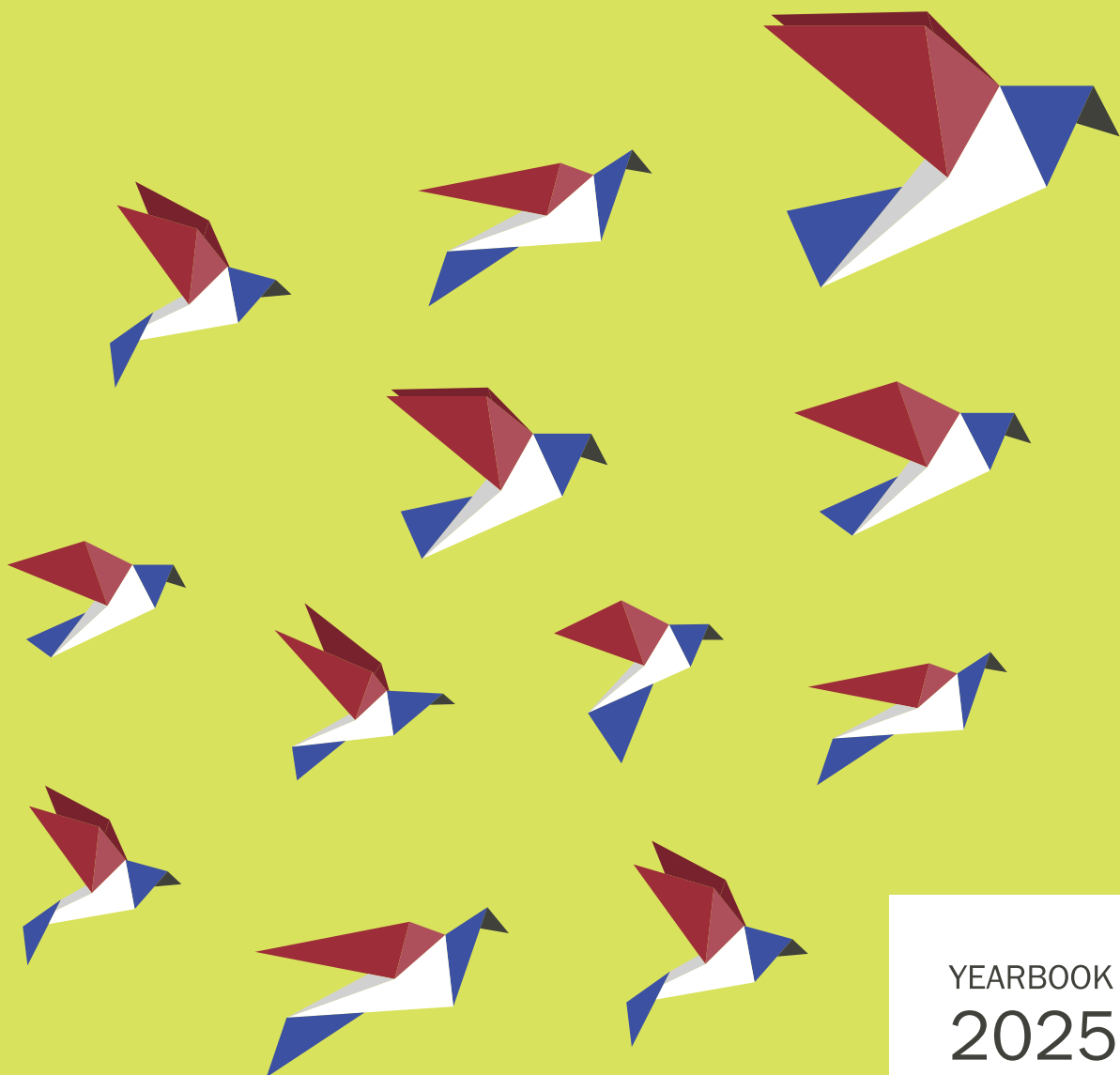




LATVIAN INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

LATVIAN FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY



YEARBOOK
2025



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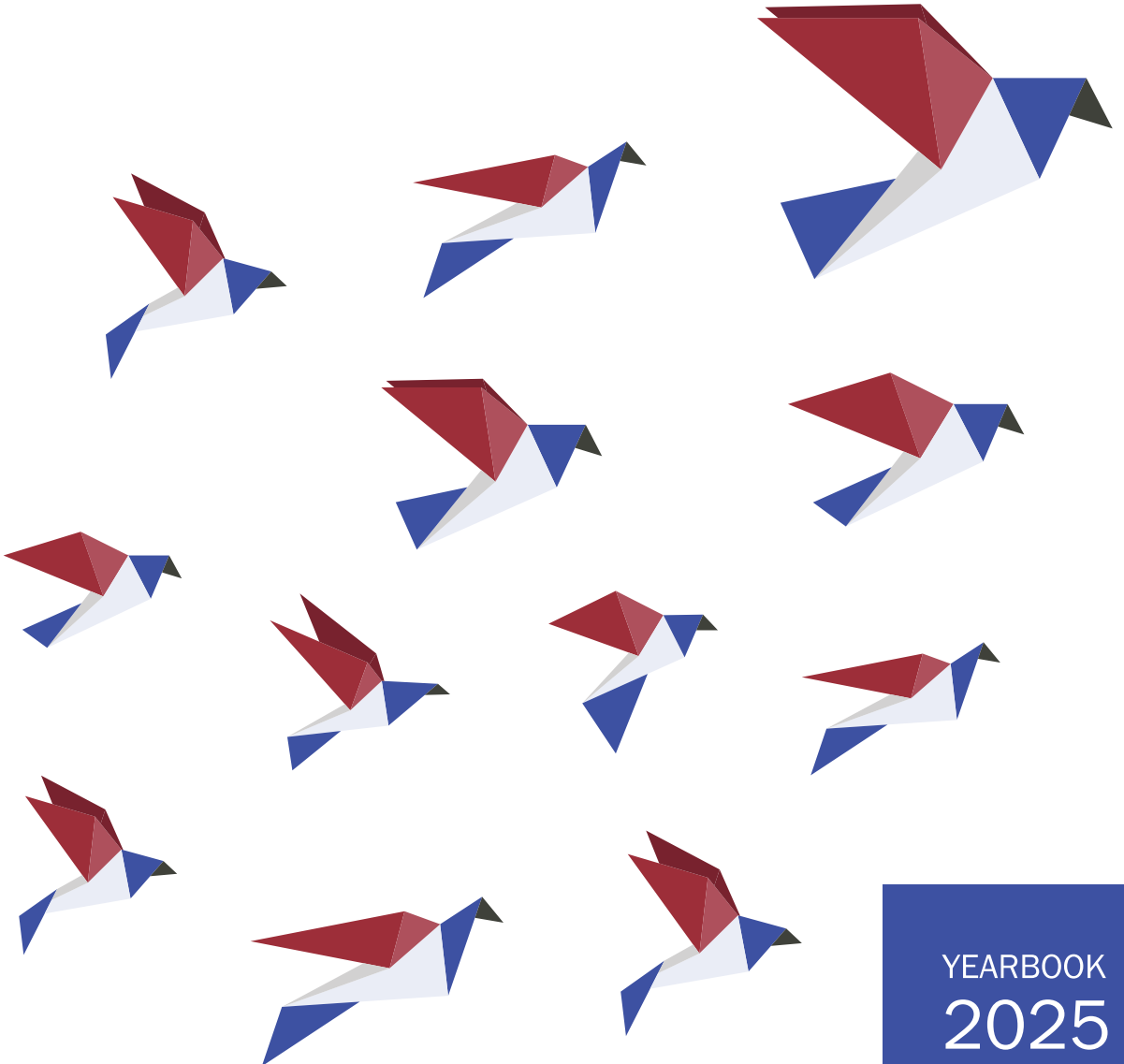
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YEARBOOK
2025

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The Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2025 aims to examine and evaluate various spheres of Latvia's foreign and security policy. It looks at what has been achieved in 2024 and draws up development scenarios for 2025, informing the public and offering recommendations to Latvian policymakers.

The project is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Baltic States.



Ministry of
Foreign Affairs
Republic of Latvia



LATVIJAS REPUBLIKAS SAEIMA



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FOREWORD

While it is rather safe to expect that Latvia's foreign and security policy will continue to face a number of different international political challenges in 2025 – in the context of which a number of outstanding authors will offer their insights and analysis in this publication – we would like to begin the year on a particularly proud and joyful note. That is, we would like to extend our congratulations to the director Gints Zilbalodis and his creative team for their outstanding achievement in the creation of the film *Flow*, which has received extremely high international acclaim, including the European Film Academy Award and the Golden Globe Award for the Best Animated Film of the year. This presents an unprecedented achievement for Latvian culture and art, demonstrating our creative ability to offer a world-level performance. The team at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs was also deeply touched by this film, which once again reminds us about universal values and Latvia's potential to inspire the world with deeply personal stories telling us about timeless and relevant values.

From the perspective of Latvia's foreign and security policy, the year 2025 will be marked by increasingly dynamic global geopolitical trends, and it is precisely the personal story of Latvia that is the cornerstone of the future vision that follows from it. At the moment, the centre stage of the world's political processes is given to the role and effectiveness of international organisations, the growing regional instability, and the need to adapt to changing economic and security paradigms. NATO's recent 75th anniversary, the ongoing integration of the European Union, and the increasing influence of the countries of the Global South contribute to a challenging international environment where Latvia must continue to defend its interests and strengthen cooperation among its allies. Under these circumstances, Latvia's ability to be active and effective in the international arena is essential for both our security and long-term national development.

Particular attention during the coming summer will be paid to Latvia's efforts towards gaining a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. This significant goal is essential not only for promoting the visibility of Latvia's foreign policy but also for our ability to influence global processes and promote international stability. We will closely follow and analyse Latvia's activities and results in this crucial international contest.

The present yearbook offers an excellent analysis on the most pressing issues of foreign and security policy from Latvian and international experts. Toms Rostoks and Mārtiņš Vargulis provide a detailed examination of the security challenges Latvia is facing – from the role of NATO to Latvia’s readiness to defend its territory against external threats. Jānis Bērziņš, Aleksandra Palkova and Marts Ivaskis are focusing on the future structures of the European Union, including its multiannual budget and new institutional posts. Anna Elīza Lazdiņa highlights the role of the “Women, Peace and Security” programme as she looks into aspects of gender equality within security policy. Inna Šteinbuka analyses the future challenges and opportunities of the EU Economic and Monetary Union.

The authors offer an in-depth view on Latvia’s place in the global arena, structured under various thematic blocks within the yearbook. Elizabete Elīna Vizgunova-Vikmane and Rebeka Zvirbule analyse relations between Latvia and Ukraine in the context of war-driven unpredictability, while Beāte Livdanska focuses on the dynamics of the bilateral relations between Latvia and Belarus. Sintija Broka examines the role of Latvian diplomacy in the Middle Eastern crisis, and Sergejs Potapkins highlights the growing importance of the Global South in world politics and Latvia’s opportunities in this context. Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova draws attention to relations between Latvia and China and their significance in the context of the G77 countries. Justīne Elferte looks at the reputation issues faced by the Latvian banking sector and efforts to combat money laundering, while Inese Vaivare analyses the results of Latvia’s development cooperation policy and future opportunities. This volume is concluded by Imants Lieģis offering a broader perspective on global trends and their impact on Latvia’s foreign and security policy. Atis Lejiņš, the Honorary Director of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, also offers his words of guidance to our foreign policy makers. This yearbook serves both as a source of an in-depth analysis and a significant tool for promoting discussions on Latvia’s strategic choices and opportunities in 2025 and beyond.

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the authors whose analyses and opinions provide a deeper understanding of the diverse facets of Latvia’s foreign and security policy. We would also like to extend special thanks to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Baltic States, as well as the Foreign Affairs and European Affairs Committees of the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia and our colleagues there, as their support and participation have been invaluable in the creation of this volume.

We are equally grateful to each and every reader, whose interest and desire to understand international processes help to improve the quality of discussions. Your support and involvement – both in reading and debating – is an invaluable incentive for our future work.

The yearbook is an annual publication serving as a platform where the opinions and analyses of Latvian and international experts on relevant foreign and security policy challenges are gathered together. It provides readers with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted international environment and Latvia's place within it. We hope that this publication will not only give information but also inspire new discussions and solutions.

We wish every reader a peaceful and successful new year, filled with valuable insights and successful achievements!

With true respect,

Dr. Kārlis Bukovskis
Director of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs

Sintija Broka
Deputy Director of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Dear reader,

In 2024, the international security environment became increasingly complex and volatile. Amidst rising geopolitical tensions, Latvia's foreign policy, in cooperation with allies in the Baltic and Nordic countries, NATO and the European Union (EU), and other likeminded partners worldwide, centred on targeted and coordinated action in three main directions:

- 1) strengthening national security, defence, and the rules-based international order;
- 2) promoting economic development, increasing welfare and the EU's competitiveness in the global arena;
- 3) protecting interests of Latvian nationals, promoting public involvement in foreign policy processes, and leveraging the potential of our diaspora.

These priorities were carried out in close cooperation with the President, the Parliament (*Saeima*), the Prime Minister, ministries, municipalities, social partners, civil society organisations, entrepreneurs, and academic institutions.

In these circumstances, experts, researchers and teaching staff play an integral role in sharing knowledge and skilfully explaining international processes to the wider public.

I would like to express my gratitude to our universities and think-tanks, as well as members of the Foreign Policy Experts Council of the Minister of Foreign Affairs for their valuable contribution to the analysis and implementation of Latvian foreign policy. Your conferences, lectures, workshops along with publications and media commentary are essential to raising public awareness of current political developments and countering disinformation. In addition, your efforts serve as long-term investments in the development of foreign policy expertise and research traditions. I also appreciate the contribution of opinion leaders toward the exchange of knowledge via digital platforms, blogs, and video formats so that educational content reaches all societal groups, especially young people. It is our shared mission to ensure that intellectual debates and

“battles of ideas” continue taking root in Latvia, so I encourage you all to pursue new international research partnerships and develop new projects in 2025!

It is crucial to continue cultivating public interest in foreign policy, highlighting the impact of international developments upon the security and prosperity of our country. We must invest in a whole-of-society approach, centred on a collective sense of responsibility in implementing a model of comprehensive national defence and strengthening societal resilience. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to every Latvian citizen working persistently to ensure the security of our country, contribute to its development and enhance its international reputation. Many thanks to all who selflessly devote their time, energy and, financial resources to support Ukraine.

The “Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2025” prepared by the Latvian Institute of International Affairs will make a valuable contribution to explaining Latvia’s foreign policy to domestic and international audiences. This year’s edition reflects the broad spectrum of issues affecting Latvia’s foreign policy and security interests.

The authors have focused on the external and internal security challenges, primarily stemming from Russia’s full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, which will reach the three-year mark on February 24, 2025. Although Latvia currently does not face a direct military threat, we must nevertheless, together with our allies, prepare for long-term threats arising from the hostile actions of Russia and its supporters aimed at aggressively challenging the international order grounded in the UN Charter and international law. There are no indications that Russia is ready for peace, as it continues transitioning to a war economy and rebuilding its military potential. Russian aggression is intensified and enabled by the Belarusian regime, assistance from Iran and North Korea, as well as economic and other support from China. This war is not a local conflict, but rather a threat to global peace and stability. In addition, Russia and Belarus continue their efforts to destabilise Latvia and its allies through cyber-attacks, sabotage, attacks on critical infrastructure, and the mass spread of hostile disinformation.

The cornerstone of Latvia’s security is its membership in the world’s strongest military alliance – NATO. The presence of the Canadian-led NATO allied presence has been notably expanded in Latvia, reaching full brigade level with the participation of 13 allied nations. For the first time since joining the alliance, Sweden is participating in NATO mission by sending 500 soldiers to join the brigade in Latvia. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has significantly enhanced cooperation between the Baltic and Nordic countries, as well as coordination of allied countries in the Baltic Sea region in the context of security and defence issues, including the protection of critical infrastructure.

At the 2024 NATO Washington Summit, Latvia together with our NATO allies took several crucial decisions regarding the implementation of NATO’s military strategy,

including the fulfilment of regional defence plans. With the increase of the defence budget of Latvia to 3.45 % of the gross domestic product and the allocation of additional funds for internal security, the defence capabilities of our country will grow significantly in 2025. We will continue working closely with our key strategic partner, the United States, both bilaterally, in regional cooperation formats, and within NATO. Our cooperation will primarily focus on mitigating threats emanating from Russia, finding solutions to security challenges posed by China, deepening economic relations and cooperation in innovation and emerging technology. Latvia's priority is strengthening and expanding the US military presence in the region.

At the EU level, Latvia and its allies achieved the imposition of stricter EU sanctions against Russia and its ally Belarus, as well as the introduction of higher import tariffs. These measures help to continue isolating the aggressor and to constrain its military capabilities and resources. Our institutions are working constantly to protect the external border of the EU and NATO, to ensure the effective implementation of sanctions and to prevent their circumvention.

Several contributors to this volume have focused their analysis on Latvia's interests in the European Union. 2024 marked the 20th anniversary of Latvia's membership in the European Union and NATO. Over these twenty years, Latvia has integrated into the core of the European Union and now steers its agenda together with other member states. As a mature member state, Latvia has the duty to contribute to forging a vision of Europe's future, including on the subjects of EU institutional reforms, enlargement and the future of economic and monetary union, as well as EU-NATO cooperation in the field of security and defence.

Russia's war against Ukraine has fostered a common European understanding and renewed support for enlargement. Ukraine and Moldova took decisive steps on their path towards their future in the EU, and they have our steadfast support. Unfortunately, the decisions of the Georgian government are distancing the country from its EU integration goals. At the same time, it must be underscored that enlargement is and will be a criteria-based process and candidate countries must fulfil all the conditions regarding adherence to the rule of law, values, and internal reforms. Latvia will strongly oppose Russia's attempts to interfere in the domestic affairs of these countries.

In the context of the preparations of the next EU multiannual budget, Latvia's priority is increasing funding for defence, cohesion, border area development, and investment in security. We will actively work to ensure that issues such as developing military industry, addressing the capability gaps identified in defence plans, and enhancing military mobility, remain on the EU agenda.

The foreign service is working actively to promote Latvia's external economic interests. Last year, the Latvian foreign service persistently helped entrepreneurs, education

and science organizations and their representatives to grow the export of our goods and services, improve competitiveness and discover opportunities in foreign markets. This support was provided in cooperation with the Ministry of Economics and the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, as well as through the instruments of the European Union. We recognise the close link between the country's growth prospects and its ability to attract investors and build partnerships with technology start-ups, researchers, and innovators. Particular attention will be paid to strengthening cooperation with Latvian nationals abroad in order to make use of their skills and experience and to promote more active diaspora involvement in the political and social life.

