border or limits. We expect Russia's hybrid campaign to increase and intensify. Russia's goal is to divide the West socially and politically and to disrupt our willingness and ability to support Ukraine. Our response must be clear. Every Russian provocation will mean a NATO more united, a West more resolute, and Ukraine more tightly interlinked with the Euro-Atlantic family.

While conquering Ukraine remains Russia's top priority, Russia is successfully conducting a massive reform of its armed forces. Despite all the Russian casualties in Ukraine, the size of the Russian military is growing. One consequence of this reform will be more Russian personnel and more Russian military assets deployed to Baltic and Finnish borders. In 2016, there were some 125,000 Russian troops as close as 25 miles from the Estonian border. Our population is 1.3 million people. For scale, imagine having some 35 million hostile troops, 25 miles into Canada or Mexico.

Our intelligence suggests that within the next two to three years or less, Russia will return to Baltic borders with even more troops and military equipment than they had before full-scale invasion to Ukraine. Russia has also already demonstrated the ability to rapidly generate large combat-ready forces, but NATO is not standing idly by. Baltic skies are protected by a NATO air policing mission, NATO launched the Eastern Sentry and Baltic Sentry operations to better protect NATO's eastern flank. Politically, as a response to our airspace violation, NATO and United Nations Security Council sent a clear message to Russia: Its aggression against Ukraine and its provocations against the West will not succeed.

Thanks to U.S. leadership, NATO recently agreed to a historic increase of its defense spending. Estonia's core defense spending will hit 5.4 percent of GDP next year. Europe is expected to invest some 7 trillion [dollars] in defense by 2033, including in co-production opportunities. In Estonia, we continue enhancing our border security and our military deterrence, and we continue sending at least 0.25 percent of GDP to Ukraine in military aid.

Here, I wish to thank the U.S. Congress, specifically. For the last several years, you have supported the Baltic Security Initiative. This program has accelerated the development of military capabilities such as air defense and long-range fires across the Baltic states. In 2025, for every dollar in security assistance from U.S., we put \$21 into our defense budget, and most of it is going back to the U.S. economy. The presence of U.S. troops on NATO's eastern front is likewise invaluable. Estonia is honored to provide your troops with top-of-the-class military housing and unique training opportunities. All this makes NATO's deterrence credible. A stronger Europe is a stronger NATO, a stronger America.

To conclude, we will not let Ukraine surrender to Russian aggression or let Russia dictate the terms of peace and security in Europe. Mr. Chairman, commissioners, Members of Congress, I thank you for the privilege of testifying here today. I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.

Chairman WICKER: Thank you very much.

Mr. Seth Jones, we are delighted to have CSIS back with us. You are now recognized for your testimony, sir.

TESTIMONY OF SETH JONES, PRESIDENT, DEFENSE AND SECURITY DEPARTMENT, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Mr. JONES: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks, Mr. Wilson, Dr. Murphy, Mr. Ellzey, and other distinguished members of the Commission. Honored to share my views on this subject, particularly returning from NATO headquarters last week, and also our allies in the U.K.

I would like to reflect on three main points in my testimony here. Happy to get to other issues in the discussion. First is that the Russian government has conducted and continues to conduct a growing campaign of sabotage and subversion against the U.S. and Europe, designed in part to target countries, companies, and individuals that have provided support to Ukraine. What else did we need to see than, within the last 24 hours, the active sabotage on

the Polish rail line that brings materiel, and has brought Members of Congress, into Ukraine from Poland. Just the latest example of sabotage operations likely perpetrated by the Russian State.

Second, much of this campaign has been led by the main intelligence directorate of the GRU [Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye]. These attacks generally across Europe, but we have also seen the targeting of U.S. bases, collection—generally been intelligence collection. They have included bombings, some of which I will go into detail on, drone incursions, sabotage against undersea cables and pipelines, electronic attack, cyber operations, as well as other incidents and intelligence collection against U.S. bases in Europe.

Then, third, a subject that I hope we get into in some more detail, is I do think the U.S. and Europe need to develop a more effective strategy that includes both defensive but also offensive measures to strengthen deterrence on NATO's eastern flank, including with our Estonian allies. Also, to raise the costs on Moscow of its continuing aggression, which is a component of what it is doing in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its nuclear saber-rattling. Actually, we see a Russian campaign that goes from irregular or sabotage operations through to a conventional, full-scale invasion and nuclear saber rattling across the conflict continuum. My government time has been in U.S. Special Operations, but it has been much more than those kinds of acts.

I think what is interesting is not that the Russians and the Soviets before them have been involved in these activities. Much of that during the cold war we referred to, and the Soviets referred to, as "active measures." What is new is the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but also the sheer number of activities. The minister remarked about several of them. According to our data set of Russian activity, between 2022 and 2023, the number of Russian sabotage and subversive acts in Europe quadrupled during that one-year time period, and then tripled again between 2023 and 2024.

Those Russian activities, some of which we assess were Russian government, some of them were leveraging partner forces including elements of Russian criminal organizations or other actors in Europe, included things like explosives against companies that were housing or building materiel sent to Ukraine. The use of blunt instruments against undersea fiber optic cables, including as part of the shadow fleet, and then a range of other activities including targeting transportation links with both cyber, but as we have seen recently, also kinetic activity—bombings against key rail links.

The range of reasons we assess the Russians are likely to do it—have been doing this. Let me just briefly note that I think there are a number of measures that—there have been some helpful steps, but I would just add a few things to consider. One is, I think, we have to be very careful about a decrease in the U.S. conventional footprint in Europe now. We have advocated in research of U.S. force posture, we call it 4+2 force posture, with four brigade combat teams in Europe. I think it is important to send a message to the Russians, particularly with U.S. Army capabilities, that we are serious and we—and those would be important for deterrence.

On offense, I will say, just very briefly, I think the Russians are vulnerable on the economic sanctions, both primary and secondary,

that are worth thinking about escalating. I think the Russians are also vulnerable on a much more targeted activity against their shadow fleet, of which there is intelligence about. Then finally, a need to continue providing assistance to Ukraine. For a range of these reasons, I think Russia can be deterred. I do think the U.S. needs to play an important role.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I would turn it back.

Chairman WICKER: Well, thank you—thank you very, very much.

We now recognize Mr. Peter Rough. Do I have that pronunciation correct?

Mr. ROUGH: You can call me whatever you like, Senator Wicker. Peter Rough is the conventional pronunciation.

Chairman WICKER: Rough, Okay. Very good. Sometimes, if I get it right 50 percent of the time, I feel like I am batting .500. You are recognized, and we are thrilled to have you here.

Mr. JONES: You got my name right, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman WICKER: All right, yes. [LAUGHS.] I struggled, and I did practice all evening last night.

