

National Security As Seen Around the Baltic Sea

A Snapshot

July 10, 2024

I visited Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Germany over the last two weeks as a member of the Board of Directors of the *Baltic-American Freedom Foundation*, while also carrying the banner of *ASU's Leadership, Diplomacy, and National Security Lab*. What follows is a summary of impressions gathered from meetings with business and security sector professionals, government officials, and students.

National Security Threats

The threat from Putin's Russia is seen as severe, current, and lasting, supported in the region directly by vassal state Belarus and from a distance by North Korea, China and Iran. Careful not to say outright we told you so, our Baltic partners nevertheless speak hard truths in describing the reality of the dire security environment on the continent. They see only Putin's full commitment to his war on Ukraine as relieving some of his military menace elsewhere in the region, certain to be resumed as soon as he wins that conflict and turns to his next target.

NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the form of Alliance multinational battlegroups from Poland to Estonia are most welcome but are viewed more as trip wires rather than actual deterrence. On the other hand, there is strong and persistent support from all the Baltic states themselves, both for Ukraine on the ground, and for Russian and Belarusian dissident groups sheltering from their oppressors.

Domestic Politics

Domestic political environments are volatile with moderate and centrist governments challenged by extremist politics, and strains caused by issues ranging from guns vs. butter budget choices to European immigration policies. That said, there is a broad realization that the NATO 2% percent of GDP defense commitment is not enough, with 3% and even 4% seen as a more realistic need.

Economic Health

The economies of the smaller states are challenged by the shortage of skilled labor and Europe's much slower recovery from COVID consequences than in the U.S. Dynamic private sectors in the Baltic states are looking for ways to connect to new business opportunities beyond their own borders, including in the expanding defense industrial sector on both sides of the Atlantic.

Transatlantic Relations

Concern over the steadfastness specifically of the long-term U.S. commitment to countering what are seen as common security concerns, along with the credibility of the Alliance's collective defense commitment, is palpable.

Security Needs Beyond Military Capabilities

Among their publics, interlocutors identified a need for greater media literacy and anti-disinformation awareness, outreach with western narratives to multiple demographics, including older citizens. Each of the three Baltic nations puts focus on societal resilience in all areas and on critical infrastructure protection.

Bottom Line

As NATO meets in Washington this week to celebrate its 75-year anniversary and deliberates its current and future relationship to and with Ukraine, judging from many Baltic conversations, the real issue on the table is the future of the Alliance itself and its role in righting the European security order. Given Putin's clear ambitions, transatlantic security cannot be protected in nuanced steps, but only in resolute action by the West.



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