The thematic blocks of this volume provide in-depth insight into key thematic Latvian foreign policy issues.

Latvia's relations with Ukraine and its comprehensive support for Ukraine in its fight against Russian imperial aggression will continue to feature prominently in Latvia's foreign policy. The solidarity and courage of the Ukrainian people alongside international support have played a decisive role in preventing Russia from fulfilling its war objectives. Latvia's support to Ukraine has been repeatedly highlighted as an example within the international community. Latvia, both at the governmental and societal levels, remains one of the leading supporters of Ukraine, providing military, diplomatic, economic and humanitarian assistance.

When addressing the Global South, to which a special chapter is devoted in this volume, Latvia also keeps Ukraine high on the agenda in conversations with international partners. Latvia has and will continue to dedicate significant efforts to explain and promote the global understanding of the historical context of the Russia's colonial war and its impact on global security. Latvia is working actively in international organisations to isolate Russia, hold it accountable for aggression, provide support to Ukraine and strengthen the rules-based international order. Through its campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council, Latvia is making the most of the opportunities to establish new contacts and cooperate with partners around the world to defend its interests and those of Ukraine.

Regarding the developments in the Middle East, it is critical to understand the link between instability in the region and its impact on the global security and economy. Iran's aggressive actions, including attacks on Israel and support for armed groups in the region, contribute to further tensions and undermine peace. Terrorist attacks on Israel carried out by Hamas and Hezbollah, the hostages still held in captivity and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza are issues that have not left Latvian society indifferent. The European Union, including Latvia, supports Israel's right to self-defence, while stressing the Israel's obligation to comply with international law and humanitarian obligations.

Latvia advocates for the continuation of international efforts to achieve a durable ceasefire in Gaza and to provide the necessary assistance to the population. Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea, and conflict dynamics in Syria and Lebanon even further complicate the situation in the region. The restoration of stability in Lebanon would facilitate the return of many residents throughout the region and promote wider peace in the Middle East region. Latvia is making a practical contribution to this effort, with our soldiers participating in the UN peacekeeping missions – UNIFIL and UNTSO. The fall of Bashar al-Assad’s brutal regime weakens both Russian and Iranian positions in the region and opens the door for peace and stability in Syria. Latvia stands for solution that ensures justice, development, tolerance and respect for fundamental rights in the country. Latvia will support the efforts of the EU and other partners to achieve this goal.

In conclusion, I would like to express my hope that creators, supporters and readers of this yearbook will actively participate in shaping Latvia’s foreign policy. May this volume lay the groundwork for new exchanges of ideas and individual engagement of each and every Latvian toward strengthening our position in the international arena.

May our foreign policy discussions extend beyond just admiring the problem!

My Latvia. My responsibility.

Baiba Braže
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia

THE TIME OF UNUSED OPPORTUNITIES: UKRAINE AND ITS ALLIES

Ināra Mūrniece

Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee
of the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia

Following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, concepts like “peace” and “security” suddenly rose to the highest level in our scale of values, compared to their habitual and ordinary status before the invasion. As a result, the geopolitical situation changed dramatically, the existing international order collapsed, and the era of peace was over. We saw a war raging on European soil.

The Hamas invasion of Israel from the Gaza Strip on 7 October 2023 became the second turning point, as it aggravated the situation in the Middle East, contributing to the further endangerment of peace and security. Due to the war, the international arena saw a more precise demarcation of the new axis of totalitarian regimes – comprising Russia, China, Iran and North Korea – which is posing challenges to the entire democratic Western world. Consequently, the military, political, economic and humanitarian support for Ukraine as a pledge of peace and security continues to remain at the top of the foreign policy priorities of Latvia and other Western countries. We are the main allies of Ukraine. Both NATO and the European Union have mobilised their resources to be able to face the new threat. NATO adopted a new security doctrine at its Madrid Summit in June 2022, and the EU came up with a number of significant economic sanctions packages against Russia while also reviewing its defence strategy and security investments. However, it must be recognised that, notwithstanding these positive changes, there are various missed opportunities, both from the point of view of security and of establishing a long-awaited peace. And it is precisely this facet I will try to address in this article, looking at it from the political angle rather than academically.

A WAR OF ATTRITION – UNDESIRABLE SCENARIO

In the foreign policy dimension, 2024 became the year when Ukrainian allies seized various opportunities in creating new support measures for Ukraine, while also failing to answer a number of other significant Ukrainian requests. Neither the NATO Summit in Vilnius in 2023 nor the NATO Anniversary Summit in Washington have fulfilled Ukrainian expectations of receiving its crucial security guarantee, namely, the invitation to join NATO. Despite Ukraine's resounding calls on the political agenda to provide it with arms shipments and air defence equipment as soon as possible, and to step up the Allied response in general, the provision of such assistance has remained slow, not to mention the long US Congress decision-making process on additional funding for Ukraine in 2023 and 2024, which was delayed for months.

Unfortunately, 2023 ended without meeting people's expectations for the establishment of a long-term peace in our region. Hopes for a Ukrainian victory and success on the front are intertwined with harsh realities on the battlefield, where they were not quite successful, sending a dangerous signal that the war was stagnating, gradually turning into a war of attrition. This scenario is undesirable for Ukraine, although there are differing opinions among experts on the subject, which I will turn to later. A war of mutual attrition not only depletes the resources of the belligerent parties, but also adversely affects the societies of Ukraine's allies and their states of mind. This, in turn, is reflected in their domestic policies and election results.

The good news is that 2024 also brought novel and surprising turns, for instance, the rapid development of drone technologies, which allowed the Ukrainians to successfully destroy Russian navy ships. There is also some positive news about the development of military production in Ukraine, and the unexpected invasion of Russian territory by Ukrainian forces has somewhat broken the course of the war, at least in people's minds.

NATO IS GETTING ITS ENERGY BACK, BUT MEMBER STATES NEED TO BECOME BOLDER

As for the Allied support for Ukraine in 2023 and 2024, we can call this period a time of incompletely used opportunities. According to the assessment of Ukrainian politicians themselves, the most complete security guarantee for Ukraine would be its admission to NATO, which, as I mentioned before, has not materialised. Although since 24 February 2022 there has been an intensive bilateral dialogue between different states and Ukraine along with cooperation in various international frameworks, in particular via the so-

called Ramstein format, there have also been three NATO summits that followed the Russian invasion and that can serve as important reference points regarding the military support of the Allies.

After leaving the post of NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg was more open about the necessary support when he stated that: “If there’s anything I in a way regret and see much more clearly now is that we should have provided Ukraine with much more military support much earlier [...] I think we all have to admit, we should have given them more weapons pre-invasion. And we should have given them more advanced weapons, faster, after the invasion. I take my part of the responsibility.”¹

According to him, this time of unused opportunities on the part of Ukraine’s allies had already begun at the end of 2021. As Stoltenberg stated: “sending weapons [to Ukraine] was a big discussion. Most allies were against that, pre-invasion [...] they were very afraid of the consequences [...] If we sent weapons earlier, it would have been a great advantage. It maybe could even have prevented the invasion, or at least made it much harder for [Russia] to do what they’ve done”.

When in the spring of 2021 Russia amassed its troops on the Ukrainian border, and, at the end of 2021, the United States and other Western countries voiced louder warnings about Russia potentially preparing for a military invasion, the Ukrainian government put out calls not to panic and not to scare away investors. Soon, in December 2021, Putin’s ultimatum followed: NATO must withdraw to its 1997 borders and abandon further enlargement, as well as coordinate NATO exercises with Russia when holding them in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Otherwise, according to Moscow, “ignoring” its interests would lead to a “military response” akin to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.²

Consequently, opinions were voiced in the public sphere pointing that Putin might have concentrated the army on the border in order to “strengthen” his position in negotiations with NATO. It is possible we will learn the right answer from Zelenskyy’s memoirs, which will be published sometime after the end of the war, as to why a timely response by the Ukrainian government did not follow. The fact is that the invasion of 24 February 2022 came as a huge shock to Ukrainian civilians.

At the same time, it is striking that Putin’s ultimatum was written so wilfully humiliating and unacceptable that NATO could not even seriously discuss it, but if rejected, it would unilaterally allow Russia to “defend its security interests” through a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In response, the NATO Summit in Madrid, which was held on 28–30 June 2022, adopted a new Strategic Concept, recognised Russia as the most significant threat to the Alliance, and focused on protecting its Eastern Flank. The NATO leaders also decided on the allocation of 2% of gross domestic product for defence purposes and invited Finland and Sweden to join the Alliance. Therefore, Macron’s 2019 statement

about the “brain death” of NATO could sink into oblivion, as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation seized the opportunity to transform the foundations of NATO’s deterrence and defence policies in line with the new realities.

A BREAKTHROUGH THAT WAS NOT THERE

The Annual Report of the Latvian Foreign Minister for 2023 stated that “Latvia’s priorities at the Vilnius summit were the strengthening of NATO’s deterrence and defence capabilities, as well as achieving a breakthrough in the Ukraine-NATO relations”. The NATO Summit in Vilnius in the summer of 2023, which was a success for the Baltic States and Poland, as the new NATO defence plans were approved and a series of important decisions were made for the security of our region, did not bring Ukraine its expected invitation to NATO. The expectations and disappointment in war-torn Ukraine rose so high that at some point during the summit, there was even news that Zelenskyy would allegedly not go to Vilnius – however, in the end, he came and gave a spectacular and emotional speech in Vilnius Square. This NATO Summit concluded with a statement on Ukraine’s path towards the NATO Alliance. It included a partners’ agreement on a three-part package that would bring Ukraine closer to NATO, help the country win the war, and pave the way for its future membership in the Alliance. Part one: the creation of a practical assistance programme aimed at helping Ukraine to move from Soviet-era military equipment to NATO standards; part two: the creation of the joint NATO-Ukraine Council; and the most significant part of the package, part 3: the reaffirmation that Ukraine would become a NATO member, along with the crowning decision not to extend the requirements of the Membership Action Plan process (MAP) to Ukraine, thus speeding up the entry process when it starts.

Overall, a number of necessary diplomatic political decisions were made, and some further steps to provide support for Ukraine were taken. However, once again, the expected breakthrough was not there. Nor it was brought about by NATO’s 75th Anniversary Summit held in Washington on 9–11 July 2024. There were promises to supply Ukraine with more air defence equipment and F-16 aircrafts, but no admission to NATO. It is worthwhile to note that when the date of the summit was drawing close, Zelenskyy already began to prepare the Ukrainian people to not again raise their hopes for the impossible.

FROM THE “IMPOSSIBLE” TO THE POSSIBLE

In 2023, while personally participating in meetings of the NATO and EU defence ministers, as well as in meetings of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (the so-called Ramstein format), I had, on the one hand, the opportunity to witness how, in support of Ukraine, countries were climbing over their own “red lines”, and, on the other hand, the experience of regret that this process was unfolding so unforgivably slowly. Even before the Russian invasion, the United States, Great Britain and other countries, including Latvia, were sending weapons to Ukraine. Back then, Germany’s decision to send 5,000 helmets to the Ukrainian side was called a “joke”, while German politicians explained that they did not want to “escalate” the situation and were trying to reach a “peaceful solution”. Almost five months after Russia’s full-scale invasion, Germany delivered its first shipment of weapons to Ukraine – but still no heavy artillery and tanks. In early 2023, after a long campaign of persuasion, Germany finally agreed to send Leopard tanks. In the same manner, as a way of slowly overcoming the resistance of some countries, both a tank coalition and a coalition for supplying F-16s to Ukraine were formed, along with other coalitions as well.

In this path to make the “impossible” possible, both the active position of the United States and the ability of former NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg to steer the discussions in such a way that the initially unbreakable “no” is bypassed, with everyone sooner or later arriving to the joint “yes” position, have played an essential part. I got an impression that, before each gathering and meeting, the NATO Secretary-General had carefully measured the “average temperature”, and during the meeting, where the floor was given to absolutely everyone, he rationally directed the discussion so as to divert some unfavourable opinions to his threshold middle point – namely, the joint decision – while also preventing them from stepping over this middle ground. In the meetings chaired by him, one could perfectly feel the weight of his many years of experience.

In Stoltenberg’s retrospective, one of the red lines was NATO’s direct military support for Ukraine, as Putin had threatened that NATO, if directly involved in the conflict, would have to reckon with a possible attack, including with the use of nuclear weapons.³ This is also what initially gave rise to the idea of creating the Ukrainian Defence Contact Group, or the so-called Ramstein Group, formally led by the United States and Ukraine and responsible for coordinating and delivering military assistance to Ukraine. Shortly before handing over the leadership of NATO into the hands of Mark Rutte, the new Secretary-General, Stoltenberg managed to establish NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine, symbolically erasing another of Putin’s red lines that had existed, as it turns out, yet again only in the minds of Western leaders.

NATO's expansion to include Finland and Sweden was also a response to both the actual security threat emanating from Russia and Putin's pre-war ultimatum. Thus, NATO managed to successfully utilise the opportunity for enlargement.

Zelenskyy, in turn, continued to fight for better chances for Ukraine. If back in the summer of 2023, during the NATO Summit in Vilnius, he was reluctantly forced to admit that "Ukraine understood that it could not become a NATO member state while hostilities continued", then in his Victory Plan, he very clearly demanded NATO member status or real security guarantees for Ukraine. While Mark Rutte has stated that Ukraine could be the "33rd or 34th NATO member", Zelenskyy, in a peculiar social media discussion, pointed out that it would be the thirty-third. After all, accession negotiations with the European Union have already begun.

THE WAR OF MUTUAL ATTRITION

There are no particular discussions in the political arena as to how we should name the Russia-Ukraine war – in particular, it is generally evolving from manoeuvre warfare (although there are places where it continues as manoeuvre warfare) into a war of mutual attrition, where both the economies of the belligerent states and Ukraine's allies suffer. A tragic facet of a war of attrition is that it is also waged in the dimension of human resources, or the demographic dimension.

Expert assessments, however, continue to differ as to whether the war transforming into a war of attrition is desirable and whether Ukraine can win such a war of resources.

"In attritional wars, military operations are shaped by a state's ability to replace losses and generate new formations, not tactical and operational manoeuvres. The side that accepts the attritional nature of war and focuses on destroying enemy forces rather than gaining terrain is most likely to win."⁴

"This will be a long war requiring a long-term outlook in strategy, but also timely decision-making. Despite the high stakes, it has become less clear that Washington and European capitals can muster the political will to see Ukraine through this war". The author emphasises that Ukraine and the West enjoy the overall advantage in resources, and attrition can prove an "important part" of their theory of victory.⁵

The second standpoint argues that it is undesirable for Ukraine to sink into a war of attrition, as it is losing, and Western military assistance combined with Ukraine's own resources still produce fewer resources than those at Russia's disposal. "The Russian defence-industrial base cannot compensate for Russia's current loss rates, but it can

replace its equipment faster than the West is, as of now, willing to do for Ukraine. For the time being at least, a war of attrition implies a Russian victory.” Although under current conditions it comes at a great cost for Russia, in the long-term it will favour Moscow.⁶

Nonetheless, these two different viewpoints do not alter the expert recommendations regarding support for Ukraine – namely, the Allies must continue to ensure various types of military support, develop military production both in the West and in Ukraine, provide intelligence support, and so on. The only question is – to what extent? Is the current assistance sufficient or are new forms of support required as well? Should the extent of Allied assistance for Ukraine ensure it is possible for the country to continue its resistance, or, if we know that the war of attrition is working in Russia’s favour in the long-term, perhaps the Allies should significantly increase their support for Ukraine to gain a decisive victory? This question has become a grand policy issue, which, as one might guess, is being discussed behind closed doors between the US, Great Britain and EU member states, namely, France, Germany and Italy. The Baltic States and Poland believe that it is imperative to achieve a total defeat of Russia.

Moreover, on 17 October this year, by a significant majority, the Parliament of Latvia adopted a statement prepared by its Foreign Affairs Committee calling on Ukraine’s allies to support the position that Russia’s aggressive policy can be stopped and the regional peace restored only by defeating Russia.⁷

THE GOAL IS TO END THE WAR

“The United Kingdom, France, and most other European countries want Russian imperialist and revisionist ambitions defeated and Ukraine restored to its internationally recognised borders in order to defend the existing territorial and political order. The United States and Germany, however, (to be more precise, the White House and the Chancellery) only want to keep Ukraine from losing. They hope that a stalemate or a tactical Ukrainian victory would force Putin to reconsider his strategy and enter negotiations. Unlike Kyiv, they do not want a decisive outcome, predominantly (but not exclusively) for fear of escalation.”⁸

What do the Ukrainians themselves think and say? One view is presented in the public domain by President Zelenskyy addressing the Western countries, whereby he voices his uncompromising stance and arguments in favour of continuing the war of defence, reclaiming territories, and providing weapons.

However, informal contacts with Ukrainian politicians have suggested that at the time when the US Congress was conspicuously hesitating with decisions on arms supplies to

Ukraine, this position became less monolithic, with some leaning in favour of possible ceasefire talks with Russia. After the capture of Kursk and other territories, it became clear that it was Putin who, at this point, was refusing the possibility of negotiations.⁹ Nonetheless, neither Ukraine nor Russia completely excludes the possibility of negotiations, signalling from time to time that, in theory, such a possibility exists.¹⁰

A number of studies on the mood in Ukrainian society have been carried out by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation together with the Razumkov Centre sociological service. The data collected through the survey “Independence Day of Ukraine: way to victory, identity, and perception of the State’s value amid the war”, which was conducted 1.5 years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, are striking and reveal the very high resistance capacity of the Ukrainian society. Answering the question “Are you proud of Ukrainian citizenship?”, 85% of respondents answered “rather / very proud”, 7.8% answered “rather not / not proud at all”, while 3.7% answered “don’t know”. When asked whether any Russian demands to Ukraine in exchange for an end to its aggression would be acceptable, 73.8% of respondents answered “fully / somewhat unacceptable”, 18.4% answered “fully / somewhat acceptable”, and 7.8% answered “don’t know”. When considering these potential demands in more detail, the strongest reaction was expressed against the possibility of recognising the occupied territories as part of the Russian Federation, namely, 90.4% of respondents answered that it would be “totally / somewhat unacceptable” and 4.7% said that it would be “totally / somewhat acceptable”. The attitude towards possible demands on Ukraine to refuse to join NATO and to grant Russian the status of an official / state language was rather similar – respectively, 73.8% and 75.1% of respondents answered “totally / somewhat unacceptable”, while 18.4% and 18.2% of respondents answered “totally / somewhat acceptable”.¹¹

According to the survey “Independence Day of Ukraine: Way to Victory, Identity, and Perception of the State’s Value Amid the War”, conducted in the summer of 2024 – 2.5 years after the onset of the war – the resilience of the Ukrainian society was still extremely high, although the war has left very severe consequences. About a third (32%) of the Ukrainian population believes that negotiations with the Russian aggressor could begin only after the liberation of all occupied Ukrainian territories. Only 9% are ready to recognise the occupied territories as a part of the Russian Federation even for the sake of ending the war (in August 2023 it was less than 5%) and 81% consider it unacceptable (in August 2023 it was 90%). The other data are rather similar as well. The majority of Ukrainians (64%) think that Russian aggression was “inevitable” and around the same number (59.5%) believe that Russia would again attack Ukraine in the future, regardless of how the current war will end.¹²

The readiness of the Ukrainian people to resist aggression continues to be very high in the third year of the war. This means the politicians do not have too much space

for political manoeuvres, even if they would have been considering them in theory. Zelenskyy's 10-point Ukrainian Peace Formula, which he presented in 2022, provided for the recovery of Ukrainian territory (including Crimea), the withdrawal of Russian troops, the creation of a special tribunal and the trial of war criminals, as well as other goals. This plan was widely discussed at several international meetings in 2023, until the First Summit for Peace for Ukraine was held in Bürgenstock, Switzerland, in June 2024. Out of the 92 countries and eight international organisations that had sent representatives to the Peace Summit, its Joint Communiqué was signed by more than 80 countries and six organisations. As for Russia, it did not participate in the Summit and, moreover, it presented a new ultimatum on its eve. It stipulated that Ukraine should withdraw its troops from the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and surrender these territories to Russia, including territories controlled by Ukraine. Moreover, Ukraine should accept the status of a neutral state, abandoning its plans to join NATO or deploy nuclear weapons on its soil in the future.