TESTIMONY OF PETER ROUGH, DIRECTOR, CENTER ON EUROPE AND EURASIA, HUDSON INSTITUTE

Mr. ROUGH: Chairman Wicker, Co-chairman Wilson, and distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for this opportunity. The views I express in my testimony, which I will now summarize, are my own and should not be construed as representing an official position of Hudson Institute.

As the minister pointed out, and as Dr. Jones elucidated, Russia is prosecuting a campaign of hybrid warfare against NATO. Putin has complemented this campaign with nuclear threats to gradually tilt the security environment between Russia and NATO in Moscow's favor. Russia's intention is to stress the alliance and exacerbate divisions between allies and within nations. The Kremlin brackets these actions with persistent information operations. To put it directly, Russia is undertaking a comprehensive campaign of political warfare designed to weaken the West.

There is near consensus in the analytical community that as long as Russia struggles to take territory in Ukraine, it cannot afford a broader war with NATO. While this judgment is almost certainly correct, it risks lulling the West into a false sense of security. Because Russia is an offensive and revisionist power, while NATO is a defensive alliance, Moscow has the advantage of choosing both the time and place of any potential confrontation. The salient point is that while the overall military balance favors NATO by a significant margin, the balance of forces in some parts of Eastern Europe may favor Russia in a blitz scenario.

What is to be done? U.S. forces are the backbone of deterrence in Europe. U.S. commanders have testified that permanently stationed troops are invaluable for learning the local terrain and improving interoperability with allies. Yet, until it established U.S. Land Forces 5th Corps Forward Command at Poznan, Poland, in 2023, the U.S. had no permanent force presence in the new member states of NATO, in deference to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. That political agreement with Russia lost all meaning with Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

To counter whatever misperceptions may arise from the recent U.S. decision to pull an infantry brigade back to Fort Campbell, U.S. planners may wish to consider turning a rotational presence into a permanent force in Eastern Europe. Given its strategic location near the Port of Constanța on the Black Sea, Romania is transforming Mihail Kogălniceanu into one of the largest NATO bases in Europe. As a keynote in Europe's security architecture, the base could serve as the ideal host for a modestly sized permanent U.S. garrison.

Even so, adopting a purely defensive posture against Russia is unwise, as Seth Jones elucidated. For the Kremlin, bribing the captains of cargo ships to drag their rusty anchors across the Baltic seabed to cut critical cables would cost a mere pittance. The total cost to Russia of launching its recent drone salvo into Poland totaled no more than a few hundred thousand dollars. As a first step, therefore, NATO's political leaders may wish to change the Kremlin's cost-benefit calculus by tasking commanders to reassess the rules of engagement for the alliance's Baltic air policing mission. Such a directive would, at the very least, get Moscow's attention.

NATO could also tie Russian violations of allied airspace to Russian positions abroad. Ukrainian special forces have already targeted Wagner Group operators in Africa, from Mali to Sudan. The West could make clear to Moscow that it would encourage and facilitate similar operations against Russia's Africa corps, jeopardizing a lucrative Russian market, should the violations of allied airspace continue. Alternatively, every violation of allied territory by a Russian UAV [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles] could be met with the transfer of a commensurate number of cruise or ballistic missiles to Ukraine, whether it is the Swedish-German Taurus or the U.S. Army Tactical Missile System.

Furthermore, while the U.S. and Europe cannot order Moscow to repair damaged infrastructure at the bottom of the Baltic Sea, it can make clear that it will exact a commensurate cost for Russian sabotage. Moscow still earns hundreds of millions of dollars every day in oil sales. The U.S. is eminently capable of metering its sanctions to mirror Russian actions against critical infrastructure. At the conventional level, to ensure that NATO can execute the family of plans ratified at the Vilnius summit in 2023, NATO's political leadership may wish to empower and encourage SACEUR to test the force through regular snap exercises, in addition to the alliance's pre-planned exercises.

This would simulate high-pressure conditions and could identify shortcomings and capabilities, while training the alliance to move quickly in an emergency setting. It is far better to strain the NATO force model in peacetime than it would be in wartime. Finally, this past week has proven very difficult for Ukraine, from military setbacks in Pokrovsk to corruption allegations in Kyiv. I would like to close by reiterating that it remains in the American-European interest to empower Ukraine in its fight for survival. Thankfully, the first billions of dollars in European commitments have served as proof of concept for the PURL [Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List] system. As more European countries participate in this arrangement, the program is only likely to grow.

It is an honor to testify before you today. Thank you for this opportunity. I look forward to your questions.

Chairman WICKER: Well, thank you very much. The fact that my phone rang gives me an opportunity to remind everyone to silence all electronic devices.

Let me begin by you, Mr. Minister. How long have you been in various public offices in your country?

Mr. TSAHKNA: I have been serving on the government level, the Cabinet member, as a minister of social affairs, minister of defense, and now minister of foreign affairs. Altogether, I can say, maybe, like, 6 years. I have been in the public sector as a representative as well since 2007, so it has been a pretty long time.

Chairman WICKER: You know—you know your people pretty well. Is there any sentimentality in Estonia to go back to the days of Soviet rule?

Mr. TSAHKNA: That is zero sentimentality, because of our history. During the Soviet occupation, we lost every fifth Estonian. All these stories are still in our families. We know exactly what happened with killings, with deportations, with escaping from the country. Unfortunately, we see exactly the same things happening in 21st century by Russia in Ukraine.

Chairman WICKER: You are very close to your neighbors in Latvia and Lithuania, both physically and also philosophically. Would that be correct to say?

Mr. TSAHKNA: It is correct.

Chairman WICKER: How many—what percentage of the population in Estonia are principally Russian speaking?

Mr. TSAHKNA: We have close to 30 percent of Russian-speaking minority.

Chairman WICKER: About the same in Latvia. Would that be correct?

Mr. TSAHKNA: In Latvia, a bit more, but the scale is the same.

Chairman WICKER: Russian speakers, high percentage also in Lithuania, is that correct?

Mr. TSAHKNA: Historically, Lithuania had less forced immigration during the Soviet times, so they have less than 10 percent.

Chairman WICKER: I will ask you a leading question. What is your opinion of the absurd assertion of some people in the United States that, because residents of other countries speak Russian, they identify themselves more as people desiring to be ruled by Russia?

Mr. TSAHKNA: Our experience is that these people, Russian-speaking people who are living in Estonia, know even better than we how the life in Russia looks like. Without freedom, under the terror, and also the threat. I can say that most of these people, they do not want to have Russia back to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Of course, it depends on the generations as well. Because older people normally remember the good old times when they had their special rights during the Soviet occupation. I can say that, based on our study and also experience, we have had cases when Russian citizens were living in Estonia, they are traveling to Russia, and also some of them have sent to Ukraine, and they are dead. They know exactly what Russia means.

Chairman WICKER: Mr. Rough and Mr. Jones, imagine, if you will, a young couple in their thirties sitting around in Camden, South Carolina, or perhaps in Corinth, Mississippi, just starting out. A couple of kids. Working hard. Both of them in jobs trying to make ends meet and deal with the challenges of youth and a family. What is it to them whether Ukraine or the Baltic nations are overtaken by a Russian dictator? What does it matter to them? What is their stake?

Mr. ROUGH: Well, Senator, thank you for that question. I would argue that the peace and stability of Europe have long been directly connected to peace and prosperity in the United States. Some two-thirds of global foreign direct investment is transatlantic. Something like 46 of 50 U.S. states trade more with Europe than they do with China. This is by far the most intense and closely knit economic environment you will find anywhere in the world. I interpret Russia's attack on Ukraine, including all of the hybrid operations in Ukraine's near abroad, as Russia's, if not opening, now I would say almost decades-long attack on the European security order. This impacts thousands of jobs. It impacts huge amounts of investment. If European security begins to crumble, so will some of the economic well-being we have here in the United States.

Chairman WICKER: Mr. Jones, same question. I might add to that, what is that couple's stake, or those couples' stake, in the validity and sanctity of our country's solemn word when we give a promise?

Mr. JONES: Well, I think we have committed, as part of a NATO member, to protect democracy in our own country, but also certainly in others as well that we have formal alliances with. You know, it was interesting, on trips to Japan, Korea, and Taiwan recently, all three of them, senior leadership of all three countries, said: What happens in Ukraine and on the eastern front has a significant effect on our security. How do we trust the U.S. going forward if they were to abandon allies in other places?

I would also highlight something that is much bigger than just Russia itself, which is, as we have seen, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started. There has been significant Chinese assistance into Russia, North Korean assistance, including North Korean soldiers, and Iranian assistance, including Shahed industrial capacity in areas like Yelabuga. Americans in 1939 wondered, why should we care about a Nazi Germany that was invading Poland, and then continued into Belgium, and then eventually into France? I think we have got a revanchist Russia and others as well. I think there is a lot to be concerned about.

Chairman WICKER: If I am 100 percent, in my little household, America first, I still have a stake in what is going on in the Baltic nations?

Mr. JONES: Absolutely. I think I am America first, but not America only.

Chairman WICKER: So am I. Thank you very much.

Chairman Wilson,

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Chairman Wicker.

Indeed, it is an honor to be with each of you. Foreign Minister Tsahkna, it is just—it is so encouraging, the success of Estonia. My visit there, as I mentioned to you, to be on the banks of the Narva

River. The chairman, again, was ahead of the curve. People may speak Russian, but they do not want to be part of Russia. They want to be part of Estonia. We have already heard, 1939, what German-speaking people, the recognition of Sudetenland, that Hitler had the same plan, and that is why we need to be strong.

With that in mind, indeed, Foreign Minister, I want you to know that unity is—has indeed not crumbled. It is been really reaffirmed, and I am associate member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. It is just so exciting to me to see NATO standing together, and no wavering. It is just incredible. Then I am also grateful to be the co-founder and co-chair of the European Union Caucus. Again, who would imagine the unity there? The consequence of that is that one of the most recent studies I have seen is that, in terms of per-capita investments to assist the people of Ukraine, the United States has come in 17th per capita GDP.

It is really clear with, indeed, the excess over our providing of aid to our European allies, and so it is just so positive. Then I am really grateful that, indeed, President Trump has recognized this in the past by putting American troops for the first time in Poland, by providing the Javelin missiles to the people of Ukraine to try to avoid this war in the first place, and then to stop Nord Stream 2, the funding of war criminal Putin. With that in mind, where we are is at what point should NATO shift to default air defense rules of engagement, including pre-delegated authority to shoot down hostile drones immediately? What are the operational risks of remaining under peacetime rules?

Mr. TSAHKNA: Thank you. Thank you for this question. This is not only, like, practical question. It is actually going back to history. Also, I see it unfortunately today. This is something that President Putin is using very, very well. It is a fear. Is a fear of escalation, which is actually isolating sometimes our way of thinking what is really happening. President Putin is using fear against us, and every time Russia has more pressure, he is going to talk about escalation. He is still going to talk about nuclear deterrence. Then the Western part of the world will be frozen. I can say to you that, in our region, we do not believe in that. That is why we say as well that the red lines policy and the meaning of NATO must be very clear.

If there is a violation of the airspace, and we see the direct military threat to the NATO member State, we should use force. As well, it was asked after we called the United Nations Security Council meeting about this, it was in September when this high-level United Nations General Assembly week started. Later on, as well, the same question was asked from President Trump. He said very clearly that, on the question if we need to shoot the planes down, it was correct. We need to shoot them down if there is a threat.

I think that we have everything in place. We just need to understand that Putin understands exactly this language. He is pushing us. He is pushing us. We are hesitating. If we are based on fear then he is pushing forward again and again. We seen it since 2007, when President Putin actually published his plan to the Munich Security Conference. He was very clear that his goal is to eliminate the root causes, and root causes for him are a collapse of Soviet

Union. In 2008, we saw invasion to Georgia, and 20 percent of the territory is still occupied. 2014, Ukraine war started, and response was not there. 2022, as well, we have full-scale war in Europe.

In that regard, why I am too long? What I want to say is that we see, very close to Russia, that we must be very clear. No fear. If there is need to use force, we will need to do it, and then the red lines are settled.

Thank you.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Again, thank you. My time is up. Actually, I just want to commend President Jones. We are so grateful for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, what that means. As we have people around our Eastern European allies observing what we are saying today, they know to call on President Jones.

Then, Director Rough, thank you so much. The Hudson Institute, how fantastic it is, and a point I want to make, you mention Constanța. I was 28 years ago visiting Cluj-Napoca in Romania to recognize a sister city relationship with Columbia, South Carolina. At that time, somebody said, hey, one day we dream that American ships will bank at—will be coming to and docking at Constanța. Well, it came true 10 years later. Not some far off.

Additionally, 28 years ago I visited Chelyabinsk in Russia, where it was a sister city program put together. It was so impressive to me see our shared culture of art, literature, architecture, arts in every way, music. My hopes for a free and independent Russia have been doomed by war criminal Putin. The people of Russia, I am just hoping one day they too will have the opportunities the people have of the eastern flank of NATO.

I yield back.

Chairman WICKER: Thank you.

Now the chair recognizes Representative Steve Cohen.

STATEMENT OF STEVE COHEN, U.S. HOUSE, FROM TENNESSEE

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thank the witnesses. I apologize for being a little late. This is most important subject.