In turn, on 16 October 2024, after discussing it with the leaders of the United States, Great Britain, Italy, France and Germany, the President of Ukraine presented his Victory Plan to the deputies of the Verkhovna Rada, the Parliament of Ukraine.¹³ The plan aims to get Ukraine, together with its allies, to demonstrate a force that Putin would be forced to reckon with, which would become a prerequisite for peace. The plan is compact: it consists of five points and three secret annexes. At the very heart of the plan there lies the geopolitical and military security of Ukraine, namely, the immediate invitation to join NATO (or strong security guarantees provided by Western countries), as well as arming Ukraine to ensure victory and the deterrence of Russia. The plan essentially asks, first of all, to provide clarity regarding the security guarantees Ukraine can count on in the very near future. In other words, this is a direct question posed by Ukraine to the West, asking the Western countries to define how they see Ukraine's geopolitical future.

The Ukrainian side emphasises the need for its NATO invitation to be presented already during the presidency of Joe Biden. The exact process of Ukraine joining NATO would be a matter of further negotiations, where the standpoint of Ukrainians themselves would be of the utmost importance. It is crucial that both the former NATO Secretary-General and the incumbent office holder, Mark Rutte, have agreed with it.

The second goal of the plan is to intensify hostilities, thus giving Ukraine the opportunity for successful offensives on the front as well as the irreversible defence of Ukrainian territory. It includes the demand to deliver the weapons promised by the West as soon as possible and in greater quantity, the demand for Western countries to grant permission for the use of long-range missiles against legitimate military targets on Russian soil, as well as petitions for air defence equipment, which is vital for Ukraine to be able to carry out the defensive war. Ukraine is also calling for the deployment of a

set of non-nuclear deterrents on its territory in order to ensure deterrence against future Russian aggression.

The plan also touches on Ukraine's strategic and economic potential, economic cooperation with the US and the EU, and the use of Ukraine's military experience after the war. Ukraine offers the EU and the US the chance to agree on conditions and sign an agreement that would allow the joint use of Ukraine's strategically important resources, such as lithium, titanium, and graphite. Kyiv has also offered a partial post-war replacement of the US military contingent stationed in Europe with the Ukrainian Army. In the words of Volodymyr Zelenskyy: "If we begin following this idea, this concrete Victory Plan right now, it may be possible to end the war no later than next year."¹⁴

THE RIGHT TIME IS NOW!

The reluctance of the Allies to fully support Ukraine, along with their protracted following in the footsteps of Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Advisor, in his use of "boiling the frog" tactics by providing gradual or slow support to Ukraine in order to avoid angering Putin and "escalating" Russia's nuclear threat, has led to the war sinking into a war of attrition. Despite a number of signals from Putin, such as announcements of increased nuclear readiness, nuclear readiness exercises, and the intention to revise the nuclear doctrine adopted by Russia in 2021, the situation was not escalated even by the invasion of Ukrainian troops into Russian territory, which began on 6 August this year.

With the Allies unforgivably delaying arms deliveries and thus forcing Zelenskyy to plead again and again for the fulfilment of promises, the only plan on the table "at the end of the day" is and remains Ukraine's Peace Formula, supported by around 80 countries, and the Victory Plan, which is still under negotiations.

"My position is very clear. We gave away our [nuclear] weapons but got nothing in return. Only a full-scale war and death. Therefore, today we have only one way out. We need NATO because we don't have weapons that can stop Putin," Zelenskyy emphasised, referring to Ukraine becoming a member of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).¹⁵

"So the biggest challenges that Ukraine faces really comes down to [the opponent's] size – numbers, population base, size of industry [...] size of territory, demographics, *et cetera*," emphasised the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), US Army General Christopher G. Cavoli.¹⁶

It is obvious that in the face of Russia's numerical superiority, only decisive actions by the US and European Allies can create the prerequisites for a Ukrainian victory. Against the backdrop of the emerging Russia-China-North Korea-Iran axis and the continuation of the conflict in the Middle East, the war entering into a further stage of stagnation in Ukraine will only encourage potential aggressors to launch new military conflicts. Even a partial Russian victory in Ukraine would set a very dangerous precedent. This would suggest that a nuclear power was allowed to carry out aggression and war crimes against another country without significant consequences, obliterating the rules-based international order. Will Europe and the world be able to bear such severe consequences? There are still ways to prevent them.

As of December 2024, when these final paragraphs are being written, the war between Ukraine and Russia remains intense, with significant developments unfolding both on the battlefield and in the sphere of international support. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy continues to engage in extensive diplomatic efforts to secure international backing, including potential discussions with the U.S. President Donald Trump. Nevertheless, it is evident that any decision regarding the cessation of hostilities initiated by Russia must ultimately be determined by Ukraine. The official Ukrainian stance will be formulated in Kyiv, rather than externally. This position was reaffirmed by Ukraine's Deputy Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha at the 31st OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting in December, where he stated that “..Russia seeks to create a world of zones of influence, where the use of force dictates new rules and new borders... Ukraine will not agree to Yalta-2 or Minsk-3, as Russia wants..yet the international community must resolutely oppose this and increase the costs of war for the Russian aggressor, compelling Moscow to accept a just peace.. There will be no compromises on our territorial integrity, sovereignty, or future security”.¹⁷

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CLARITY AND AMBIGUITY

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2024 was a year of European Parliament elections, when voters had the opportunity to answer the question of what kind of future they wanted for Europe. However, even well after the elections, it has been difficult for the media to come up with a brief and clear formulation describing the choice of voters. From one perspective, we can look at numerical changes that reflect the mandates of political groups – more seats for conservatives and the far right, less for liberals. On the other hand, the end result is still a coalition similar to the previous one, formed by the same political groups. It has acquired less support from voters but still represents the majority of the electorate. In the same manner, there has not been a change regarding the most visible face of the EU, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, as she has been confirmed for a second term.

It is likely the consequences of the choices that hundreds of millions of Europeans made in the elections will only be completely understood in the long run and following specific decisions. It is possible the future of the European Union will continue along a path that is still relatively similar to what we have seen before. And it is equally possible it will take a different direction.

Both this ambiguity and the inability to see a clear result immediately after the elections are probably not good for democracy or motivating voters. Moreover, given the increasing support for the far-right, which presents another threat to democracy, the chances of a clear majority for members of a unified political ideology are shrinking. As a result, ambiguity and uncertainty are gradually becoming a hallmark of the entire European political space. Firstly, this ambiguity is being reflected in the post-election period, in which political groups must develop increasingly unusual constructions of mutual cooperation. As these broad coalitions leave little room for strong political leaders with sufficiently solid mandates, uncertainties also creep into their ability to respond to major policy challenges.

Unfortunately, there is no shortage of challenges on the global agenda. We feel increasingly strongly that we are living in a world of myriad interrelated crises piling up in an endless to-do list. The bloody war carried out by Russia and Putin both continues to threaten the lives of the Ukrainian people and seeks to rewrite the norms of the international order and national sovereignty. The impact of anti-democratic forces is growing in different parts of the world, with independent media and institutions dedicated to protecting the rule of law being increasingly attacked. The repercussions of COVID-19 are still being felt in the background, the conditions for trade and economic development are being actively rewritten, and the climate crisis, as well as other threats to other life support systems, remains without a proper response.

Events taking place in close proximity to Europe also require more concrete positions from European leaders. The actions of Israel and anti-Israeli military forces continue to pose a risk of wider escalation in the Middle East. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria opens the door to a new order, the outlines of which are only gradually becoming clearer. On these and other issues, it is not difficult to define the interests of the majority of Europeans – less conflict, fewer threats to the rules-based world order, fewer civilian casualties, and more mutually beneficial cooperation, including in addressing global challenges.

At the same time, while various experts emphasise the crucial importance of responsible decision-making and remaining steadfast, their comments have recently remained, if not quite ignored by heads of state, still without the level of action required to decisively defend these common interests of Europeans.

Support for Ukraine and appropriate pressure against the violent Russian regime is one of the most striking examples of failing to take full-fledged actions based on expert recommendations – this is a situation that Latvia has been anxiously monitoring. Although we have received occasional support for Baltic-led initiatives, the overall actions of European national leaders, as well as the absence thereof, has not so far given reason for an optimistic outlook towards a secure European future.

Unfortunately, these blank responses to threats against Europe's deepest values and principles create an uneasy feeling for an increasingly large part of society – a feeling that is well-known to those who are following the actions, or lack thereof, concerning preparedness for pandemics, climate crises or other relatively disheartening areas.

It is undeniable that under these political circumstances, there is great potential to amass support for those who are prepared to take decisive actions. In this context, it is a telling observation that one of the contenders for the role of such a leader in the current EU environment is Kaja Kallas, who, as expected, has used her mandate to make a particularly strong address on behalf of the EU against the threats posed by Russia regarding, for instance, Baltic Sea infrastructure. However, given that two EU prime ministers have already visited Moscow, this will not be an easy task.

At the conclusion of 2024, a number of very crucial issues remained unclear – it is difficult to predict the future of Russia’s war economy, the outlines of Trump’s second term and its impact on support for Ukraine, and the outcome of elections in Germany. Nonetheless, some challenges that are inevitably closing in on Latvia and Europe and that require clear answers can be pointed out.

Firstly, there will be an ever-increasing need for cooperation. Today, security issues are among those that clearly demonstrate the need to work together across European borders, both in terms of defence capabilities and responding to other threats. But the manifestations of the climate crisis will grow in force, and so will the subsequent inevitable need for transitioning away from fossil resources. Likewise, Russia’s attempts to destabilise energy, food and other systems will make it necessary to be ready to look for new solutions to various crises. The impact of technological advances, social network monopolies, and related challenges for democratic processes and society as a whole will also force us to rethink ways to define new rules for the global media. Therefore, on certain issues, it will be necessary to find a common ground with, for instance, China, even despite our increasingly differing worldviews.

Secondly, there will be the threats to democracy. At times we have an urge to simply shift much of the responsibility for the modern problems of democracy to almost anonymous and impersonal forces of technological development, but 2024 has proven that Russia and other parties are responsible for deliberately creating these threats. In order to find vulnerabilities in the electoral process and manipulate democratic processes, the responsible parties can use both high-tech solutions such as misleading videos and mass campaigns on social media, as well as simple tools like bribing, intimidating and exerting pressure on voters in various ways. Here, one should also point to significant trends in the field of media consumption – namely, the increasingly important role allocated to short videos, which are gradually replacing texts. As a result, the influence of traditional media threatens to diminish even further, leaving more and more interpretations of events to video (and audio) content creators – a narrow circle of popular personalities. Needless to say, such an environment without any rules of media ethics will complicate the work of those who try to put out fires in the field of conspiracy theories, deception and extremist policies.

And thirdly, an ever-expanding range of actors will make more active efforts to question the rules-based world order. A good example here is presented by the actions of Viktor Orbán during the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. First of all, the first step of the Hungarian Presidency was to visit Moscow, thus challenging the rules for shaping the EU common foreign policy. Later, Orbán took the opportunity to make an extremely hasty visit in person to congratulate the self-proclaimed winners of the elections in Georgia, thereby legitimising these elections, even though most EU countries received reports of worrying irregularities in the conduct of these elections.

Hungary continued to maintain the same position in its subsequent actions, as it did not support the preparation of a joint statement by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on election irregularities and violence against protesters.

All these actions have been deliberate steps to determine which violations will be condemned and which will not be condemned by other European countries, thereby defining a new set of rules in practice. Hungary is just one example. Similar attempts to test and expand the boundaries of international rules and the rules-based order are being made by Russia, China, Iran, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Israel and, unfortunately, an increasingly long list of other countries.

In this era of these interlinked challenges, there is still a certain political potential. Current trends are threatening democracy, security, human rights and national sovereignty – values that most Europeans still hold very close to their hearts. Therefore, they present an opportunity for the potential future European leaders to build upon. By being able to avoid a simple “floating down the stream” by creating, defending and explaining a bold vision that is truly capable of protecting these vital values and providing answers to the great challenges, it is possible to gain very broad and resilient public support. The year 2025 will show whether any policy leaders will be up to such an ambitious challenge.

SECURITY AS A CONSTANT PRIORITY IN A DANGEROUS WORLD

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For Latvia, foreign policy is an existential matter as its most important goals are security and survival. Unfortunately, changes in the international environment demand that the country re-emphasise once again the significance of the fundamental goals of Latvia's foreign policy, namely, "preserving independence, sustainable security and public welfare of a democratic state". This is probably also the reason why the term "SECURITY" was particularly highlighted in the 2023 Annual Report of Krišjānis Kariņš, the Foreign Minister of Latvia.¹ Latvia can strengthen its security in various ways, but achieving sustainable security will only be possible with the help of its allies. The best international environment would be one where Latvia would not have to worry about its security, however, the achievement of such a goal seems unlikely over the next few years. For now, Latvia has to rely on itself and its allies while hoping that in the future its security could be grounded upon a rules-based international order, where the superpowers would accept restrictions on their freedom of action imposed by the rules of the international game.

European security in 2024 continued to be determined by three parallel processes: Russia's efforts to break Ukrainian resistance, Western support for Ukraine in the struggle for its independence, and Western countries gradually strengthening their military capabilities to create the preconditions for deterring Russia. Both the events outside the transatlantic space (the Israeli military operation against Hamas and later also against Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as the escalation and subsequent de-escalation of the conflict with Iran in the fall of 2024) and the domestic political developments of certain countries (the delayed US decision on granting a military aid package to Ukraine and preparations for the US elections on 5 November 2024) have had a significant impact on European security. Providing support to Ukraine is an important Latvian foreign policy priority, and the intensification of various international

conflicts affects its partners' assistance to Ukraine and its place on the priority list of NATO and EU countries.

When considering the priority of security in Latvia's foreign policy in 2025, one should keep in mind that the ambitions of Latvia's allies in the context of the Russian-Ukraine war are lower than Latvia's. While some of Latvia's allies want the war to end and for Ukraine to manage to preserve its sovereignty and most of its territory, Latvia has stated that it is in its interests to achieve Russia's defeat in the war.² On the other hand, a number of Latvia's allies are not ready to take actions that could potentially, even with a small probability, lead to an escalation of the conflict between NATO and Russia. Although it is the war-weakened Russia that should be the most afraid of escalation, the Western capitals still fear the military measures that would have to be taken if there was a need for a proper response following a conflict escalation by Russia. Therefore, it seems much more beneficial to them to try to avoid provoking an aggressive Russian response as a consequence of Western assistance to Ukraine, which, in turn, would require a decisive response from the West.

In an event of escalation, the ever so important international shipping lanes and critical infrastructure seem fragile and vulnerable to Western countries. Potentially, Russian missiles could be used against targets in Poland, Romania or the Baltic States. This, in turn, would create the obligation to give Russia a direct military response (and not an indirect one through Ukraine). In these circumstances, Western capitals could face political paralysis instead of acting decisively. As a result, Ukraine is given less assistance than necessary in the hopes that it would be enough. However, it may turn out that it will not be enough, and the Western countries might already find themselves in this unpleasant situation as early as 2025. Ironically, the fear of escalation could lead to escalation. The second presidency of Donald Trump will create additional risks for European security and economic well-being in 2025, which could lead to deteriorating relations between the United States and Europe and significantly reduced military and economic aid to Ukraine.

LATVIA'S SECURITY IN 2024

Despite the tense security situation in Europe, Latvia's security did not deteriorate in 2024. It is true, however, that this conclusion may turn out to be faulty if 2025 proves to be unfavourable for Ukraine. A major war is raging in Europe, and Russia, Ukraine, and NATO nations are still just a few steps away from a catastrophe. The Western approach to the war in Ukraine may prove successful if Russia is denied a victory while at the same time avoiding a conflict escalation with Russia. However, the situation in

the Russian–Ukrainian war may change for the worse for Ukraine, in which case the Western countries would have to review their current strategy and the amount of their support to Ukraine. It is possible that with a lower US willingness to support Ukraine in 2025, the willingness of European countries to provide assistance could also decrease. Although the front-line in Ukraine did not change significantly in 2024, this war phase may prove to be transitory. The re-election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States increases the likelihood of this scenario.

The international context in which Latvia is trying to strengthen its security has changed significantly. There has been an expansion of the military conflict in the Middle East, where the most active phase of the Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip has been completed, while at the same time there has been an escalation of the Israeli conflict with Hezbollah and an escalation of the Israel-Iran conflict.³ The active military conflicts in the Middle East will most likely continue in 2025 as well. Their intensity may increase, but they could just as well diminish. While the US and its allies enhanced their military presence in the Middle East and were to some extent involved in standing against the Iranian attack on Israel, the United States continued to focus on the threats posed by China in East Asia, where a significant share of US military power is also concentrated. The US's cautious approach towards the war in Ukraine also comes from the belief that the US cannot afford to engage in a European war at a time when increased attention must be paid to China.

On the bright side, there has been a positive development within NATO, namely, the conclusion of Sweden's accession to the Alliance in 2024. Even before its formal accession, Sweden had issued an announcement about a Swedish battalion-level unit joining the Canada-led NATO multinational brigade over the coming years.⁴ Additionally, NATO countries continued to increase their defence expenditures. While in 2023 only 10 NATO countries allocated at least 2% of their GDP for defence expenditures, in 2024, 23 countries had already reached the recommended defence expenditure level, with the defence expenditures of NATO European countries and Canada increasing by 17.9% in a year.⁵ Work on increasing the productivity of the European defence industry fared considerably worse, and this task will require a lot more work in the coming years.⁶ It is clearly difficult to sufficiently swiftly increase the productivity of the military industry and augment the number of troops of the armed forces during a time of peace. Many NATO capitals have gone through changes, albeit these changes have not been as fast as Latvia would like them to be.

Decisions affecting Latvia's security have often been made at NATO summits. For instance, the 2016 Warsaw Summit brought the decision to establish and send a NATO enhanced Forward Presence battle group to Latvia,⁷ while the 2022 Madrid summit came with the decision to transform this battle group into a multinational brigade.⁸ However, for Latvia, the most important results of NATO Washington Summit in 2024 were

related to the implementation of previously adopted decisions and an overall increase in the military capabilities of NATO countries.⁹ Considering that Russia's further actions and the security of NATO countries depend on the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war, emphasis was placed on providing economic and military assistance to Ukraine. The Washington Summit Declaration stated that "Ukraine's future is in NATO". At the same time, Ukraine's NATO membership will become possible only when the Allies are able to reach a consensus on this issue and when the membership conditions are met.¹⁰ In autumn 2024, the end-of-war plan, which was proposed by Volodymyr Zelenskyy and envisaged an invitation to Ukraine to join NATO, was met with caution in many NATO capitals.

One of the previously adopted decisions to see significant implementation progress in 2024 was the gradual transformation of the Canadian-led battle group into a multinational brigade. In 2024, the construction of the Canadian-led brigade headquarters also moved further, and military personnel and combat equipment continued to arrive in Latvia. For instance, Canada deployed 15 Leopard 2 tanks in Latvia as early as the end of 2023.¹¹ And, in the summer of 2024, the Canadian Armed Forces provided Latvia with helicopters¹² and vehicles for the purposes of logistics, technical maintenance and engineering.¹³ In November 2024, the Canadian-led NATO Multinational Brigade held its field exercise "Resolute Warrior 2024" in Latvia.

While aware of dangers posed by the Russian-Ukraine war, Latvia continued to develop its defence capabilities, with defence expenditure reaching 3.15% of GDP in 2024. A relatively high level of defence expenditure would likely be maintained over the years to come. The number of soldiers conscripted into the National Defence Service (NDS) has gradually increased, and this growing trend should continue in the coming years, even though the capacity of the National Armed Forces (NAF) to provide quality military service to a larger number of NDS troops could prove problematic. If the Allied military capabilities do not increase as fast as Latvia would wish, the need for Latvia to provide a significant part of the collective efforts to ensure deterrence and protection against Russia will remain. Over the following years, Latvia should receive long-range rocket artillery, medium-range air defence systems and anti-ship missile systems, the purchase of which was signed in previous years.

At the same time, it cannot be said that 2024 has been entirely favourable for the National Armed Forces. For instance, a Russian Shahed drone crashed down in Rēzekne municipality on 7 September. Initial criticism that the drone should have been shot down and that it was not done was gradually replaced by the suspicion that (contrary to the initial announcements of the drone being spotted already over the Belarusian territory and its movement in Latvian airspace being monitored¹⁴) the NAF did not notice the drone flying into the territory of Latvia and received information about this incident from the police, which, in turn, received it from a resident of the Gaigalava parish.¹⁵ The

seriousness of the incident was enhanced by the fact that the drone was equipped with explosives, which were neutralised after the crash. Most likely, this Russian drone was to strike a target in the territory of Ukraine, but it deviated from its course, flew over the whole of Belarus and fell down in the territory of Latvia, about 100 km from the border with Belarus. This has been a lesson for both the NAF and the people of Latvia. As a result of this incident, the Latvian people have learned two important things: firstly, it is difficult to spot a relatively small-sized drone that has entered its airspace, and secondly, the existence of anti-drone capabilities does not necessarily mean their easy peacetime availability in a particular geographical location. The Russian drone incident once again showed that greater investments in the defence sector come with a greater attention and, accordingly, the need for skilful communication with the public.

PREDICTABLE SECURITY CHALLENGES IN 2025

What can we expect from the international security environment in 2025? The changes in international security in recent years have resembled a train gradually picking up speed, and this means that the next year is likely to be no less dynamic than the previous one. The military conflicts will continue in the Middle East, and a number of countries (China, Russia, Iran, etc.) will continue their attempts to weaken the existing world order and the dominant position of the West. And November 2024 saw the final straw as Donald Trump was re-elected to the post of the President of the United States.

However, as in the last two years, the war in Ukraine will continue to be the most significant event for Latvia. Therefore, it is worth looking at potential 2025 developments in the Russia-Ukraine war. Almost three years after the full-scale invasion, the range of possible war outcomes has shrunk, and these can be divided into more and less likely outcomes. A Ukrainian victory over Russia is one of the less likely outcomes. This outcome is still possible, but only on the condition that Putin's regime collapses, which in turn would cause chaos in Russia and a spontaneous withdrawal of troops from Ukraine. Although Russia is facing increased dissatisfaction with the war, the fall of the political regime is unlikely.¹⁶ Russia has not yet reached its tipping point.

If Russia's defeat is unlikely, what might be the biggest challenges posed by the war during the next year? Looking at the changes over the last year (which were small in territorial terms), it could be reasonable to assume that the course of the war will not change significantly in the next year. However, it would be a mistake to believe that the next year will be similar to the previous one, as it is characteristic for wars of attrition to go through rather rapid changes after a long period of relative stability if one of the belligerent parties runs out of strength sooner than the other. A war of attrition is usually more beneficial

to large countries standing against smaller ones; therefore, it would be reasonable for the Western countries to review the assumptions that form the basis of their current position in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war and their support for Ukraine.

Three assumptions are worth looking at in more detail. According to the first assumption, both belligerents are weakened, making Russia unable to gain a decisive advantage – namely, the war of attrition becomes meaningless since neither of the parties is able to achieve victory. It is possible for this to occur in the case of the Russia-Ukraine war; however, it is also worth considering scenarios that are more unfavourable for Ukraine. Russia's hopes are primarily linked to wearing Ukraine out, which then could create favourable conditions for a Russian victory. Unfortunately, there is the possibility that, in 2024, Russia managed to find a way to weaken Ukraine's defences and advance further. Here, the Western countries with their insufficient military assistance are partly to blame.¹⁷ And Donald Trump becoming the US President could further diminish Ukraine's ability to protect itself.

If the current war dynamics were to stay the same in 2025, the Russian troops could continue to advance further, despite significant losses. In turn, the Ukrainian side could reach its breaking point if it were unable to replenish its military units and replace its wounded and deceased soldiers. If Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression diminished, the ratio of Russian gains and losses could change. Until now, the course of the war has been characterised by huge losses of Russian personnel against small territorial gains, but the exhaustion of Ukraine could lead to increased Russian territorial gains against decreased personnel losses.

Unfortunately, Western discussions in 2024 have focused on the wrong issues. Namely, increasing attention was paid to the position arguing that it was impossible for Ukraine to win the war and regain its previously lost territories.¹⁸ This position itself is not wrong, although the conclusions drawn from it, unfortunately, are. This position has often been interpreted as a need for Ukraine to sit down at the negotiating table and seek a diplomatic resolution to the conflict with Russia. However, the events on the battlefield can be interpreted in a different way, namely, that it is possible for Ukraine to lose the war. The plan, which was developed by Volodymyr Zelenskyy and made public in October 2024, envisaged significantly increased Western assistance, allowing Ukraine to stop the Russian military offensive.¹⁹ In other words, the amount of assistance should be increased in order for Ukraine not to lose the war. Ukraine's own messages in the second half of 2024 also show that Kyiv is well aware that a long war is not in its interests. Consequently, it would be necessary to create favourable conditions to end the war as soon as possible.

The second assumption, which may need to be revised in 2025, is that Ukraine will always be sufficiently motivated to defend itself against Russian aggression, and it will

always find ways to compensate for Russia's numerical advantages. Until now, Ukraine has indeed been able to successfully resist Russian aggression, which has allowed it not only to protect its sovereignty but also to recover some of the territories lost at the beginning of the war. Precise information on the personnel losses of the belligerent parties is not yet available, however, one can assume that the losses of Russia as the attacking party significantly exceed those of Ukraine. But it is also true that Ukraine's losses are significant as well, and it has been forced to mobilise a large number of its men for the needs of the war.²⁰ And it is similarly true that Ukraine's ability to continue mobilising and training a large number of soldiers, while strengthening the front-line sections where Russia has managed to advance so far, presents a cause for concern.²¹

At the beginning of the war, Ukraine had no difficulty in significantly increasing the personnel of its Armed Forces, but the situation was already quite different in 2024. Those Ukrainians who were patriotic and wanted to defend their country had already gone to the front. On the other hand, those who did not want to be involved in the defence of their country searched for ways to avoid going to the front.²² An unfortunate set of factors, consisting of Russia's efforts to divide Ukrainian society, the reluctance of many Ukrainians to participate in national defence, corruption in the public administration, delays in Western aid and failures at the front,²³ has created conditions where Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression can no longer be taken for granted. The worse Ukraine fares in the war against Russia, the more difficult it will be for the country to muster the human resources necessary for its national defence. In addition, Russian attacks on energy infrastructure have created the preconditions for winter 2024–2025 to become the worst Ukraine has experienced since the beginning of the war. Ukraine will most probably survive it; however, measures should be taken to strengthen its resilience.

The third assumption, which follows from the first two and which may also have to be revised in 2025, is related to the military and economic support given by Western countries to Ukraine. It is believed that the level of support can be adjusted depending on the progress of the war, thus giving Ukraine the opportunity to defend itself against Russian aggression while avoiding a possible conflict escalation by Russia. Western countries have provided aid to Ukraine since the beginning of the war, but they have not directly engaged in the war by sending military personnel to Ukraine. In summary, the West is pursuing a low-risk strategy regarding the war in Ukraine. At the beginning of the war, the West did not draw its red line on the border between Ukraine and Russia, as was done on the border of NATO countries with Russia. As the war progressed, another red line emerged, namely, regarding the use of nuclear weapons.

If in 2025 Russia continues its offensive and the Ukrainian Armed Forces are increasingly forced to retreat, then two things can potentially happen. First, the lifting

of arms embargoes and increased arms supplies may not bring the expected stabilising effect on the front. War-weakened Ukraine could find it difficult to withstand Russian pressure, which in turn could have a negative impact on governmental efforts to increase the size of its Armed Forces. Second, in the worst case, the only possibility to save Ukraine from defeat in the war against Russia and the imposition of humiliating peace terms could be direct Western engagement in the war by sending military units to Ukraine to perform specific defence functions. Western engagement could be primarily aimed at protecting Ukraine's airspace, but even that could prove to be insufficient. This pessimistic scenario is unlikely, as Russia is also weakened by the war, however, there are signs that sending NATO soldiers to Ukraine is already being discussed – for instance, Lithuania's (former) Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis has called on NATO countries to start a discussion on this issue.²⁴ Although this call was made mainly in the context of North Korea sending soldiers to Russia, it could become relevant in a situation where Ukraine's military weakness would allow Russia to break the front line and advance further and with greater speed. To prevent this, a much riskier strategy would have to be implemented, and the question of the US's readiness to continue supporting Ukraine would come to the fore.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine has proven itself able to successfully resist the aggressor. It is very possible that in 2025 there will be no significant changes on the front and Ukraine will continue to successfully defend itself. It should be noted that Russia has also faced significant problems during the war, and its offensive potential has diminished. Its losses are significantly higher than Ukraine's, and the engagement of North Korean soldiers in battles, along with growing problems of personnel recruitment, point towards Russia's weakness. The concern, however, is that a war of attrition favours the belligerent with greater human and military-industrial resources, which in this case is Russia. In the worst-case scenario, if the war were to reach its breaking point in 2025 to the detriment of Ukraine, the West may face a difficult choice: to continue supporting Ukraine the same way as before, with the war continuing to turn in Russia's favour, or to change the course of the war by increasing support for Ukraine and, if necessary, by directly engaging in it.²⁵

The uncertainty as to which of the belligerent parties would give up first (whether the Russian offensive in the Donetsk region will end or whether the defence of Ukraine will be weakened) forces us to prepare for two very different scenarios, and Latvia has different priorities in each of them. In the first scenario, which is favourable to Ukraine, the most attention should be paid to the progress of Latvia's Allies in providing military

units and capabilities in the context of NATO's new defence plans. These plans have been approved, while the capabilities necessary to activate them are still insufficient. In this context, the enhancement of the defence capabilities of European countries is of particularly great importance.²⁶ If Ukraine manages to withstand Russian pressure and Latvia's partners continue to provide Ukraine with the necessary resources for war purposes, then Latvia's primary foreign policy focus would be to work on strengthening its national security, potentially laying the foundations for a discussion on a larger military presence of the Allies in the Baltic States.

The second possible scenario is unfavourable to Ukraine. If Ukraine's defence begins to falter, Latvia's primary task in 2025 will be to save Ukraine. The adverse scenario has both a light and a hard version. In the light version, Ukraine's defence capabilities can be adjusted without Western countries themselves engaging in hostilities. On the other hand, if the hard version prevails, the stabilisation of the defence lines would no longer be possible through only the delivery of military aid to Ukraine, and Western countries would be faced with a choice: to allow Ukraine to lose the war or to risk their direct involvement in the war. If the worst happens, those NATO countries that have already considered their possible actions in the case of such a situation would have the advantage. It would be useful for Latvia and like-minded countries to hope for the best and prepare for the worst, while also taking into account the evolving position of the Donald Trump's administration on the issue of the Ukrainian war. The stakes are too high to be complacent and believe that Ukraine will be able to defend itself for as long as it takes.

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assume that the collapse of the Soviet Union became possible largely due to oppressive methods not being used to suppress the independence movements in the republics of the USSR and protests in Russia. Vladimir Putin has argued that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, and therefore the current Russian regime will not hesitate to use force against the public to eradicate protests. In summary, the Russian authoritarian regime, relying upon a rather efficient system of state administration with a large repressive apparatus at its disposal and a willingness to use force against the public in order to stay in power, is most likely to be rather successful in terms of staying in power.

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STRENGTHENING NATIONAL SECURITY IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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“Safety is not a result, safety is a process”.¹ This was stated by President Edgars Rinkēvičs at Riga Castle while presenting an award to former President Vaira Viķe-Freiberga for her great contribution in Latvia’s path towards NATO, the guarantor of its national security. Although absolute security is utopian, continuous progress towards it is the basis for a credible deterrence and defence strategy. Security continued to be Latvia’s top priority in 2024. Although less than three years after the start of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, vulnerabilities and homework to be done have become even more apparent, this year has also seen several new facets of how countries should view security, what potential threat scenarios might be there, and how they should interact with their closest allies to find solutions to these challenges.

In 2002, when Vaira Viķe-Freiberga spoke at the NATO Summit in Prague, where Latvia was invited to join the Alliance, she stated that “Latvia knows the meaning of security and the loss of it”.² Although security concerns have always been present, the Russian war in Ukraine has brought a completely different dimension to them. It seems that after Russia started the war with Ukraine, we are more aware than ever of the importance of Latvia’s membership in the most powerful military organisation. The war has been a major wake-up call, contributing to the move towards ensuring full-fledged defence. In the context of the war, we have also realised that security is not self-evident – it is not guaranteed. It must be strengthened and improved. 2024 was no exception.

While the tone of international relations in 2024 continued to be defined by Russian aggression in Ukraine, Latvia’s security was also affected by several other interrelated events: the US presidential election, developments in the Middle East, Chinese activities, internal EU challenges, and domestic political turbulence among its European allies. 2024 could be described as the year of “continued unpredictability”, which is related

to several ongoing major issues: a) what foreign policy Latvia's main strategic partner will pursue and in what direction will it develop; b) whether European powers will be able to convince their domestic policymakers and societies to provide more support to Ukraine; c) what the Allied investments in strengthening the defence of the Baltic States will be; and d) how the developments in the Middle East (and the ambiguous EU policy) will affect events in Ukraine. The unpredictability permeating the entire year, in turn, demanded a consistent national foreign and security policy.

Given that this has been a turbulent year in the context of international security, it has required Latvia – both as a state bordering a potential aggressor and as an actor with a society sharing a fairly strong consensus on providing the necessary support for Ukraine – to take a leadership position and continue to insist on the necessity to ensure support for Ukraine and the “containment” of Russia. Given the unpredictability and turbulence fuelled by the domestic political situation and political currents within several allied countries, it can be anticipated that the leadership of countries like Latvia may be even more necessary in 2025. Leadership means emphasising the threat Russia can potentially pose (thus maintaining a consistent policy), pointing out the risks, trying to offer solutions to ceasefire plans, and ultimately creating synergies within NATO between all the actors on both sides of the Atlantic.

CHALLENGES ON THE BATTLEFIELD IN UKRAINE – THEIR IMPACT ON LATVIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY

The future security of Latvia will be largely determined on the Ukrainian battlefield. Ukraine has been holding the Latvian frontline not only since 24 February 2022, but already since 2014. Russia is not capable of opening a second strategic front, especially with an adversary like NATO. But, if Russia is successful in Ukraine, a confrontation in the Baltic region and in the broader context cannot be ruled out, given the existing ambitions of the Kremlin. Consequently, the dynamics of the battlefield in Ukraine are directly related to Latvia's national security. In late 2023, Ukraine launched a counter-offensive, which initially raised high hopes among both Ukraine and its allies for its potential impact on the overall further development of the war. However, the first half of 2024 already painted a different picture. Russia was not only able to fight off the Ukrainian offensive but also managed to expand its conquered territories.

These positions also significantly affected the sentiment of the international community, which was further intensified by US domestic political discussions about the transfer of aid to Ukraine. In 2024, with different national understandings and approaches present, Ukraine's allies largely continued the search for ways to ensure a full-fledged

victory for Ukraine and answers to the question of what a defeat of Russia would mean. Different ideas and different attitudes are present even among the closest allies. The lack of a unified strategy significantly affected the fact that Ukraine did not receive full and timely military and financial support. Several countries, and Latvia can be justifiably counted among them, continued the active provision of necessary resources; however, this was rather an *ad-hoc* measure instead of a planned, coordinated action approved and practiced by all its allies in the form of a unified strategic approach. There are still different views among its allies as to what it would mean to create an escalation that could provoke an uncontrollable reaction from Russia, as to whether the statements of Russian officials are grounds for concern or yet another bluff, as to what circumstances would be grounds for allowing the use of weapons on wider Russian territory, and as to what the Russian “red lines” actually mean. European and North American leaders have also had mixed responses in public discourse.