I visited Narva. You can visually see the city of Narva, the area, and it is so Russian in terms of stark architecture that is typical Soviet. The expressions on the people's faces are those of people who do not seem to be happy campers, unlike in the rest of Estonia. I am happy to see you, sir. You have one of the most attractive leadership groups in the world, and nice that they chose a minority to send here. I enjoyed my visit to Estonia. Always have. [LAUGHS.] There is nothing changed—

Chairman WICKER: I think the minister is a very handsome man. [LAUGHTER.]

Representative COHEN: I concur with the chair. [LAUGHTER.] He is in a league of his own. [Laughs.] 1939 and today are no different. The attitudes of Putin and Stalin are no different. It is Russia, Russia, Russia, Soviet Union, Soviet Union, Soviet Union, and that has not stopped. That is what drives Putin. It has driven him since he was KGB Komitent in Germany and saw the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was awful to him. He has never forgotten that. Politicians who sometimes forget old problems and go on to new prob-

lems. Sometimes they cannot get over old problems, and they get into repeating errors of the past.

We are going to have—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are going to have problems with Russia. They would love to have you back in the Soviet Union. We need to act strongly. I know President Trump has mixed postures toward Russia. What he did in Helsinki was sinful. What he did in Alaska was almost as sinful to welcome him to our country, to roll out the red carpet, to have our troops honor him when he just come as a charade. He never came to Alaska with any idea of working toward a peace agreement. He does not want peace. He wants to take over Ukraine. He would like to kill Zelensky. He would like to go into the other countries in Eastern Europe, and he will do that.

Russia has a lot of significant and lethal military equipment on a scale comparable to ours and China's, and maybe in some cases surpassing it. They did not do that to win the science fair. They wanted to come after us and our Eastern European friends. Our president must understand that, and strengthen our resolve to help our Eastern European allies, because that is being America first. They will come after us eventually. They want world domination. The planes that they have—missiles that they have got that can stay in flight for interminable amounts of time are not necessarily intended for the Baltic countries. It is intended for the United States. There is no need for those missiles if they were just interested in Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and other countries in Eastern Europe. They are after us.

We need to be prepared for it. We need to fight—know that Ukraine is fighting the war for us now. They need more defensive weapons, and they need more authority to attack Russia and bring the fight to the Russians. That is the only way we can stop them. Putin only knows power. To retreat from him, as we did in Helsinki and as we did in Alaska, was wrong. It only strengthens him. I hope that we get bolder and we understand the importance of what is happening in Ukraine and what would happen in the Baltic states if Ukraine is not successful in fending off the Russians. Thank you for your country's strength and for its desire for democracy, which all people should yearn for.

I yield back the balance of my time.

Chairman WICKER: Thank you very much, Representative Cohen.

Senator BOOZMAN, I am going to give you a minute to collect your thoughts here and recognize Mr. Jake Ellzey of Amarillo, Texas. Representative Ellzey is a Navy veteran, fighter pilot, and a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, and we welcome him to the Commission.

You are recognized for questions, sir.

STATEMENT OF JOHN BOOZMAN, U.S. SENATE, FROM ARIZONA

Senator ELLZEY: Thank you, Senator. Appreciate being here. It is actually the thrill of a lifetime, as I studied growing up about the Helsinki Commission and the work that they do for world peace. I am just privileged to be a part of this now with so many friends, and to see you all here today.

Vladimir Putin is not a president. He is a dictator, and he is a czar. What we have to understand is these four dictators that very

much reflect what occurred in 1939 are now stronger because of the invasion of Ukraine, not weaker. They have gotten together on economic, industrial, and defense cooperation, and that has increased amongst all four. If anybody is deluding themselves into thinking this is about Russia and the Baltics or Russia and the Nordics, it is not. What troubles me about some of the discussions that we have in the media, not here today, but the discussion, and I guess it is the accepted term now, is hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare is one of those terms that really makes it antiseptic. It is as if there are no victims, as if there is no damage, there is no deaths, there is no destruction.

We, in 1999, learned that the Chinese are using unrestricted warfare in their aims for the South China Sea and beyond. We need to call this for what it is, as it is unrestricted warfare in all the ways that they are doing it, to include killing people in foreign nations. That is an act of war, so many ways that they are doing that. I think we should start calling it unrestricted. I am pleased with what I am seeing from NATO, the responses that we have had. From time to time, we have kind of tried to find our way on this. I think we need to continue to send the signal that we are going to send permanent troops into Europe to defend them, because Vladimir Putin is the orc. He is the ultimate orc, as a fan of "Lord of the Rings."

John 10:10 says the enemy kills, steals, and destroys. Tell me what Russia builds, what they improve? They improve nothing. They build nothing. They kill, steal, and destroy, and they are probing the Baltics. They are probing the Nordics right now to see if there is going to be a response, and till now—up until now, there has been no cost for anything they have done. I am proud to say that President Trump said, shoot them down, and I am a proponent of that myself. Peter, I am going to ask you a question, put you on the spot. In 1994, we had the Budapest Memorandum, which said Russia is not going to invade, and we would be there to protect Ukraine. Different president. In 1997, we had the Founding Act. Different president, different czar in Russia. Can we just count those as not being in effect anymore?

Mr. ROUGH: First of all, Congressman, thank you for your service and thank you for your leadership on national security issues since the moment you entered Congress. It has been a pleasure getting to know you and watching you at work.

I think the NATO-Russia Founding Act is totally obsolete. I do not think the United States should feel bound by it at all. It has essentially been torn up by the Russians. If one reads the language of the act, it has been totally violated by the Russian Federation. I agree 100 percent that the Russians understand strength, and strength alone. To connect it to Chairman Wilson's remarks, you know, remember in 2015 in November the Turks shot down a Sukhoi SU-24, and ever since, the Russians have not violated Turkish airspace once.

Now, we should not, I think, act brazenly. These are MiG-31s that violated Estonian airspace, certified with dual-use and nuclear-capable Kinzhal missiles. Nonetheless, at least looking at rules of engagement, I think, is a way to flip that cost-benefit calculus for the Russians and make them think twice about violating

airspace for 10 minutes, which is a level of audacity that has to go challenged.

Representative ELLZEY: Thank you. When we talk about these nations, the Baltics and the Nordics, we are talking about 10 million people total, 1.3 million people in Estonia. They are not that big. They are—as they are in Taiwan and as they are in Israel, they are surrounded by enemies that are only minutes away. Do you have the capacity right now? Do you have everything you need to defend yourself in case this incursion comes again? Through Article Four, we have now said it is time to knock one down.