There have been attempts to adopt a unified policy on Ukraine within NATO. This has, first of all, been related to a unified policy regarding the necessary financial investments, which was not fully achieved during the year after all. In early 2024, the NATO Secretary-General called on member states to consider a NATO fund for Ukraine, the total “value” of which would be around USD 100 billion.³ In the context of this discussion, Latvia, together with other regional allies (the Baltic States and Poland), is actively defending the idea to NATO member states of determining a specific defence expenditure percentage that could be transferred to support Ukraine. Although such a consensus has not yet been fully reached among the Allies, Latvia has committed to the annual allocation of 0.25% of its GDP to strengthen the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Ukraine plans to sign or has signed this type of bilateral agreement with all its G7 partner countries (parties to the “Joint declaration of support for Ukraine”), as well as the European Union.⁴ A joint NATO and/or EU plan and commitment would enhance Ukraine’s position, allow for long-term planning, and provide the adversary with a clear signal on a unified position and a commitment to assist Ukraine “for as long as it takes”.

A crucial discussion in the context of events unfolding on the Ukrainian battlefield is related to the (non)permission to use Western weapons in the wider territory of Russia, which has also influenced the way Latvian society reacts to and understands the desire of its allies to engage. Over the years, discussions have been held from various perspectives: legal considerations, international agreements, the necessity of the war, and potential escalations. Although following the US presidential elections, the outgoing administration of Joe Biden made a decision to authorise the use of medium- and long-range US missiles in the wider Russian territory, there are still varied approaches from the perspective of all the other Allies. This reinforces the argument about the lack of a unified military strategy and doctrine among NATO Allies.

NATO'S 75TH ANNIVERSARY: THE ALLIANCE – STILL THE MOST POWERFUL MILITARY ORGANISATION (?)

The most significant international event in 2024 in the context of Latvian security was the NATO Washington Summit, which took place in Washington and marked the 75th anniversary of the Alliance. The NATO Washington Summit was not dedicated to the Baltic States and the potential challenges on the eastern flank. Although it took place under the shadow of Russian aggression in Ukraine, it was also not about Ukraine. While making several important decisions on how to coordinate and plan the delivery of military equipment to support Ukraine, the most crucial messages regarding Ukraine's potential accession to or approach towards NATO membership were not conveyed.⁵

The NATO Washington Summit Declaration introduced a new term to NATO terminology – “irreversible”. It refers to defining the process in regard to Ukraine's potential NATO membership. This is an important step for an organisation where decisions are made by consensus, but it does not outline a specific timeframe or terms under which the membership could be enacted. Although NATO is committed to appointing a high-level civilian representative in Kyiv and establishing a command post in Wiesbaden, Germany to coordinate security assistance and training, it is essential for the Ukrainian Armed Forces and society to receive a signal that Ukraine will become a full-fledged NATO member state in the foreseeable future and upon meeting certain criteria.

It is significant to Latvia's security that, with the NATO Washington Summit, the question of whether 2% of GDP for defence is sufficient under the current security conditions is becoming even more relevant. The Declaration recognises that more efforts are needed to implement the promises made in Madrid and Vilnius, in particular to make NATO's new regional defence plans feasible. This means that NATO countries will have to spend more than 2% of their GDP on national defence.

Similarly, the NATO Washington Summit has enhanced the Allied-initiated discussion within the public discourse regarding the threats posed by China to the security of the Alliance and its member states. Likewise, the enhanced Russian-Chinese cooperation, which was also observed in 2024, presents an element of threat to the Alliance. It is therefore crucial that NATO has highlighted the growing strategic partnership between Russia and China. It is an essential step to strengthen both NATO's unity and its common understanding concerning the sources of threats. By recognising the mutually reinforcing efforts of Russia and the PRC to undermine and transform the rules-based international order, NATO is providing an important foundation for developing strategies to address and mitigate the impact of this partnership. By identifying China-Russia cooperation in NATO's public communications, it signals a

collective commitment among member states not only to monitor but also to actively engage in identifying and implementing measures to mitigate the impact of this partnership.

TURMOIL IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND ITS IMPACT ON LATVIA'S SECURITY

Since regaining independence, Latvian society has mostly had a rather unified consensus regarding the external security environment. Namely, in broad terms, security issues have not been the issues to significantly divide the sentiments of the public or the ruling coalition. The dynamics and policies pursued in the Israeli context have been such a divisive element.

While Latvia's official position supports a two-state solution and Israeli efforts for self-defence, the activities conducted by the Israeli Prime Minister in the Gaza region and Lebanon in the context of 2024 have shaken not only the state of mind of the Latvian government and political parties but also the public. The ambiguous assessment of Israel's activities and reactions to them in Latvia indicate that there is no common understanding as to the best solution or the approaches that would be considered acceptable.

Given the different ideational currents and opinions on the events in the Middle East, the greatest risk, from a Latvian security perspective, lies in the fact that resources, attention, and funding that could potentially be transferred to Ukraine are directed towards Israel. This was vividly demonstrated in 2024 by the ongoing process/movement in the US Congress regarding large-scale financial assistance to Ukraine, which, as a result of political struggles, was tied together with the Israeli "story".⁶ Without denying the danger Middle East developments could pose to Latvian security, it is in Latvia's interests in the context of 2025 to pursue a policy that would separate Ukraine from what is happening in the Middle East. It is also essential that in these efforts, the official discourse within Latvia's foreign and security policy is unified both in statements and actions.

LOOKING FORWARD TO 2025: TRANSFORMING THE EASTERN FLANK FROM “DETERRENCE BY PUNISHMENT” TO “DETERRENCE BY DENIAL”

Since the beginning of the Russian military action in Ukraine, the Baltic States have experienced several significant security-enhancing measures that have been adopted and approved during previous NATO and EU summits. Each of the measures and actions of its allies also conveys a message to the adversary about our readiness and commitment to protect a specific territory. Although significant progress has been made in recent years, it would be dangerous to consider the Baltic States as “finished business”. In this context, work must continue at both the national and NATO level.

The decision taken at the Warsaw Summit in 2016 on the enhanced Forward Presence of Allied troops was a significant and necessary message to the potential aggressor, and it marked the beginning of NATO’s transformation. Returning to NATO’s roots – collective defence – the development of a policy was initiated that was focused, first and foremost, on the potential defence of NATO territory. Furthermore, the decision of the Warsaw Summit was reinforced at the NATO Summits in Madrid and Vilnius, which transformed the enhanced Forward Presence from battalions to brigade-level units. Regional defence plans have been adopted, including for the Baltic States, which has been a national interest since joining the Alliance in 2004. The accession of Sweden and Finland to the Alliance has strengthened our security by addressing air- and maritime-dimension challenges in the Baltic Sea in the event of a potential Russian “Baltic scenario”. The readiness of NATO’s rapid reaction force has also been increased, both in terms of time and numerical strength.

While these are crucial decisions with a significant strengthening impact on the security of the Baltic States, it is important from a military perspective that these NATO decisions continue to address aspects that are so important to the Baltic region, namely, the timeframe for the engagement of large numbers of Allied troops from the very first minute of a conflict. The continued strengthening of Allied Forces, the improvement of defence plans, and the development of capabilities allowing NATO forces to engage in large-scale defence operations from the very first minute – all these measures serve as a significant signal to deter an adversary.

The presence of Allied Forces in the region

As stated in the wording approved by previous summits, the goal of multinational units is to create strong and combat-ready units, thereby demonstrating the strength of the transatlantic bond, as well as making it clear that an attack on one ally will be met with a joint response of the Alliance. This component is essential in implementing

the “deterrence by denial” approach. In the context of this decision, it is crucial that, firstly, all three Baltic States do their necessary national homework in a timely manner to ensure full-fledged host nation support functions, and secondly, they invite Allies to engage in “filling” these units with capabilities lacking in the region. In this regard, we should positively view and emphasise the commitment of Germany and Canada – as the respective NATO enhanced Forward Presence framework nations for Lithuania and Latvia – to invest and deploy additional troops in their respective host countries. We should particularly note the change in German military thinking and strategy, which has resulted in its readiness to send a brigade-size unit to the region (Lithuania) on a permanent basis (thus, it would be integrated into the Lithuanian National Armed Forces, meaning that these troops would become a full-fledged part of the defence operation from the very first minute of a conflict).

While doing their homework and strengthening their own security, the Baltic States must be able to identify the progress that has been made in terms of providing host country support. In the case of Latvia, this is a story about the development of military infrastructure – especially in the context of the Selonia Military Training Area, which is planned to be the largest military training ground in the region. The faster and more successful the national action, the sooner additional Allied troops will be deployed to the Baltic States. It is also essential for Sweden and Finland to become full-fledged members of the new military formations. Considering the role of Sweden and Finland in the defence of the Baltic States, their involvement in peacetime operations is a vital necessity.

An essential element of deterring an adversary is the message that countries will engage from the very first minute of a conflict, both nationally and at the NATO level. Therefore, from the perspective of the Baltic States, it is essential for the enhanced Forward Presence forces to engage in the initial stages of a conflict. It is vital that the close cooperation with the Canadian-led battle group initiated by Latvia is strengthened to such an extent that this unit of Allied troops becomes an integrated and inalienable part of the operational planning of the National Armed Forces of Latvia. From the perspective of the national defence system, this would facilitate a common NATO response, as well as send a strong message to the aggressor about the unity and solidarity of the alliance.

The ongoing gaps in the air and sea dimensions

Since the beginning of NATO’s transformation after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, its adaptation has been focused on the land dimension, leaving the maritime and air dimensions unprotected. The last two NATO summits in Madrid and Vilnius have highlighted and identified this gap in terms of ambition. Similarly,

Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have initiated their own national procurement processes for short- or medium-range air defence systems, which already present a significant burden on their defence budgets. Without the financial support and involvement of the Allies, it is impossible to ensure a full-fledged air and sea defence. It was already decided at the Vilnius Summit that the Allies should ensure regular training and a rotational presence of modern air defence systems and capabilities across the SACEUR⁷ area of responsibility, with an initial focus on the eastern flank. Progress has not really been achieved in this context. As demonstrated by the events in Ukraine, it is the air dimension that can be the most critical. Therefore, it would be in the interests of the Baltic States to ensure practical steps and commitments are taken to reduce this gap.

Time is still the centre of gravity for the Baltic States

Although Russia's aggression in Ukraine has contributed to adaptations among the Allies and the adoption of necessary decisions that would strengthen the speed of NATO's response forces and its ability to provide immediate military influence through a 360-degree approach, the issue of a sudden, surprise attack on the Baltic States remains relevant. That is why, in this context, from the perspective of Latvia (and the Baltic States as a whole), it is essential to continue to increase the reserves of pre-authorised and deployable rapid reaction forces that could be immediately used by the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in the shortest possible time, as well as to call for an enhanced presence of Allied Forces in the region on a permanent basis. It is also crucial to convey messages informing the adversary about NATO's military readiness, which can take, for instance, the form of large-scale Article 5 military exercises in the region, which, among other things, test NATO's ability to send the necessary number of Allied troops to the region within a limited timeframe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering Latvia's security and foreign policy situation, as well as the challenges identified in 2024, Latvia's 2025 foreign policy must be purposeful, active, and adaptable in order to strengthen its security and international standing.

- Latvia will have the important task of maintaining and strengthening its leadership in providing support to Ukraine. It has an obligation both to continue the allocation of 0.25% of its GDP for military and economic support to Ukraine and to promote international consensus on providing coordinated assistance. Latvia should serve as

an example to promote understanding on the significance of a Ukrainian victory for the European and international security architecture. It is also essential to strengthen public diplomacy to ensure that, in international discussions, the opinion defending the necessity to continue and expand support for Ukraine is unequivocally expressed.

- In terms of security, Latvia should focus on strengthening the defence of the Baltic region. This is not “finished business”. It is necessary to achieve a more substantial presence of Allied Forces on a permanent basis in Latvia in order to implement the “deterrence by denial” strategy, which ensures readiness to respond to any threat from the first minute of a conflict. At the same time, Latvia must continue to develop its military infrastructure – like the Selonia Military Training Area, for instance – to improve its ability to host Allied Forces and implement effective defence planning. Strengthening air and naval defence capabilities by attracting financial and technical support from Allies also plays a crucial role.
- Latvia’s foreign policy should help in promoting NATO cohesion and reform processes. This includes strengthening the Allied agreement to increase defence expenditure above 2% of GDP, as well as finding common solutions to remaining gaps in different regions. Latvia should actively participate in the development of a unified NATO military strategy that would be able to effectively address the challenges of the eastern flank, especially in the air and sea dimensions.
- Latvia’s foreign policy will have to demonstrate flexibility and a readiness to respond to global geopolitical challenges in 2025 as well. In this context, it is essential to recognise the impact of emerging aspects on national security, including the strategic partnership between Russia and China.
- By strengthening international partnerships, Latvia should continue to position regional security considerations to its Allies, especially the United States, Canada, Germany, France, and Great Britain (as, *inter alia*, the framework nations of NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence in the region).
- Latvia should also take an active role in the EU common security and defence policy, especially by developing military mobility and technological capabilities. At the level of regional cooperation, coordination between the Baltic States and Poland on security issues must be continued and deepened.

ENDNOTES

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LATVIA'S INTERESTS IN THE FORMATION PROCESS OF THE NEXT EU MULTIANNUAL BUDGET

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On 21 July 2020, following the conclusion of one of history's longest summits of leaders of the member states of the European Union (EU), the head of the Latvian government had the unique opportunity to announce that an unprecedented agreement was reached both on the next multiannual EU budget and on the European Economic Recovery Fund, providing more than EUR 10 billion for the development of Latvia.¹ However, this significant increase in available EU funding was mainly the result of applying an equalised level of agricultural direct payments for the next period, as well as unprecedented financing at the expense of EU debt, creating an economic recovery budget of almost 75% in addition to the regular budget.

If we evenly divide this amount between all seven years of the EU multiannual budget, we have EUR 1.5 billion per year, which means an approximate annual increase of 5% when compared to the 2020 gross domestic product (GDP), which was just under EUR 30 billion.² The increase of GDP at current prices to almost EUR 40 billion due to significant inflation³ dilutes the size of this external injection, but it still amounts to more than 3.7% of Latvia's GDP after 2023. It is undoubtedly safe to argue that EU budget has already played a significant role in supporting the pace of Latvian economic development for more than 20 years.

Naturally, the actual real economic outcome of these intergovernmental negotiations has not been the focus of foreign affairs over the past three years. However, when looking at the political guidelines for the next Commission issued by Ursula von der Leyen, the re-elected European Commission President, we see that she will propose a draft EU multiannual budget for the period after 2027 as early as in 2025.⁴ These guidelines

indicate a plan to transform the EU budget from a programme-based budget to a policy-based budget. The aim is to create a simpler budget, one with fewer programmes and a plan for each country, linking key reforms with investment and focusing on joint priorities, including promoting economic, social and territorial cohesion.⁵

Considering the importance of the EU budget for the Latvian economy, and the fact that the European Commission is already working on the next EU multiannual budget proposal, Latvian negotiators must be highly prepared to conduct negotiations already at the time of publication of this article in order to influence the proposal offered by the European Commission.

THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS CONCERNING THE EU BUDGET AND NEGOTIATIONS

In the 20th century, over time the “night-watchman” state that dominated the 19th century gave way to the “spending state”, which became increasingly active in economic management, education, and welfare provision.⁶ Today, the budgets of public administration structures account for a significant portion of gross national product around the world, in some places reaching as much as 50% of a country’s GDP.

Historically, national state budgets have played a significant role in the development of modern state models and the expansion of the public sphere, intervening in almost every aspect of human life. The mobilisation and distribution of public funding answers the traditional questions of policy implementation – who gets what, where, and how. Attempts to find social equality within the state are based on a willingness to redistribute from the “winners” of the economic modernisation process to its “losers”.⁷

The development of EU finances must be assessed in the context of the development of the European Union as an increasingly deeply integrated economic space and political entity. At the same time, the European Union itself can be described as a multi-level, albeit unstable, governance structure that extends from the local to the EU level, with a complex division of competences between national and EU levels of governance.⁸

Therefore, one of the most useful tools to analyse EU finances is to use theories of fiscal federalism. These essentially talk about “who does what and who pays for what” at different levels of government to ensure maximum economic efficiency and welfare.⁹

However, given the emphasis of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) on the need to respect the principle of subsidiarity,¹⁰ and given that the European Union is not a fixed political entity, the process of assigning political responsibility to

different levels of government is highly politicised. These discussions are grounded upon issues of efficiency on the one hand and issues of fairness on the other.¹¹

At the same time, discussions on the role of government as such should be based on three allocation principles:

- Allocation policies that seek to ensure the most efficient or effective use of resources;
- Distribution or redistribution policies that have an interregional role;
- Stabilising policies that help to overcome downturns in the business or economic cycle.

But a budget cannot be viewed solely as an expenditure, as it also requires a source of funding. The creation of a truly federal EU taxation system would have significant economic consequences, albeit they would not be too serious. With a total budget amounting to approximately 1% of the EU's GDP, serious consequences cannot be expected. This would not mean too many changes for national parliaments, either, as they already have to consider different levels of government – national, regional and local – when preparing a national budget.

It should be emphasised here that if a public service is organised at lower jurisdiction levels, there is always a risk that someone will receive a free service, which is to say that someone will enjoy a public service without paying taxes for it. Raising the level of service provision to a higher jurisdiction level can help to prevent such side effects, to create economies of scale, and to ensure an optimal level of service provision. However, it also poses the risk of service provision being moved further away from citizens and diminished democratic control over the service provision.¹²

Economic theories argue that adequate income should be ensured, as far as possible, at the same level at which the service is provided.¹³ This is also the basis for TFEU Article 311, stating that EU policies should be financed wholly from the EU's own resources.

EU-funded programmes aim to complement national policies and create added value through transnational policies. However, the structure of interests in agriculture differs significantly from interests regarding cohesion policy, which in turn differ from interests regarding research and development policy and interests regarding environmental policy.¹⁴ The strengthening of the subsidiarity principle in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU has only exacerbated the debate on the division of responsibilities between the EU level and the national level of governance.