Mr. TSAHKNA: First of all, the Nordic-Baltics economy together belongs to the G-10 economies, and, actually, Nordic-Baltics economies together exactly the same size as Russia. If you are adding Poland, it is 150 percent of Russian economy. Economically, we are very powerful. Now, if you are asking the question about military capabilities, of course, we have our own capabilities, but we are committed to NATO. Also, we have agreed the NATO defense plans regionally, and they are good plans, actually, since two years ago in Vilnius we agreed the new defense plans. There are gaps we need to fulfill. That is the reason why we are now increasing heavily the investments to defense. Of course, we have capabilities to fight back. If we are talking about a full-scale invasion from Russia, so we need full NATO. We need, as well, the U.S. commitment there, and that is why the NATO unity is most important.

Thank you.

Representative ELLZEY: Senator, my time is up. It is an honor to be sitting at this table with you and these other distinguished members.

Thank you.

Chairman WICKER: Thank you very much.

Now I recognize Representative Murphy of North Carolina. In addition to being a representative, Dr. Murphy is a urologist and has been a missionary in both India and Haiti. We welcome you to the committee, Commission.

STATEMENT OF GREG MURPHY, U.S. HOUSE, FROM NORTH CAROLINA

Representative MURPHY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it. As with Representative Ellzey, I am honored to be part of this group.

We sat together as a unified body, House and Senate, a few years ago, before this monstrosity ever occurred. We were with the armed forces chiefs of staff. We were with defense secretaries, and we sat, and we looked on the wall, and we saw how Ukraine was bordered by three sides by Russian troops, and we did nothing. We did not arm Ukraine. We did not want to, “poke the bear.” I pray that if the same thing happens with the Baltics, we will have the fortitude that we do not wait for an action, that we prevent the action by arming the people, by coming up and not fighting a defensive war. It is so much that inaction led to a lot of action by Putin. I pray we do not make that same mistake again. I think a lot of the things that, sadly enough, occurred in Afghanistan have led to the debacle today, led to the loss of a million lives that should have never happened. If that ever happens, God forbid, I pray that who

is ever in the administration to this point—to that point, prevents that from happening.

I will ask this. Is there any public campaign within Estonia now, or any of the Latvian states, that is anti-Putin? Is it all just fear of what is going to occur? Or is there any anti-Putin campaign?

Mr. TSAHKNA: Thank you. Thank you for these remarks. First of all, I would like to commend the first part, is that we agreed in Vilnius two years ago the new NATO defense plans. They were exactly based on the experience what we see now in Ukraine. Of course, you can imagine that, for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, we have a territorial depth, like 200 kilometers. The idea before was that, of course, if Russia will be aggressive and invade NATO and the Baltic states, then finally, of course, NATO would win the war victoriously. The sad thing is that, taking back the territories, there will be no Estonians, no Latvians, no Lithuanians left. That is why we changed this strategy and also the plans. They are very good plans.

Russia must know as well. Then they know, of course, that if deterrence is not working—and I do hope that it will work. If it is not working in the future, we will be ready from the first second to hit into the heart of Russia and take down all the targets that are supporting this kind of aggression. This is exactly why we are now investing heavily to our defense capabilities regionally, but of course, together with NATO and also with allies as U.S., so this is the understanding.

Why I am talking about this is that actually, people of Estonia, we are not afraid of Russia. We do not fear. We have no fear. We have been living there 10,000 years, and we have planned to continue for the same long time. We just know what may come. This is a big difference. If you know what may come, then you are not afraid. You are just preparing for that. We are very practical. That is why we decided in the beginning of 1991, after regaining our independence, two things.

First, we fight back this time. We did not do it in 1940 and 1939. The second, that we never be alone again, because at this time we declare that we are neutral, peace-loving country. Actually, Stalin and Hitler did not, you know, care about that, so we did not fight back, and we were alone. We wanted to get good relations with Moscow, with Berlin, with Paris, London, and Washington at this time. Now we made our choice, never be alone again, and we definitely fight back, and Russia should know that. Whatever it costs, and it is not based on fear.

Thank you.

Representative MURPHY: Thank you.

Mr. ROUGH, let me ask a question. You know, getting into the mind of Putin, getting into the mind of Stalin, the other despots that we have seen in the world, how do you change that man's mind? Because I would submit that while many criticize the president for trying to do what he did, he tried to give him an out. I do not know. That is not my understanding. I would just love to know, how do we give Putin an out to back out, because he is seemingly, not going to do it on its own. Interested in your thoughts.

Mr. ROUGH: There was a wonderful description of Putin in the early days after the full-scale invasion, reported in, I think it was,

The Financial Times, where a reporter asked a senior Kremlin source close to the president who President Putin was relying on to go to war, who he was listening to. He said he had two primary advisors, Ivan the Terrible and Catherine the Great. There is, I think, an imperial quality to President Putin. We have seen it on display in the now-famous/infamous interview he did with Tucker Carlson, where he went off on a long historical soliloquy. The reports out of the meeting in Alaska are similar, where apparently President Putin began with a lengthy historical excursion, talking about Yaroslav the Wise and other figures of Russian imperial past. There is sort of a grandiloquence, a sense of historical boasting that is, I think, at the core of Putin.

Beyond that kind of ideological tenor, I do think he responds to basic cost-benefit analysis, and if the pain and suffering imposed on the Russian people is sufficient to threaten the political foundations of his rule, he may be forced to reconsider and come to the table. I think both the PURL system of weapons support financed by the Europeans to Ukraine and the recently announced Rosneft and Lukoil sanctions, which take effect on the 21st of this month—so just in a few days—are both the military and economic prongs of an attempt to change the Russian calculus.

Because to date, the president has sought to engage President Putin and President Zelensky. He has sought to act as a mediator, bending in his kind of neutrality in the mediation toward the Ukrainians, but nonetheless to mediate. Since I think he has been frustrated by Russian obstruction, by Russian inflexibility, he is now trying to change the calculations of the Russians by applying some pressure.

We will see—as President Trump put it when President Putin—or maybe it was Lavrov, the Kremlin spokesperson—scoffed at the sanctions announcement, we will see if he is still laughing in six months.

Representative MURPHY: Thank you.

I will yield back.

Chairman WICKER: Senator Boozman can also be called Dr. Boozman. He is not only a foreign policy expert, having actually lived in Europe for a time when his father was assigned over there, but also he is in charge of agriculture policy over on this side of the Capitol, and he is mighty busy. John, we appreciate you showing up today and lending your expertise to this important subject.

Senator John Boozman?

Senator BOOZMAN: Well, thank you so much, and it is so good to be with you all and to have such a distinguished panel to come and tell us what we need to be doing, and I thought it was interesting, the—I think we all know that the airspace incursions are a method of destabilizing our countries and collecting intelligence. The list goes on and on.

Congressman Ellzey suggested that we shoot them down. President Trump has. I think if you polled the panel here, you would probably find a bunch of people that would be in that camp. The reality is, besides doing that, you have all the other stuff that is going on—the cyber war that is taking place, the disrupting our elections, arsons, assassinations. You know, the list goes on and on.