The pressure to set new expenditure targets creates friction between historical commitments, such as those under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and new policy objectives, which compete for limited resources. In the same manner, every policy area faces a dilemma between the advantages of collective action and the desire to preserve one's national sovereignty and independence when making policy choices.¹⁵

Therefore, we can conclude that:

- During budget discussions, attention should also be paid to the EU agenda, as it may cause changes to the structure and size of the budget;
- The crowded policy space means that attention must be paid to distinguishing between highly focal and less focal actors, as well as between the formal budgetary policy and the informal dimension of budgetary policy;
- The multi-level model of the governance structure of the European Union also requires that attention be paid to the additional *games* played by different actors in different decision-making forums;
- Policy-support coalitions and their role in both negotiations and the development of joint problem-solving strategies should not be underestimated.¹⁶

One of the most important aspects of negotiations is to realise that the other party will not negotiate with you unless you can help them or pose a threat to them.¹⁷ Negotiations must be based upon a comprehension of three fundamental issues:

- 1) What do you really want?
- 2) Why is the other party interested in negotiating with you?
- 3) What are your alternatives?¹⁸

When thinking about negotiations between different interest groups, it is human nature for people to be guided by one of two perspectives in their reasoning. There are those who wish to be honest, show kindness, be open, and play by the rules. Then there are others who fear being tricked, manipulated, or forced to agree to something they don't understand or desire.¹⁹

Before we continue the discussion on negotiating, it is important to define terminology. Karl Albrecht offers the following terminology:

- Deal: an exchange of value between two or more parties that satisfies their respective interests;
- Value: the substance or medium of exchange in a negotiation; various tangible and intangible elements which can be traded off for one other as a way of satisfying the interests of the various parties;
- Interests: the unique needs, desires, aspirations, or outcomes which the parties in a negotiation seek to satisfy;
- Negotiation: a process for arriving at an exchange of value that satisfies the interests of all parties involved;
- Options: various ways of packaging the elements of value involved in a negotiation. Options are not the same as interests; they are ways to satisfy interests.²⁰

When negotiating, it is crucial to focus on interests instead of specific offers and counteroffers, as this creates new value opportunities that may not have been

noticed or were not obvious at first glance. Following this logic, working with options and developing them is essential in negotiations. This provides the parties with their own sense of power as it allows them to offer various deal packages with different appealing aspects. At the same time, the other party does not feel threatened as there is no pressure to accept one specific proposal that would then require a counter-offer. A wider comfort zone is also created for everyone involved because the options are easier to work with than “take it or leave it” offers.²¹

Well-thought-out national development strategies may or may not coincide with the Commission’s perception regarding the necessary strategy, but they will at any rate form a sound basis for negotiations in Brussels and vis-à-vis the net payers. At the same time, a national development strategy, the main aim of which is to ensure that not a single euro cent of Brussels funding is missed, risks creating the opinion that the member state is in the European Union just for the money.²²

As Denton acknowledges, the budget was not designed as a federal budget for Western Europe but as a tool for implementing policies on which member states were able to agree. This means that in the negotiations, those who support integration as a tool for nation-building will advocate for a strong EU financial budget, while those who want to limit political integration to the minimum level necessary to ensure market integration will insist on a limited EU budget.²³

The fight over the budget is based on various visions regarding European Union integration, different attitudes towards the use of public funding, and different interests expressed in the balance between budget revenues and contributions to it.²⁴

It can be expected that different member states, social, economic and political groups within the European Union, and European institutions will have significantly different visions on the desired political and economic order to promote European integration. Therefore, the outcome of the negotiations on the distribution of EU funding also reflects the outcome of political battles over the integration process as such, rather than being an optimal prescription for the role of public finances in integration.²⁵

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

Considering that the outcome of the previous negotiations additionally included a unique stabilising policy tool in the form of the European Economic Recovery Fund, we can expect the negotiations on the EU budget for the period following 2027 to contain a significantly less funding for the Latvian economy, unless the EU budget is significantly increased or new additional tools are created.

At the same time, the proposal of the European Commission to move from traditional programmes to a policy-based budget presents new options concerning the redistribution of funds and allocations for policy implementation. So far, Latvia has had good negotiating results, but they have not been ideal. To achieve the best solution, a clear vision of Latvia's aspirations is required, both regarding the European Union and the role and development of Latvia within it.

To create a deal that maximises value, it will be important to maintain the option of deeper integration. There may be political restrictions both at home and among the negotiating partners, but it is safe to expect, for instance, that as far as priority interests are concerned, the task of limiting integration will be more important for Hungary. It is equally safe to predict that France will defend its traditionally important aim of protecting the Common Agricultural Policy and the direct payments to farmers provided within its framework. The beneficiary countries of the Cohesion Fund, and Poland in particular, will keep cohesion policy high on their lists of interests.

Here, we see grounds for natural coalitions to develop, with the potential to help both defend major allocation policies as well as avoid a redistribution of sovereignty that would go further than desired. These coalitions could also potentially develop options that could be agreed upon during negotiations without getting dragged into offers and counteroffers. However, this does not answer the question of what Latvia's *unique needs, desires, aspirations or outcomes might be* and how to incorporate them into the common policy.

In my opinion, Latvia's future faces two challenges – namely, adaption to climate change and the enormous costs of achieving climate goals, as well as the completion of *Rail Baltica*, the largest railway project in Europe. It is also worth noting the potential of the new railway to take over the North-South freight route from road carriers, thus both relieving Latvia's road infrastructure of heavy vehicles and reducing the emissions they generate.

My recommendation for the next negotiations is to put forward one priority interest, rather than two or three of equal importance. That priority should be to secure funding for the completion of the *Rail Baltica* project within the framework of the next multiannual budget. This does not mean abandoning the cohesion policy or direct payments but rather focusing on one issue while trusting allies to protect the other valuable interests.

It will be crucial to embed this priority in EU policy by arguing that it is both a part of climate policy implementation and an essential component to strengthen EU security, as it promotes military mobility. Latvia must also leave open the option to fulfil this need through various means – both within the framework of existing policies and by creating new ones.

After the negotiations are concluded, the value of the deal will consist of the sum of various elements. Unless there is an exponential increase in the EU budget, or a new

off-budget tool is created – for instance, to achieve climate goals – then Latvia will have a worse result compared to previous negotiations. Therefore, it will be essential to compensate for this gap with elements of self-created options that go beyond traditional policies, so that the result could be viewed as the best possible outcome at the conclusion of negotiations in 2027.

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LATVIA'S ASCENT IN THE EU: A SMALL STATE DRIVING BIG CHANGES BY 2025

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Latvia, a member of the European Union since 2004, stands as an integral part of the bloc, actively shaping its policies and strengthening its influence. This year, Latvia celebrated the 20th anniversary of the EU's historic "Big Bang" enlargement, a milestone that highlights its integration journey. As we look toward 2025, Latvia's role within EU institutions is set to expand, marked by notable achievements and evolving priorities.

This article offers an overview of the main themes emerging in 2024, highlighting key developments and priorities, while also assessing their potential impact in 2025. It further explores the Commission's priorities for 2025 and Latvia's capabilities within the EU, emphasising its ability to influence and contribute to the Union's evolving agenda.

HARD SECURITY ON ALL FRONTS

In an era of mounting geopolitical tensions and evolving security threats, Latvia has emerged as a steadfast advocate for robust defence and transatlantic cooperation within the European Union. Demonstrating a holistic approach to security, Latvia balances its contributions to EU defence frameworks with innovative cyber strategies, reinforcing its role as a key player in safeguarding regional stability.

In 2024, Latvia reaffirmed its commitment to the European Union's security and defence frameworks, emerging as a proactive contributor to regional and global stability. The country participates in 17 Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects, reflecting its focus on critical areas such as cyber defence, maritime security, and military mobility. Latvia also plays a pivotal role in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), contributing to its missions and reinforcing its position as a bridge between EU and NATO defence initiatives. This dual alignment underscores Latvia's advocacy for stronger transatlantic ties and cooperation in addressing shared security challenges. In line with EU-wide goals, Latvia supports the development of a European Defence Industrial Strategy, recognising the importance of a robust and innovative defence sector to enhance strategic autonomy.

Addressing cyber threats has become a cornerstone of Latvia's security strategy. The National Cyber Security Law, enacted in September 2024, aligns with the EU's NIS2 Directive and broadens the scope of sectors subject to cybersecurity regulations. Latvia's Cybersecurity Strategy 2023–2026 further outlines key objectives, including strengthening resilience, promoting public awareness, and enhancing international cooperation. These measures, complemented by the work of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, emphasise Latvia's leadership in countering disinformation and fostering robust cyber defences.

Beyond security, Latvia continues to engage in diverse EU initiatives by also contributing to humanitarian aid and peacekeeping missions. As Latvia intensifies its participation in these initiatives, it demonstrates its dedication to advancing EU goals and addressing contemporary challenges, solidifying its reputation as a dynamic and reliable partner within the European Union.

UKRAINE IN THE EPICENTRE

Latvia's unwavering support for Ukraine remained a cornerstone of its foreign and security policy in 2024, with a comprehensive approach encompassing military, humanitarian, and diplomatic dimensions. Latvian Prime Minister Evika Siliņa reaffirmed this commitment, stating that providing military aid equivalent to 0.25% of GDP – exceeding EUR 100 million annually – will remain a priority.¹ When combined with humanitarian and other forms of assistance, Latvia's total support for Ukraine in 2024 is projected to exceed EUR 200 million, underscoring its steadfast dedication to Ukraine's sovereignty and regional stability.² This contribution ensures continued military training, equipment, and weapons support across various domains, including land, air, sea, and cyber-electromagnetic operations.³ This substantial contribution

supports ongoing military training, as well as the provision of equipment and weapons supplies across these domains. A key highlight of Latvia's leadership is its co-chairmanship of the Drone Coalition for Ukraine, showcasing its innovative approach to defence support. The military aid package includes brand-new "Patria" armoured personnel carriers, drones, ammunition, individual soldier equipment, and resources for training 4,000 Ukrainian troops.⁴

Beyond military aid, Latvia remains a staunch advocate for Ukraine's EU integration, actively supporting its accession procedures and facilitating alignment with EU standards. Financial aid through the EU's Ukraine Facility and other mechanisms will continue to address Ukraine's immediate and long-term recovery needs. On the international stage, Latvia champions the establishment of a special tribunal to address the crime of aggression against Ukraine, highlighting its commitment to accountability and justice.

Latvia's support also extends to the humanitarian sphere – the EU has allocated EUR 70 million to aid Ukrainian refugees within its borders,⁵ ensuring access to essential services and integration programmes under the Ministry of the Interior's oversight. According to the Latvian Ministry of the Interior, as of the beginning of 2024, more than 32,000 Ukrainian citizens were living in Latvia, and more than 61,000 Ukrainians had been registered and issued relevant documents to remain in the country.⁶ Moreover, the country actively advocates for enhanced EU solidarity measures, recognising the critical role of collective action in sustaining Ukraine's defence efforts.

ENLARGEMENT

The EU enlargement process has been fully revitalised following the December 2023 European Council decision to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.⁷ The Council of the European Union's Negotiating Framework for each of the countries was adopted on 21 June, and the following Intergovernmental Conference with each of the candidate states took place on 25 June. As a result, Ukraine and Moldova are currently in the process of bilateral screening meetings with the Commission.

Accession progress has been seen in almost all candidate countries, with the exception of Georgia, Kosovo and Türkiye. Montenegro is making due progress with the most extensive "fundamentals" thematic cluster, with closing benchmarks being set for chapter 23 of the EU *acquis*. Albania opened a "fundamentals cluster" on 15 October 2024, after having completed the screening meetings with the Commission at the end

of 2023. Finally, following the Commission's proposal of 12 March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina on 21 March 2024.⁸

Furthermore, there have also been developments in EU aid for candidate countries and aspiring states to accelerate European integration and accession processes. In the Western Balkans, this aid has taken the form of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the EUR 6 billion Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, and the annual EU-Western Balkans Summit. In that regard, on 23 October 2024, the Commission approved the Reform Agendas for Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. This decision provided the five countries with access to funding from the Reform and Growth Facility to implement reforms that support accelerating their alignment with the EU *acquis*.

Concerning the eastern trio, the EUR 50 billion Ukraine Facility entered into force on 1 March 2024, providing aid in Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction, and EU integration. The Facility provides aid for Ukraine through EUR 17 billion in grants and 33 billion in loans. As of August 2024, EUR 12 billion have already been paid to Ukraine. Furthermore, on 10 October 2024, the Commission presented the Growth Plan for Moldova, with a connected Reform Facility with an EUR 1.8 billion budget.

Latvia's interest in efficient and smooth enlargement proceedings are multilateral. Firstly, the integration of Ukraine and Moldova into the EU strengthens collective EU security. Historically, Russian foreign policy has been a destabilising force on the European continent. EU accession proceedings are rooted in values such as democracy and rule of law, reflected through the extensive fundamentals cluster. By enacting democratic reforms during accession negotiations, Moldova and Ukraine receive a two-fold benefit. On the one hand, progress in accession negotiations keeps political and popular support for reforms high. On the other hand, Moldova and Ukraine strengthen their resiliency against further Russian interference. The spill-over effect of those reforms and their new-found resiliency is increased stability and new strategic partners for the European Union and Latvia.

Secondly, a smooth and functioning enlargement process for all previously mentioned candidate countries provides Latvia with new opportunities to develop strategic, economic and political partnerships. Furthermore, easier access to candidate country markets provides new opportunities for Latvian businesses.

Thirdly, enlargement proceedings can have a positive effect on reducing the potential of economic shocks for Latvia. The Russian-led war of aggression in Ukraine, as well as the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, severely affected the Latvian economy and the purchasing power of Latvian citizens. Inflation, especially for foodstuffs, reached levels not seen since the economic crisis of 2008, affecting low-income citizens

the most. Access to the Ukrainian agricultural sector, for example, could in the future prevent such negative shocks and price hikes.

Historically, Latvia has been a relatively passive voice with regard to enlargement, frequently choosing to follow the voices of other EU member states. However, ever since the beginning of Russia's aggression, there has been a fundamental policy shift in which Latvia has become an active supporter of enlargement, especially with regard to the so-called eastern trio of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK AFTER 2027

The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is the basis of all further EU action. It defines the maximum amounts that the EU can spend per year in different policy areas during the duration of the MFF.⁹ Therefore, it is arguably one of, if not the most, important pieces of legislation to guide short-, mid- and long-term policymaking in the EU.

The Commission proposal concerning the next MFF framework and the ensuing negotiations are expected to only begin in mid-2025.¹⁰ However, there has already been a distinct level of activity with regard to how the new MFF might look and what member states should be prepared for.

On 18 July 2024, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission published the “Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029”, which outlined the need for a different approach to the MFF. The political guidelines outlined three key points for the structure of a new MFF: 1) a more focused policy-based budget, rather than a programme-based budget; 2) a simpler budget, with national plans for each country, with fewer programmes, and linking EU investment with key reforms; and 3) a more impactful budget, through the creation of a Competitiveness Fund.

Meanwhile, in her mission letter to Polish Commissioner-designate Piotr Serafin, who received the role of Commissioner for Budget, Anti-Fraud and Public Administration, the President of the Commission outlined that the third policy choice – the European Competitiveness Fund – “[will be an investment capacity] that will support strategic sectors critical to the EU competitiveness, including research and innovation, and Important Projects of Common European interest.”¹¹

Certain leaks of Commission memos and internal documents have shown ideas floating around such as a central pot of financing for each member state, access to which is dependent upon the fulfilment of certain reforms, while others have seen the lumping of

all research and innovation funds into one single fund.¹² It is crucial to note that none of these positions is the official position of the Commission, nor are they confirmed to be part of the upcoming MFF proposal in 2025.

However, if such fundamental changes to the MFF are being considered, it poses a lot of challenges for Latvia. As EU beneficiaries, Latvia's success and continuous development over the last 20 years has been largely dependent upon access to EU funds, such as the Common Agricultural Policy, cohesion and structural funds, EU research and innovation funds, and more. These funds provide a certain level of certainty because the available funding is clearly delineated in a programme-based budget. Farmers, research institutions, or other private beneficiaries know how the EU budget "pie" is cut up. With policy-based budgets, this certainty is not as clear. The extent of the budget's flexibility will be decisive in that regard. Could the Commission, if it finds it appropriate to do so, divert a sizable amount of funding away from cohesion funds to, for example, defence funding? In that regard, there was no real clarity about the outlook of the future MFF in 2024, as the process has just begun, and everything discussed here is somewhat speculative – however, that does not change the fact that the MFF "engine" is slowly turning, and we are already seeing fundamental changes.

TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK – EU SECURITY AND DEFENCE

As we approach 2025, the European Union is addressing significant security challenges through strategic initiatives and policy shifts. Two years ago, the start of Russia's ongoing, unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine marked the return of high-intensity conflict on the continent, underscoring the urgent need for enhanced defence readiness.¹³ Central to this agenda is the newly established role of the Commissioner for Defence and Space, tasked with overseeing the implementation of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP). These initiatives reflect the EU's determination to strengthen its defence capabilities, foster member-state cooperation, and reduce dependency on non-EU suppliers.

EDIS sets out a comprehensive vision to bolster the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) by addressing existing challenges and harnessing its untapped potential. It emphasises collaborative defence procurement, with the aim of ensuring at least 40% of defence equipment is procured jointly by 2030, while also setting the target of a minimum of 50% of defence investments within the Union by 2030, rising to 60% by 2035.¹⁴ EDIS also calls for mainstreaming a culture of defence

readiness across EU policies, revisiting the European Investment Bank's lending policy, and integrating Ukraine into the Union initiatives supporting its defence industry.

EDIP, with a EUR 1.5 billion budget for 2025–2027, extends and institutionalises previous short-term measures to adapt the EDTIB to the evolving security landscape.¹⁵ It includes provisions for strengthening supply chains, fostering the industrialisation of defence technologies, and facilitating cross-border defence cooperation. Regulatory elements of EDIP propose innovative frameworks, such as the Structure for European Armament Programme (SEAP), to enhance collaborative procurement and create an EU-wide regime for the security of defence equipment supplies.¹⁶ Additionally, EDIP highlights the importance of the Defence Industrial Readiness Board to ensure coordinated and consistent EU action in defence industrial policy.

Additionally, as the EU seeks to protect its values and interests, open strategic autonomy will be a key background theme in 2025. This encompasses reducing dependency on external suppliers and partners, particularly in defence and critical technologies. The EU's increasing focus on autonomy is driven by rising tensions in regions like the Indo-Pacific, as well as unpredictable threats from state and non-state actors. This vision will extend to the EU's defence cooperation with non-EU countries and NATO as it seeks to balance cooperation with external allies while also strengthening its independent capacity to respond to crises. This dual approach will be essential for managing the complex security environment of 2025, which may include threats related to hybrid warfare, cyber threats, and conventional military conflicts.

With the growing importance of space in national security and defence strategies, the EU will further integrate space-related initiatives into its security framework. A dedicated Commissioner for Defence and Space, responsible for strategic coordination, will oversee the integration of space capabilities into defence policies, ensuring that the EU remains competitive in this critical area. This could involve the development of space-based surveillance systems, satellite communications, and early warning systems to enhance both military and civilian resilience.

Another key element of the EU's defence framework is Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The EU expects PESCO projects to deliver significant defence capabilities by 2025, focusing on military mobility and interoperability across member states' armed forces. These projects are designed to improve the speed and efficiency of military deployments, addressing the need for a more agile defence posture. With binding commitments for all member states, PESCO will also drive further collaboration on defence equipment and infrastructure, reducing reliance on external defence suppliers. EDIP also plays a key role in assisting Ukraine in rebuilding its defence sector, fostering long-term cooperation between the EU and Ukrainian defence industries. This

initiative aligns with the EU's broader objective of reducing its dependence on non-EU defence technologies, ensuring that strategic defence capabilities remain within its borders.