If you do, you know, take out one, you still have the others to deal with. You mentioned sanctions, and I guess what I am asking is, what do we feel like is the best, most comprehensive way to deal with this? How do you make it such that the Russians actually feel, you know, a response from a unified West that actually does help them—help us hurt them?

Mr. TSAHKNA: Thank you.

First of all, I would like to thank Senator Boozman. I was two years ago in Arkansas, and this is a good example that we actually bought the HIMARS systems from Arkansas.

Senator BOOZMAN: Yes, canned in Arkansas.

Mr. TSAHKNA: Also this is a good example how the Baltic Security Initiative added, as well value from Estonia, is going back to U.S. industry, and now these HIMARSes are working well in Estonia already. Thank you for that cooperation.

Yes, what we need to do, we need to do what we need to do. It means as well what we—we need to increase our capabilities. We need to actually be committed to our plans. First of all, invest money in military capabilities.

The problem is aggressor. The problem is Putin, and the only way out is peace through strength. It means as well increasing heavily the pressure on Russia. We have already put on the 19 packages of sanctions from European Union side. The twentieth is already preparing.

We are ready, very close to make a decision to use the Russian frozen assets. We are talking about more than 200 billion euros, which is frozen in Europe, and Estonia has been pushing this process already close to three years. Now we see the political willingness to do it in Europe.

I do hope that it will happen in December. As well, the European Union has leverage and opportunity to put tariffs on exports from Russia and Belorussia to Europe, mainly about energy, which does not need consensus.

You know, probably our complexity about European Union, about sanctions, we need consensus, 27 countries. About tariffs we need the qualified majority and it is proposed by European Commission. It will hit heavily.

As well we are very much welcoming President Trump's decisions on putting sanctions onto the largest energy companies as well the secondary sanctions. I do hope that the Senate will and also Congress will support these sanctions regime—the secondary sanctions—mainly because they are hitting these countries and governments which are dealing with Russia.

I was in a visit to China just last week. It was very interesting. Of course, I probably could not change the global foreign policy goals of China. That was very clear as well, and I asked the question that China is the main enabler for Russia to wage the war. Main economical supporter but as well we are talking about at least the dual-use technologies which have been given to Russia.

What we need to do together with U.S. and so on, together with Europe, is to improve and also to increase the pressure to China to buy less gas and oil from Russia because Putin's and Russian economy are not doing well. They are not doing well.

As well, Russia has not had any kind of strategic breakthrough on the battlefield in Ukraine. Whatever Putin wants to tell, instead of six days of special operation, he is waging more than three years of full-scale war without any strategic breakthrough.

That is why we need to act to support Ukraine, but at the same time put more pressure on Russia. This is the only way, and I hope that we are going together on that direction.

Thank you.

Senator BOOZMAN: Mr. Jones?

Mr. JONES: Just to add, on the Russian challenges it is not just that the Russians surpassed a million casualties over the course of the summer, which is extraordinary. It is not just that the Russians—the average rate of advance is slower than during the Somme during World War I. It is also that if you start the Soviet campaign at Operation Barbarossa when the Germans invaded and you fast forward three years and nine months, they were in Berlin.

Today, if you fast forward that same amount of time from the beginning of the full-scale invasion they are in Pokrovsk. It is a shell of the Soviet Union.

I would add that the Russians are vulnerable on the economy and I think that is an area where—that we can exploit. I agree they are grappling with inflation, labor shortages, brain drain. I think increased sanctions would be very difficult for President Putin.

I also think, and I would just add one other area, is a much more targeted effort at identifying and then trying to shut down elements of a shadow fleet, including sanctions against some of the flag vessels that are illegally shipping Russian oil and gas.

There are other elements of that, including listing and sanctioning insurers that are providing insurance to the shadow fleet ecosystem. Sanctions and I think a couple of other steps, including the shadow fleet, will start to put a dent in the Russian economy, which is not doing anywhere near as well as Vladimir Putin would hope and certainly not as well as he is telling his own population.

Chairman WICKER: Thank you. Further questions, Senator Boozman?

Senator BOOZMAN: Do you want to—

Mr. ROUGH: Sure. I am happy to add to that.

I would just say that there are, I think, symmetrical responses available to the United States and to NATO when it comes to cyber aggression. President Trump has shown in 2018 by shutting down the—reportedly, the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg that we can punch back in that domain. Maybe it is time for the lights to go off in the Moscow metro for a warning, for them to get the message that they cannot undertake similar attacks in the West.

Maybe it is time to facilitate, encourage, support Ukrainian special operations against Russian positions in Africa if they sabotage us in Europe. Maybe it is time to dial up the sanctions in certain areas to essentially fund or pay for or force the Russians to feel the pain from their own critical infrastructure attacks in the Baltic Sea.

I would add on the economic sanctions front, while I am not an economic determinist—I am not a Marxist—I do think that the

pain is real. On Friday, the Russian statistical agency reported essentially stagnant growth, 0.6 percent GDP growth in the third quarter over a year ago.

Their inflation has decreased a little bit, still hovering around 8 percent, and I think on October 24, the last rate cut was to 16.5 percent in the key base rate in the Russian system, which makes borrowing costs incredibly painful for Russian businesses. Inflation's a problem. Economic growth is stagnant. High borrowing costs.

Now there is talk, according to the Russian finance ministry, of a VAT [Value Added Tax] increase from 20 [percent] to 22 percent next year, which shows that the National Wealth Fund is beginning—the liquid portion is beginning to run dry, and they have a big budget deficit that is yawning and on the horizon.

I think the Rosneft and Lukoil sanctions, which takes about half of Russian crude oil production into attack, will begin to really shape at the end of this week and beyond. Already, just to take one example where this has positive follow-on effects for the United States, the port of Burgas in Bulgaria, which processes about 140,000 barrels of crude oil per day, is now being taken in receivership by the Bulgarian government. It is a Lukoil asset.

Instead, the U.S. is forging through the 3+1 ministerial. I think just this week in Athens a new vertical corridor energy partnership where American LNG [Liquefied Natural Gas] from Athens through Bulgaria up through Romania, Moldova, can go to Ukraine to help deal with some of their natural gas shortages.

We are pushing out in some respects the Russians' energy dominance of this part of the world, and we will be able to replace it, I think, with the U.S. system, and that is in our national interest.

Senator BOOZMAN: Good.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman WICKER: We will take another round if you gentlemen can stay with us.

To what extent does the average person in Moscow or St. Petersburg—the population centers—hear our point of view? What are their sources? We have testimony that the economy is in the tank, and people realize the economy is bad there.

To what extent do they blame the war and Putin for getting us—getting them into the war? Then if you—if anybody would also like to talk about the legislation that would sanction Russia in terms of actually being an international terrorist nation because of the abduction of children.

Who would like to start first? Mr. Tsahkna? Yes. Tsahkna.