Latvia, as a key member of both the EU and NATO, has several opportunities to contribute to strengthening EU defence and security. By increasing its participation in PESCO projects, especially in cyber defence, military mobility, and maritime security, Latvia can enhance EU defence capabilities. It can also support the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) in promoting local defence industries and fostering innovation within the EU. Latvia can advocate for higher defence spending and invest in modernising its forces to align with NATO standards. Additionally, Latvia's strategic position allows it to bridge NATO-EU initiatives, particularly in response to hybrid threats like cyber-attacks and disinformation. By continuing its contributions to CSDP missions and crisis management operations, Latvia will play a significant role in building a more resilient and capable European defence framework.

WELL-PREPARED AND IN FAVOUR – ENLARGEMENT IN 2025

Enlargement seems to be the future of the European Union. The year 2025 will see the accession processes continue to move in the same direction – forward. Importantly, Bosnia and Herzegovina will most likely begin accession negotiations, Montenegro will inch closer to closing key chapters, and Ukraine and Moldova will receive their opening benchmarks after the screening meetings.

The year will also see the implementation of accelerated integration and potentially a partial “phasing in” of individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes. In this regard, accelerated integration through financial aid for reforms similar to the Reform and Growth Facility, and integration into rule-of-law mechanisms, seem to be the most likely areas of progress, while other forms of accelerated integration could also develop.

However, it is important to note that momentum for enlargement is arguably the most important factor for the success of enlargement. Without member state support, the process will grind to a halt. Therefore, Latvian MEPs, Commissioner Dombrowskis, and the Latvian government have to look towards the idea of “how do we sell enlargement to the wider population?”

Therefore, it is important to figure out the most effective strategic communication choices and messaging in the field of enlargement. For example, can enlargement help

with the cost-of-living crisis by bringing down costs for foodstuffs? Can enlargement help with attracting highly qualified workers to fill gaps in the labour market? Does enlargement help with European collective defence? There is no universal message in favour of enlargement that will work in consensus-building with other member states, nor is there a universal message in favour of enlargement that will work with all parts of the population. Figuring out what works best for each group will be key in moving the process forward.

Furthermore, while enlargement might still be several years in the future, the consequences of enlargement should already be considered *now*. While enlargement is a net positive for the EU, that does not mean enlargement does not come with its own set of problems and difficulties that require efficient adaptation and change. In that regard, it is evident that enlargement will affect the availability and distribution of EU funding to Latvia in almost all fields – the Common Agricultural Policy, the cohesion and structural funds, R&I funds, or the new Competitiveness Fund. Consideration also needs to be given to how an enlarged EU will affect the representation of smaller states such as Latvia in the Council’s and Parliament’s decision-making processes. Will Latvian MEPs have the same amount of consensus-building power within an enlarged EU?

ANTICIPATING BIG CHANGES – THE UPCOMING MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK

In the spirit of the new MFF, Latvia needs to remain flexible with regard to the development of its national position vis-à-vis the MFF after 2027. Due to the uncertainty and lack of information concerning the future of the MFF, it is difficult to provide concrete recommendations; however, a crucial aspect to keep in mind is the level of convergence within the budget, and the consequences of that convergence.

Firstly, with regard to the level of convergence, it is crucial to understand how a policy-based budget, national plans, and simplified, centralised funds and programmes will look in practice. There is a drastic difference on whether the new MFF will resemble the Recovery and Resilience Facility, with one envelope per member state,¹⁷ or rather a more general division of funding, where multiple existing funding mechanisms under a policy field are grouped into one. For Latvia, the latter would be more beneficial with respect to long-term planning and current institutional know-how with regard to implementation.

Secondly, regarding the consequences of such convergence, a key aspect to closely consider is the development of the “linking investment with certain key reforms” policy choice.¹⁸ Essentially, this is a conditionality mechanism, seemingly like the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation.¹⁹ Therefore, it is important to understand the extent of such a conditionality mechanism – how does it work? Would non-fulfilment of certain key reforms limit access to EU funding in that field, or would it, in principle, be applicable to all EU funding? Furthermore, what kinds of reforms could be linked to such a conditionality mechanism – would it cover key reforms in fields such as defence or agriculture, or could it also apply to social issues?

Even though there is a high level of uncertainty of the specific shape that the proposal will take, the Latvian government and Latvian MEPs need to be in close communication and effectively cooperate on this matter even before the proposal is published in mid-2025. The Polish and Danish presidencies will provide opportunities within the Council to steer the Commission’s approach in the development of the proposal. Furthermore, 2025 will see EU member states actively adopting national positions on the matter, expressing red lines and suggestions. This will present an opportunity to seek common positions and strive for early consensus-building within the different institutions. Furthermore, the role that Latvian MEPs will play during the European Parliament’s deliberations concerning the proposal will be instrumental. Previously, the European Parliament has been an effective stakeholder in the MFF legislative process.²⁰ Therefore, coalition and consensus-building by Latvian MEPs within their respective European parties will partly define the shape that the MFF will take.

AN INDEPENDENT EU IN AN INTERDEPENDENT WORLD – THE COMMISSION’S OTHER PRIORITIES FOR 2025

The Commission’s priorities for 2025 essentially fall under the heading of Open Strategic Autonomy (OSA). Previously discussed issues such as security and defence and enlargement highlight this aspect – integration and cooperation where possible, independence where necessary. This can be illustrated by three further key priorities for the Commission in 2025 next to the budget, defence and enlargement: trade policy, industrial policy and energy policy.

Regarding trade policy, the Commission will have to strike a balance between China on the one hand and the US on the other. The EU will have to adopt measures that protect its industries while avoiding potential protectionist and retaliatory measures that might impact bilateral trade. Furthermore, the Commission will also have to look for new

trade partners to lessen the EU's dependence on the two global superpowers. The EU-Mercosur agreement, for example, highlights such an opportunity.

In the field of industrial policy, the Commission will look to lessen the EU's strategic dependencies through continuing to strengthen industries producing semiconductors, batteries, hydrogen, pharmaceutical ingredients and other products. However, where possible, the Commission will also look for new industrial alliances to attract business partnerships and potential investors to the EU.

Finally, concerning energy policy, the story by-and-large is the same. There will be a clear focus on continuing to diversify energy supply, further reducing dependency on Russian LNG and oil, and bolstering the EU's renewable energy industry through subsidisation, regulatory assistance and other measures.

Whilst Latvia can lead by example in energy policy through eliminating its dependency on Russian LNG, gas and oil, it also has the opportunity to shape the development of the EU's industrial and trade policy in 2025 as well. By utilising the opportunities within the already existing multilateral landscape, Latvia can develop important strategic partnerships with third countries. Currently, Latvia is not taking enough advantage of the international events, conferences, assemblies and other forums that it participates in. By increasing its diplomatic efforts and participation in expert-level groups, looking for bilateral meetings, and re-evaluating its strategy, Latvia could become a strong voice for the EU internationally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Latvia should increase its involvement in PESCO projects, particularly in areas like cyber defence, military mobility, and maritime security. Taking a more active leadership role in these projects will help the country shape EU defence priorities and improve interoperability among member states' armed forces
- Latvia can maximise the benefits of the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) by promoting local defence SMEs. Supporting Latvian companies in accessing EU defence markets will not only strengthen the national defence industry but also contribute to EU technological innovation.
- Latvia should continue advocating for higher defence budgets within the EU, ensuring that all member states align with NATO's defence spending targets. Latvia can lead by example, focusing on modernising its forces and prioritising investments in emerging technologies like cybersecurity and space defence.

- Given Latvia's dual membership in NATO and the EU, it should foster greater cooperation between the two organisations. Promoting joint training exercises and coordinated defence planning will strengthen regional security and ensure a more unified approach to emerging threats.
- Latvia should encourage partnerships between its defence companies and their EU counterparts to drive innovation in military technology, logistics, and defence-related cybersecurity. This will bolster both Latvia's and the EU's defence capabilities.
- Latvia needs to remain a vocal and strong supporter of enlargement and be attentive to developing effective messaging for the general population and other EU member states on the importance of enlargement.
- Latvia should start extensively evaluating the impact of a new wave of enlargement to better prepare for and guide its position on certain aspects, such as EU funding availability, the institutional framework, and strategic cooperation possibilities.
- Latvia should remain flexible in its approach towards the MFF, sticking to a more general position that can be quickly adapted.
- Taking into account the uncertainty around the 2025 MFF proposal, Latvia should start communicating with other EU member states, especially the Polish presidency of the Council and the upcoming Danish presidency, on their priorities for the 2028–2034 MFF period, and it should seek common positions to pre-emptively express red lines.

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COMPETITIVENESS CHALLENGES FACED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION AND LATVIA

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Competitiveness is one of the key priorities of Latvia’s economic policy in the context of the last decade which was characterised by instability resulting from the recent global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia’s war in Ukraine and future geopolitical risks. The Annual Report of the Foreign Minister states that “the growth prospects of the global economy remain unclear. Growth is impacted by geopolitical tensions caused by conflicts and their economic consequences – high inflation, falling production, decreasing exports, refocusing trade flows, access to energy resources and raw materials, unfair competition from specific countries, and non-compliance with international rules”.¹ In order to achieve sustainable growth in the future, the European Union (EU) and Latvia must look for unorthodox solutions, and thus competitiveness comes to the fore. This article aims to examine the progress of the EU and Latvian policies of competitiveness and to develop policy recommendations.

COMPETITIVENESS BACKLOG IN THE EU AND FUTURE POLICIES

The World Economic Forum defines competitiveness as the set of institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country. For the purposes of the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), Forum researchers define a country’s competitiveness as its productivity. They argue that well-being and living standards are determined by productivity, which in turn depends on the economy’s ability to make

efficient use of available resources (labour and capital) and to promote innovation and technical progress.

Over recent decades, globally and especially in developed countries, productivity growth rates have been low. The productivity of developed countries, which has contributed to their prosperity, is growing slowly or not at all. In other words, the latest challenge is to find an answer to the question of why – despite the fourth wave of the industrial revolution arising as a result of rapid digitalisation, robotisation and artificial intelligence, as well as other impressive technological advances – competitiveness and productivity are still lagging behind. The fact that the labour productivity backlog in emerging and developing countries is a major obstacle to convergence with the income levels of the economies of developed countries presents a cause for concern. Many countries are facing the risk of enduring underdevelopment. There is a growing risk of increased global poverty.

In the quest for solutions to increase competitiveness, researchers and international institutions are conducting in-depth analyses on the causes of the slow productivity increase, growth factors and policies. Today, the productivity slowdown is explained mainly as the result of the consequences of the global economic and financial crisis (high national debts and a lack of investment), the gradual disappearance of the effect of the Internet revolution, the lack of effective structural reforms, limited educational gains (in developed countries, an increase in the education level is no longer attainable, since integration into the education system is already close to 100%), as well as increased protectionism.

Admittedly, choosing a productivity-enhancing policy can be a particularly daunting task, as there is neither a “silver bullet solution” nor a standard set of reforms that can be implemented uniformly in all countries. Therefore, there are significant studies being carried out to assess productivity characteristics in different regions, countries, cities and rural areas of the EU. Moreover, experts are also trying to decipher the “gap” between the productivity growth rates of the United States (US) and EU countries.

The task of increasing competitiveness is an EU-wide challenge; however, it especially applies to the “new” EU member states.² In a changing world and in the context of geopolitical tensions, the EU must find the tools to promote competitiveness, well-being and its global leadership role. This is why the European Commission (EC) asked Mario Draghi – the former European Central Bank President and one of Europe’s great economic minds – to prepare a report of his personal vision on the future of European competitiveness. The report³ looks at the challenges faced by industry and companies in the EU single market. The findings of the report will contribute to the Commission’s work on a new plan for Europe’s sustainable prosperity and competitiveness.

Mario Draghi points to changes in three key areas – *trade*, *energy* and *defence* – which stimulated growth in Europe after the end of the Cold War.

As for *trade*, even as domestic growth slowed, the EU benefitted significantly from the burgeoning world trade. Between 2000 and 2019, international trade as a share of GDP rose from 30% to 43% in the EU, whereas in the US it rose from 25% to 26%. Trade openness ensured that Europe could freely import goods and services it lacked, ranging from raw materials to advanced technologies, while exporting manufactured goods in which it specialised, particularly to the growing markets of Asia. However, the multilateral trading order is now in deep crisis and the era of rapid world trade growth looks to have passed: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects world trade to grow at 3.2% over the medium term, a pace well below its annual average from 2000–2019 of 4.9%. EU producers mainly suffer from a lack of demand stability and differences in production costs, which are further aggravated by uneven competitiveness conditions due to other major economies providing significant subsidies and creating barriers to trade.

As we turn to the *energy* impact, we can conclude that before the Russian war, Europe was able to satisfy its demand for imported energy by procuring ample pipeline gas, which accounted for around 45% of EU natural gas imports in 2021. But this source of relatively cheap energy has now disappeared, at huge cost to Europe. The EU has lost more than a year of GDP growth, while having to re-direct massive fiscal resources to energy subsidies and building new infrastructure for importing liquefied natural gas. The EU's energy-intensive industries face higher investment costs to meet their decarbonisation targets as compared to their competitors. It is crucial for Europe to bring down its high energy prices, while continuing to decarbonise and shift to a circular economy. At the same time, Chinese competition is becoming particularly acute in the key industries driving decarbonisation – such as clean tech and electric vehicles – driven by a powerful combination of massive industrial policy, rapid innovation, control of raw materials and the ability to produce on a continent-wide scale. For the EU to succeed, it will therefore need to engineer a coherent strategy for all aspects of decarbonisation, from energy to industry. However, it must be understood that the transformation of energy sector and the EU economy as a whole will be gradual, and fossil fuels will continue to play a central role in energy pricing for the remainder of this decade, thus jeopardising price stability and competitiveness.

In turn, in the context of *defence*, the era of geopolitical stability under US hegemony allowed the EU to largely separate economic policy from security considerations, as well as to use the “peace dividend” from lower defence spending to support its domestic goals. However, the current geopolitical environment resulting from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, deteriorating US–China relations and rising instability in Africa,

which is a source of many commodities that are critical to the world economy, requires appropriate actions on the part of the EU.

The report identifies three main areas for action to reignite sustainable growth in the EU.

First, Europe needs to carefully refocus its economic policies on closing the innovation gap with the US and China, especially in advanced technologies. Unfortunately, the EU is losing its once-strong position in the global race in the field of modern technologies. Currently, only four of the world's top 50 tech companies are from the EU. Mario Draghi explains that there is a close link between the size of companies and advanced technology adoption, since large companies can afford to devote more financial resources and developed human capital to the use of innovative technologies. For instance, in 2023, 30% of large businesses in the EU had adopted AI, and only 7% of SMEs had managed to find the resources to do the same.

The second area for action is to synchronise the plans for decarbonisation and competitiveness. If the EU fails to coordinate its policies in both fields, there is a risk of decarbonisation running contrary to competitiveness and growth.

The third area for action refers to increasing security and reducing dependencies. Security is a precondition for sustainable competitiveness and growth. Rising geopolitical risks can increase uncertainty, dampen investment and disrupt international trade. Europe is particularly exposed to these risks. Although dependence on Russian gas and other raw materials has declined, the EU still relies on suppliers of critical raw materials, especially China. For instance, the EU is heavily dependent on imports of digital technologies. In terms of chips production, 75–90% of global wafer fabrication capacity is in Asia. This state of affairs could only be salvaged by the swift development of the military industry in accordance with the implementation of the common industrial policy.

COMPETITIVE CAPACITY AND PRODUCTIVITY IN LATVIA

Although Latvia's productivity dynamics over recent decades have been quite rapid and have exceeded the EU's average growth rates, there still remains a significant gap of productivity levels when compared to the highly developed countries of the EU. In 2023, the productivity level in Latvia in current prices was only around 60% of the EU average, and it is one of the lowest indicators in the EU. Latvia falls significantly behind the highly developed EU countries in areas like the quality of production resources (people and capital), digitalisation, and the application of innovations and new technologies.

The slowing dynamics of productivity convergence are indicative of a “productivity trap”, which requires the acceleration of structural reforms and significant improvements in innovative solutions. The low level of productivity in the Latvian economy is the result of an insufficient level of innovation in the business sector, which is largely explained by the dominant position of low-technology sectors in the manufacturing industry and the relatively small number of large enterprises. As the experience of developed countries shows, the manufacturing industry is characterised by a potentially higher innovation capacity. The Latvian manufacturing industry is clearly dominated in structural terms by low-tech sectors, which in recent years have generated over half of the total added value of the manufacturing industry, which is almost 1.5 times higher than the EU average.⁴

Latvia’s 2023 Productivity Report points to technological factors as playing a significant role in increasing productivity levels, e.g., the modernisation of production, the improvement of existing technologies and the introduction of new technologies. Transitioning from old to more novel technologies stimulates a productivity increase at the business and sectoral level. However, the contribution of such factors in increasing the overall level of productivity largely depends on the redistribution of resources from lower productivity sectors to higher productivity sectors, as well as to sectors with healthier productivity dynamics.

Employment growth in sectors with productivity levels above the national average (e.g., the manufacture of computers and electronic equipment) along the decrease in employment numbers in some low-productivity sectors (e.g., light industry) is a positive development. However, a large number of jobs are still being created in sectors with relatively lower productivity levels (e.g., accommodation and food services). The recent redistribution of labour resources to the benefit of productive sectors has not been sufficient to have a significant impact on the speed of increases in the overall productivity level of the national economy.

In order to ensure sustainable productivity growth, it is important to follow price and cost competitiveness, as well as external and internal balances, in particular the foreign trade balance and the dynamics of the export market share. The Economic Barometer⁵ of the University of Latvia Think tank LV PEAK shows that despite weaker cost and price competitiveness indicators, Latvia’s export market share has increased by 7.7% over five years (2019–2023). However, in 2023 the situation deteriorated as the export market share of Latvia decreased by 3.4%, which was the result of decreases in the market share of both exports of goods and exports of services by 5% and 1%, respectively, compared to the previous year.

The prospects for future productivity growth are closely linked to the deeper integration of Latvian companies into global markets by increasing the share of knowledge-intensive

products and services in total exports. This goes hand in hand with the ability to carry out technological modernisation and innovations. In order to overcome the risks of weakening competitiveness, it is necessary to increase the sophistication of Latvian goods exports by increasing the share of products whose competitive advantages and positions in global markets rest upon qualitative factors rather than low costs and price competitiveness.

According to the Economic Barometer, the gap between productivity and labour costs has widened significantly over recent years. Increasing productivity is the only way to prevent the ever-growing cost pressure on competitiveness.