Mr. TSAHKNA: Tsahkna. Yes. This is—it took a couple of years in Estonia to study my language and my family, and thank you.

We do not know in adequate ways what Russian people are thinking because it is not even the question about the surveys, which is pretty impossible to make in Russia, in Moscow and St. Petersburg. People are under constant terror, and they are not able to answer the questions in honest ways.

We are talking about the society which is living under constant terror, and if you think about that Russian war against Ukraine is a bad thing, there will be punishments. People are sitting in

prison. It is hard to say what Russian people are thinking in scientific ways but it is as a consequence of a terror regime.

The second point is that we have declared as Estonia that Russia is a terroristic country, and also for us no problem to follow the legislation as well, based on these criteria so and as well accountability is at the same time a very important topic.

We are talking mainly about what is happening on the battlefield and what is happening with territories but as well under the Council of Europe, we have called the initiative, which is the special tribunal about the aggression crimes of Russia, and this tribunal must be put in force and Estonia will join one of the first countries with this.

We sent this legislation already to our Estonia parliament to join that. It was exactly—the last time we did something like this in the world was Nuremberg special tribunal about the Nazi crimes.

Unfortunately, communistic crimes have never had this kind of tribunal, and this is actually, I think, one of the core reasons why Russia continuously repeatedly violating everything and acting as an imperialistic nation because this kind of tribunal has never happened from the past, and now is the time to commit that.

Thank you.

Chairman WICKER: Mr. Jones?

Mr. JONES: Every week, every month, and certainly every year since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian State has become even more authoritarian, even more concerned about stability, and even more concerned about the views of its population.

No, I think the answer is clear. Russian citizens do not have access to information. It is a state-controlled media, state-controlled internet. I do not think, in general, the population understands what has gone on. I do not think there is a general sense of the sheer casualties that the Russian State has—that Russian soldiers have suffered.

Chairman WICKER: Let me interrupt you there.

President Zelensky, in a conversation that I was part of just a few days ago, said there were over 50,000 Russian fatalities in the month of September this year. Not just—not casualties, but 50,000 fatalities in their military force. Surely that word is getting back to the mothers and fathers and husbands and wives.

Mr. JONES: Well, I think, Mr. Chairman, one of the challenges has been that most of the individuals recruited into the Russian military have not been serving—they have not been the sons, certainly not the daughters, but not the sons of politically important people in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

They are from Central Asia or Siberia or other locations and, clearly, Vladimir Putin does not care about casualties from huge chunks of his population.

Chairman WICKER: Does public opinion matter in Russia?

Mr. JONES: I think as long as there is a significant element of fear among the population, people are not going to rise up against the government that Vladimir Putin has right now, and there is tremendous fear right now.

Chairman WICKER: Well, I did interrupt your train of thought there. If you would like to complete your statement I would be happy to do that with you.

Mr. JONES: No, just that the Russian State under Vladimir Putin, since the war—the full-scale war began—it was already going in this direction anyway—has become increasingly repressive. His population is not getting accurate information about the State of the war. They continue to blame NATO for A, how it started, and B, NATO assistance, and that—I think that is an interesting question about whether we have effectively penetrated Russian news media.

I will just remind everyone that it was President Reagan, for example, in Poland during the cold war that authorized an incredible program to provide assistance to Poles and support solidarity. Are we doing the same right now?

Chairman WICKER: Mr. Rough?

Mr. ROUGH: I would just note that in the 2010's President Putin built up a pretty significant domestic repression apparatus after Russians took to the streets following a questionable Presidential election. I think that very effective repressive mechanism mingles with a certain apathy of Muscovites who look at, as Seth Jones put it, sort of Dagestanis dying in Ukraine and think to themselves. Long as it does not affect me and my immediate kin I am okay with this.

I do not detect the same sort of churn, the writhing and chafing that we saw in Berlin in 1953, Budapest 1956, Prague 1968, right now in Russia. I do think, though, that the—returning to the United States, the issue of the abducted children, which is just a horrific and cruel and terrible act of aggression against the Ukrainian peoples, has seized the attention of a lot of Americans, and when advocates for the Ukrainian cause tend to travel outside of the Beltway and speak about this many Americans that are unaware of it are really gripped by it.

To connect to your opening question, Senator, about what does someone in Corinth, Mississippi, care about what happens in Ukraine. I think this really does offend the conscience of Americans even if Ukraine is considered a place far away, not to mention that they are backed by some of the most odious dictatorships in the world. Whether it be the People's Republic of China, the autarkic, essentially, concentration camp that is modern-day North Korea, and then the Islamic Republic of Iran.

From the First Lady down to the average American, this is an issue that I think has gripped them, and it is an opportunity to demonstrate the stakes for the American public.

Chairman WICKER: It is my understanding that Pope Leo will be addressing this issue in Rome within a matter of days.

Mr. ROUGH: That would not surprise me, Senator. If I could just add one more point.

I think the threat to Putin comes not from sort of the cosmopolitan artist class of St. Petersburg but really from his hardened fascist right flank, which will argue you were correct to go to war, Mr. President, but you have been weak in how you have executed it because it has been such a bungling effort for the Russian armed forces.

To the extent that there is opposition, we see some of it in these social media Telegram channels where there has been criticism of the leadership.

Chairman WICKER: To what extent do we need to be worried about what is happening in Pokrovsk?

Mr. ROUGH: I think the situation in Pokrovsk is difficult if not dire. I think it is very important that the Ukrainians learn the lessons of Bakhmut and Avdiivka and ensure that their personnel is able to leave pockets that seem to be, according to the public reporting, an open source intelligence closing.

I would note that the Pokrovsk is not the final gate of protecting Ukraine proper. There are other very important fortified cities as part of this fortress belt that Ukraine's established in Donetsk, and so it is one very important battle. I think it matters as much at the political sort of symbolic level as it does at the actual military tactical level, and for that reason it is garnered a lot of attention. I would not say it is determinative.

Chairman WICKER: Mr. Wilson?

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Indeed, thank all of you for being here today, and, indeed, Foreign Minister, I think you are so correct to hear the resolve of the people of Estonia to resist whatever may occur, and it is ironic that we are here with the Helsinki Commission. Okay.

We can think back to the Finnish population, the bravery of the Winter War of 1939. A tiny little former Russian province comes back and defeats and resists the Soviet Union successfully.

Then as we were talking about the resolve of NATO, I cannot believe I forgot to point out the ultimate resolve, and that is now Finland is a member of NATO. Now, Sweden is a member of NATO. Who would ever imagine? Two hundred years of neutrality.

I think they were inspired, too, by the Baltic republic so working together. I am just so encouraged of what can be done. Putting that together too, what more can we do to advance the capabilities of our Baltic allies in terms of technology, such as drone technology and counter-drone technology?

Mr. TSAHKNA: Thank you.

Really, the Winter War you mentioned that Finnish people fought, actually this is something we as Estonians are following, and also this is our mistake that our democracy did not work so well in 1939. It worked better in Finland because Finnish people had an opportunity to decide, and then they started to fight back.

Estonians, I think, we are ready. We were ready at the time, but finally there was an agreement and then it was too late. Also, we fought our freedom in 1918 to 1920, and we were—we were actually victorious against Soviet Russia at this time.

What we can do, of course, the understanding that we are doing our part, but U.S. presence militarily in our region is very important, and this decision has been made right now that U.S. troops will remain in the Baltic states and Poland. Any message that U.S. is withdrawing troops from Europe is a bad thing because Russia definitely will use it.

I am not talking only about the military capabilities but I am talking as well the messages, the messages to our people, to European people, because Russia and Putin will definitely use that as

a sign that U.S. is weak and withdrawing the troops because of them, because of Putin, and this is a very, very wrong way to go.

As well, on a practical level, it is very important, and I am grateful for the Congress support for the Baltic Security Initiative, as I mentioned before. These are practical things, but as well to understand the main principle that aggressive Russia is not a problem for Ukraine only. Aggressive Russia is a problem for all of us, and we are ready to do our part. We are ready to stand there. We are ready to—as well to support Ukraine, and also what is the clear thing is about security guarantees for the future if the just and lasting peace will come.

We in Europe must understand, and I think that we are ready, that we must put the skin in the game to secure Ukraine, to give the relevant security guarantees, not the guarantees which are written on paper and which are not costing anything in the near future, as it happened with the Minsk agreements.

Of course, the Estonian position is clear that we cannot take down the opportunity for Ukraine in the future to join NATO because this is the most efficient security guarantee. As well, we, as—we, as a bordering country of Russia, may be a good example that if the coalition of the willing will go and decide together with Ukraine that security guarantees needs boots on the ground—we decided this March as Estonian government we will be part and participate in boots-on-the-ground military capabilities, even we are the member—neighboring country of Russia, if there is need for that. Because if we give the solid security guarantees for Ukraine, then these guarantees are for Europe as well.

Thank you.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you.

Indeed, Director Rough, I appreciate you bringing up about Burgas. That is—I want to know more about that. You also identified, indeed, the political composition, sadly, of the Russian Federation is fascism. It is fascism with a combination of mafia.

As I told you, I had wonderful visits to Russia, and it is just heartbreaking to me to see a country that could have had such opportunity now have an economy smaller than Italy, and then to find out it is smaller than the Baltic republics and Poland together.

Over and over again, what could be a great country. Putting that in mind, there is also good news, and that is about Burgas and then, indeed, the incredible opportunities that President Trump has achieved for the Black Sea region and Caucasus with Azerbaijan and Armenia. A tragedy, truly, is the rigged elections in the Republic of Georgia.

What do you recommend that can be done with the Georgian Dream dictatorship, which is now working very closely with the Chinese Communist Party to give away the only Black Sea port that Georgia has to the Chinese Communist Party, which facilitates their ability to impact the importation of rare earths and the liberation and economic progress of Central Asia?

Chairman WICKER: We are told that the minister has to leave in about five minutes, and we want to be—

Co-Chairman WILSON: Hear, hear.

Chairman WICKER: —mindful of his time.

But thank you, Representative Wilson, for mentioning the steadfast, brave people of the Republic of Georgia who have stood out in the cold and in the summer heat for one full year protesting the illegal and rigged election, which has been recognized as such by the European Union and by a number of Americans.

Who would like to respond about that particular issue?

Mr. TSAHKNA: About Georgia?

Chairman WICKER: Yes.

Mr. TSAHKNA: I was in Georgia just a year ago or a bit more, and I was there together with the Baltic foreign ministers and Iceland foreign minister at this time. It was before the elections happened.

I saw as well, Mr. Chairman, the great willingness of Georgian people, and they believed at this time that actually the leadership is keeping the promises about the integration to the Western part of the world and European Union and so on.

It was heavily violated. Also we are very close to Georgian people. We have been very supportive all the decades about reforms, and what we see now I do not call this government a government, but this is a regime which is not following the Georgian people will.

What we see now is the beginning of the same developments what we saw years ago in Belorussia. This is a very dangerous thing. This is a very dangerous thing, and I—the Estonian people, I can say to you, will—continue to support and Georgian people's will for freedom.

Thank you.

Chairman WICKER: Mr. Cohen says he can limit his remarks to two minutes. Can you stay that long?

Mr. TSAHKNA: I will stay.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, sir. Just a little history lesson, if you do not mind, Mr. Minister. I believe you said something—

Mr. TSAHKNA: We have time.

Representative COHEN: I believe you said something about Russia taking all the children in Estonia during the 1939–1940 period. Is that accurate? Did I hear that right?

Mr. TSAHKNA: I was talking about Ukraine children.

Representative COHEN: Okay. Well, I know about Ukraine children. I misunderstood you then.

Mr. TSAHKNA: Okay.

Representative COHEN: I thought you said they took—the population in Estonia was not as great because they took all the kids.

Mr. TSAHKNA: No, no. The problem was that at the end of 1930's our parliament ran out of these democratic rules, and we had a very good president at the time who wanted the best for the Nation. We had no democratic system as it was in Finland to respond to these proposals, so-called, from Russian side—Soviet side. The Finnish people decided to fight, and Estonian people, we had no democratic system.

Representative COHEN: I got you. I just misunderstood what you said, and I wanted to clarify.

Thank you very much.

Mr. TSAHKNA: Thank you.

Representative COHEN: I appreciate you.

Chairman WICKER: We are going to conclude the hearing. We want to very much thank our witnesses, particularly you, Mr. Minister, and the representatives, also of the think tanks that we rely so much on hearing the ground truth.

Also, thank you to our audience who have been very patient and attentive and have filled this room with supporters of what you believe in, Mr. Minister, and I can assure you that the words that have been spoken today by our three witnesses will reverberate around Europe and be heard worldwide.

Thank you very much, and with that, we conclude the hearing. [Whereupon, at 5:06 p.m., the hearing ended.]





The United States Helsinki Commission, an independent federal agency, by law monitors and encourages progress in implementing provisions of the Helsinki Accords.

The Commission, Created in 1976, is composed of nine Senators, nine Representatives and one official each from the Department of State, Defense, and Commerce.

All Commission publications may be freely reproduced, in any form, with appropriate credit. The Commission encourages the widest possible dissemination of its publications.

WWW.CSCE.GOV

[youtube.com/HelsinkiCommission](https://www.youtube.com/HelsinkiCommission)

facebook.com/helsinkicommission

flickr.com/photos/helsinkicommission

x.com/HelsinkiComm