Productivity growth will increasingly have to be based on science-intensive activities, the proportion of which is currently small in the Latvian economy. Latvia's weakest point is innovation – including both investments in research and development as well as improving people's knowledge and skills. However, policymakers must not forget the “old” problems, such as infrastructure deficiencies, sharp regional differences and social inequalities. Latvia's 2023 Productivity Report clearly states that increasing productivity and competitiveness requires a comprehensive and broader approach: strong performance in one area cannot compensate for poor performance in another.

Productivity growth is impossible without investments, and in particular a serious focus on investing in competitive innovative projects and human capital through raising both public and private funding. From 2020 to 2023, investments in the Latvian economy on average accounted for 22.2% of annual GDP, which is equivalent to the average rate of the last pre-pandemic years. In the face of the current volatile international environment, a sharp investment increase is unlikely to be expected. Financing from EU funds and the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) will provide a positive impact, as these EU tools are important sources of boosting investment levels. It is necessary to ensure the wise and full use of EU funds in Latvia in line with EU and national priorities over the period of 2025–2027, when the amount of EU funds available to Latvia will significantly exceed the financing of previous periods.

Competitiveness, productivity, growth and prosperity are driven by innovation. Innovation, in turn, requires investing in research and development (R&D), the improvement of people's knowledge and skills, etc. From 2013–2022, Latvia invested only 15% of the EU average in R&D. In comparison, Lithuania invested 25% of the EU average, while Estonia invested close to half (46%).⁶ Between 2013 and 2022, Latvia's average R&D investments amounted to 0.6% of its GDP, Lithuania invested 1% of its GDP and Estonia invested 1.5%, while the EU's average R&D expenditure relative to GDP stood at 2.2%.⁷ If we look at the role of private companies in R&D funding, Latvia, unfortunately, is falling behind in this area as well. In Latvia, private R&D funding as a

percentage of the total financing in 2022 amounted to 37.3%, in Lithuania it was 39.9%, and in Estonia it was 49.4%, almost on par with the public funding.⁸

The impressive total investments of Latvia's neighbours and their companies account for one of the factors that positively influences the faster growth in added value of the Lithuanian and Estonian economies and their respective sectors. In other words, insufficient innovation funding partially explains Latvia's growth backwardness, as compared to its neighbouring countries.

Taking into account our limited state budget resources, Latvia's innovation performance could benefit from more active involvement in R&D funding by the largest private companies and state-owned enterprises. Large companies have the resources and knowledge to make substantial investments. A good example is LMT, which is currently investing the most in the development of innovations. Considering the relatively small number of large companies in Latvia, policymakers should find an opportunity to promote the performance and export capacity of our flagship companies.⁹

In this context, I particularly welcome the target set by the Ministry of Economics, namely, to ensure that R&D or innovation investments account for at least 0.5% of company turnover. With this target, the Ministry, as a stockholder and public shareholder, clearly states that state-owned enterprises must engage in growth-enhancing activities, including in the field of R&D.

Further digitalisation could also have a positive impact on competitiveness. According to Latvia's 2023 Productivity Report, the country is experiencing a digital divide between city and countryside. A large part of Latvia's people lacks basic digital skills, excluding them from the effective use of the Internet. The integration of digital technologies in businesses is well below the EU average. In general, Latvia's population is not fully prepared for a digital boom in the economy. Latvia has one of the highest proportions of inhabitants in various age groups with low overall levels of digital skills. This aspect not only leads to a shortage of digital skills on the labour market, but also generally hinders a broader rollout of digital technologies within companies. Core policies must focus on increasing digital skills for society as a whole, with specific attention given to target groups to avoid the risk of future imbalances.

At the moment, when electricity prices in the EU are two to three times higher than in the US and but gas costs four to five times more, energy companies play a particularly important role in improving competitiveness in the EU and Latvia. The introduction of new technologies to reduce electricity prices would make it possible to obtain cheaper electricity and reduce dependence on natural gas while providing a competitive advantage to Latvian businesses. According to Eurostat data¹⁰ for 2024, we can see that the electricity price for non-household consumers in Latvia is 0.15 EUR/kWh, which is slightly lower than the EU average (0.16 EUR/kWh) but higher than in Estonia. Latvia

is currently able to provide a more competitive price than the EU average. This price level can be maintained as a result of regional connection capabilities and the contribution of hydroelectric power plants. In Estonia, the electricity price, amounting to 0.13 EUR/kWh for non-household consumers, is the lowest in the Baltic States and also lower than the average price in the European Union. Estonia's advantages include cheaper local energy production using oil shale resources, as well as interconnections with the Nordic countries. In 2024, Lithuania had the highest electricity price, amounting to 0.17 EUR/kWh, exceeding both the EU average and the Estonian and Latvian levels. This reflects Lithuania's more substantial dependence on electricity imports, leading to higher prices, in particular due to market volatility and the costs of switching to green energy.

Eurostat¹¹ data point to Baltic enterprises having to pay significantly higher prices for natural gas since 2021 as compared to the EU level. Although natural gas prices are currently falling both in the EU and in the Baltics, gas prices for non-household consumers in Lithuania and Estonia began to decrease a year earlier than in Latvia, as they were faster to react to supply diversification and the use of alternative energy sources.

Security considerations must be taken into account when promoting competitiveness.¹² Economic security is an essential part of the EU security and collective defence policy. In today's geopolitical context, competition between countries, especially the US and China, in the field of technology is increasing rapidly. It is necessary to find EU economic instruments that, on the one hand, promote EU competitiveness, innovation and modern technologies, and on the other hand, do not jeopardise EU security. The pandemic and Russia's war crises clearly demonstrated that interstate economic cooperation ties, especially in foreign trade and finance, can easily become a threat. The manipulation and economic coercion of Russia and China, which distorts the functioning of the market, clearly illustrates the economic vulnerability of the EU.

Latvia lacks ambition and action to improve human capital education and skills, which is an important prerequisite for competitiveness. Latvia and other EU member states need to address the worrying shortage of qualified teachers in areas related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics by increasing support for teacher training. The main challenges of the Latvian labour market in the medium term can be attributed to the ageing workforce and the lack of working hands. The ageing workforce trends will have the greatest impact on the availability of medium-skilled labour, in particular in sectors like transport services and storage, construction, the manufacturing industry, as well as agriculture and trade. Labour shortages may also develop in sectors where a significant increase in demand for highly-skilled labour is expected – namely, professional, scientific and technical services, along with information and communication services, especially in STEAM areas.

The rapidly changing economy needs to respond more to the needs of businesses. To this end, it is important to strengthen vocational education and training by giving students and adults the skills that businesses are looking for.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the government's most significant challenges in the face of low productivity and risks posed by geopolitical instability, an ageing population, rapid technological progress and the need to increase climate change-related investment is to significantly increase the growth of productivity and competitiveness.

It is impossible to promote competitiveness without investments and innovations, without further digitalisation and without implementing a smart industrial policy that is synchronised with the European Green Deal.

In order to improve Latvia's progress in the field of innovation, the largest private companies and state-owned companies must engage in more active R&D funding. The resources and knowledge at the disposal of large companies allow for significant investments that could substantially accelerate innovation. Policies to promote the export capacity of flagship companies and their investments in innovation also play an essential role.

The government must look for the most effective ways to encourage private investment. At the same time, Latvia must ensure the effective use of resources allocated by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and cohesion funds over the period of 2025–2027.

Taking full advantage of digitalisation opportunities is essential to maintaining productivity and improving living standards. A comprehensive strategy for the digitalisation of companies needs to be developed. An important tool in the digital age is also the ongoing dialogue with entrepreneurs on the latest technological developments and the impact of digital economy trends on their activities.

Workforce availability and quality also play a vital role in increasing productivity. Addressing demographic and migration issues, improving access to and the quality of education at all levels, and promoting reskilling and upskilling are therefore crucial. In order to promote the development of human capital, several reforms have been implemented or started in Latvia. However, their positive impact on the overall level of productivity can be expected only in the medium or long term.

Latvia should take into account that the European Commission will propose the creation of the European Competitiveness Fund as part of the EU's next multiannual budget – this will drive investment in European strategic technologies, including artificial intelligence, clean industry and biotechnologies. The European Competitiveness Fund will support Important Projects of Common Interest (IPCEIs). In this context, it is important for Latvia not to miss the opportunity to attract EU funds for advanced technology projects. Latvia should also evaluate the possibility of establishing a competitiveness fund within the framework of its state budget – a fund which can be synchronised with EU resources to achieve Latvia's priority technological objectives.

Great opportunities for new technological solutions and innovations are provided by the military industry, the role of which is difficult to overestimate given the current conditions. Latvia has defined defence as its priority, and investments in the military industry offer a wide range of growth opportunities.

ENDNOTES

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THE PEACE AND SECURITY OF WOMEN: CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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There is a link between international security and gender equality – a connection that NGOs driven by women activists and allies sought to have the UN Security Council acknowledge before the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325¹ (Resolution 1325). There were several motivations for this. Firstly, one of the increased risks for women and girls is conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)² – although this persisted as an issue before the 1990s, the disproportionate impact of CRSV on women was increasingly brought to light in connection with the armed conflicts in former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, and Rwanda.³ Secondly, more women worldwide live in poverty than men, and conflict and post-conflict contexts amplify that even more, as the possibility of employment and education barriers increase, and women often become the sole care-takers of the family.⁴ Thirdly, women (and children) make up the majority of the displaced populations during armed conflict. Moreover, it is during armed conflicts that women often face restricted access to reproductive health services, which can result in increased maternal mortality and various other health complications.⁵ Despite these adversities, women are not merely passive victims. Women’s meaningful participation in governance is important, especially in decision-making positions, to bring a more comprehensive perspective to different policies that have an impact on society. Women play active roles in addressing post-conflict needs yet remain largely excluded from peace negotiations,⁶ where their insights are needed.

In response to these realities, Resolution 1325 was adopted in 2000 under Namibia’s presidency of the UN Security Council, which recognises the varying impacts of conflicts on women and girls and advocates for addressing their distinct needs at all stages of a

conflict. The four pillars of Resolution 1325 – prevention, protection, participation, and post-conflict recovery – offer a framework for addressing the gendered dimensions of security. By formally recognising women as essential participants in peacebuilding, the resolution challenged the longstanding tendency to group them with children, affirming their independent role as stakeholders in global security.⁷ It was the beginning of the “Women, Peace and Security” (WPS) agenda.

October 31, 2025 will mark 25 years since the adoption of Resolution 1325 and 30 years since the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,⁸ a foundational document that influenced Resolution 1325. Throughout the year, the international community will reflect on their achievements, shortcomings, and the gaps that persist in the implementation of the WPS agenda. This article offers a focused perspective on the current state of women’s peace and security, including in regionally and in Latvia’s foreign policy.

25 YEARS OF RESOLUTION 1325

Over the 25 years since Resolution 1325 was passed, the WPS agenda has gained institutional momentum. The UN Security Council has adopted nine subsequent resolutions, making WPS a permanent agenda item with annual debates. The Security Council’s language now regularly incorporates WPS keywords – “woman/women”; “sex/sexual”; “gender”; and “girl/boy”.⁹ In 2020, the UN Secretary-General established women’s participation as a non-negotiable priority for the UN.¹⁰ Globally, 107 countries implement National Action Plans (NAPs)¹¹ on the issue, while regional organisations like the EU, NATO, the OSCE, and the AU have developed their own frameworks to reach the goals of Resolution 1325. The United States was the first country to adopt a law (act) on WPS in 2017.¹² Countries have also formed various coalitions and networks, such as the WPS Focal Points Network,¹³ to exchange good practices on WPS. The actions taken by states, international organisations, and NGOs have led to advancements in addressing the needs and rights of women in conflict zones and beyond. However, despite these strides, women and girls in conflict zones and post-conflict situations continue to face severe and complex challenges.

By measuring 13 indicators,¹⁴ the WPS Index for 2023/24 found that extreme difficulties remain in Afghanistan, Burundi, CAR, DRC, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. Among all country groups and regions, the “Fragile States group”¹⁵ has the poorest performance:¹⁶ one in five women has recently faced intimate partner violence, six out of ten women live near conflict zones, and maternal mortality is about 540 per 100,000 live births, which is more than twice the global average of 212.¹⁷

The region of Sub-Saharan Africa performs only slightly better. On average, women in the region have received only five years of schooling, and less than half feel safe in their neighbourhoods at night. However, there have been significant improvements in some areas, such as women's financial inclusion, which increased from 23% in 2014 to 41% by 2021.¹⁸ A mixture of progress and setbacks can also be found in the latest UN Secretary-General's Report on WPS. While 33% of peace agreements in 2022 included gender-specific provisions, the exclusion of women in peace negotiations persists; for instance, women were entirely absent from the Ethiopian peace negotiations, although near parity was achieved in Colombia's talks with the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*.¹⁹ In Afghanistan, nearly all women-headed households faced food insecurity in 2022,²⁰ and since 7 October 2023 close to 1,000,000 Palestinian women and girls have been displaced,²¹ with female-headed households being particularly vulnerable amid severe food shortages, unemployment, and an imminent risk of famine.²² Climate-related risks are increasingly intertwined with WPS, with 40% of NAPs now addressing gender-sensitive climate impacts.²³ Therefore, while progress in certain areas is evident, the data reveals persistent and interconnected challenges that continue to affect women's security and participation across multiple regions and contexts.

The 2024 UN Secretary-General's Report on CRSV focuses on conflicts in Ukraine, CAR, Columbia, DRC, Ethiopia, Gaza, Haiti, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Somalia, and Yemen. The report outlines that CRSV unfortunately remains persistent in conflicts globally, namely, there has been a 50% increase in UN-verified cases of CRSV globally, totalling 3,688 in 2023.²⁴ These cases span a range of atrocities, including sexual violence linked to abduction, trafficking, and terrorism, often exacerbated by the lack of the rule of law. Gender-based hate speech, disinformation, and threats of sexual violence emerged as tools for humiliation and destabilisation. Survivors – diverse in gender, age, orientation, and background – faced brutal attacks, stigma, and socioeconomic exclusion, with some subjected to lethal violence.²⁵ Progress, however, was seen with the historic prosecution of forced pregnancy as a crime against humanity in DRC,²⁶ which was a landmark for the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2021 and for DRC's national courts in 2023.²⁷ Overall, impunity for CRSV crimes remains a challenge, with new difficulties emerging along with the development of digital tools.

Importantly, while there is considerable effort from the international community to advance gender equality and the WPS agenda, there is also pushback. This was evident in 2019 when Russia and China became the first UN Security Council members to abstain from a WPS resolution (2467), which was ultimately weakened by removing references to sexual and reproductive health.²⁸ While this pushback threatens to undermine the WPS agenda, there is also the continuing development of new diplomatic and legal initiatives to protect and advance women's rights globally.

A recent development took place during the 2024 UN General Assembly High-Level Week (UNGA HLW), whereby Australia, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands took formal steps to call on Afghanistan to cease its violations of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women under Article 29.²⁹ In support, a number of countries, including Latvia, joined together in a declaration that, among other points, called upon Afghanistan and the Taliban *de facto* authorities to immediately cease violations of the human rights of women and girls.³⁰ In the context of women's and girl's rights in Afghanistan, there have also been several calls on the international community to consider the codification of gender apartheid in international law.³¹ Another topical issue has been women's representation in the UN itself – during UNGA HLW 2024, many states called for gender parity in UN leadership, stating that the next election of the UN Secretary-General will be a unique opportunity to finally elect a woman.³² These initiatives demonstrate efforts to strengthen international mechanisms that are interrelated with the goals of the WPS agenda.

WOMEN, WAR AND SECURITY

The WPS agenda continues to hold significant relevance in Europe. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has deeply affected women and girls, exacerbating already existing vulnerabilities. Ukraine has set a precedent globally in implementing, overseeing, and adapting a NAP amid an active conflict. In 2022, Ukraine revised its existing NAP to address the challenges brought on by the full-scale invasion (with support from international partners, including Latvia).

The updated NAP focuses on how the civilian population is affected by the armed conflict in Ukraine, including the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure by Russia, as well as highlighting the importance of shelter. The NAP also addresses the risks that people fleeing Ukraine face (mainly women and children), for instance, the heightened risk of human trafficking.³³ Moreover, effective and timely assistance to victims of gender-based violence (GBV) and CRSV is also highlighted within Ukraine's NAP. UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine documented 376 cases of CRSV in the period from 24 February 2022 until 31 August 2024, including both civilians and prisoners of war, and the survivors and victims are women, men, and also children.³⁴ In most documented incidents involving adult male survivors and victims, sexual violence was used as a method of torture during their captivity by Russia. However, in residential areas, CRSV has mainly been used against women and girls.³⁵ Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the UN has also registered over 1,000 attacks on healthcare, which has further constrained access to services related to the clinical management of rape.³⁶ Unfortunately, the number of cases of GBV also tends to rise during armed conflicts,

and the rates of GBV have increased in Ukraine. It is estimated that 3.6 million people in Ukraine are in need of GBV prevention and response services.³⁷ Moreover, online sexual exploitation and abuse has also become more prevalent, as Ukrainians are using more messaging apps and social media during the war to find support.³⁸ Thus, the conflict has significantly impacted healthcare accessibility and increased GBV incidents in Ukraine, affecting both in-person and online spaces.

However, Ukrainian women are also active participants in the army, including on the front lines – they are humanitarian actors, community leaders, and providers for their families. Interestingly, one in every two businesses in Ukraine was founded by a woman.³⁹ Ukrainian women also set a global example in the fight to raise awareness of and solve the challenges faced by female service members in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The Veteranka movement in Ukraine has worked towards the introduction of changes on the legislative level, as well as very practical issues, such as the provision of appropriate uniforms, body armour and helmets for women.⁴⁰ According to the movement, the first female military (summer) uniforms were only issued in the beginning of 2024, but now the organisation has established a workshop to produce sets of uniforms for women, including for winter.⁴¹ This example sets a practical precedent for other armed forces worldwide in the accommodation of female soldiers.

Overall, women in Ukraine face the harsh realities of war while actively participating in all spheres of life – as service members, humanitarian workers, business leaders, and community advocates. Ukraine’s adaptation of its NAP during an active conflict is an important achievement in maintaining institutional progress on gender equality even in the most challenging circumstances.

WPS IN LATVIA’S FOREIGN POLICY

Latvia’s engagement with the WPS agenda is both reflective of its domestic priorities and shaped by its role as a proactive contributor to international gender equality efforts. Thus, to understand Latvia’s foreign policy approach to WPS, it is essential to first examine the national context. The foundation of the policy is embodied in Latvia’s first NAP from 2020, which identifies three areas of action: 1) raising societal awareness on the WPS agenda, especially in relation to youth; 2) training for the defence and internal affairs sectors, with the eventual creation of gender advisor positions in these sectors; and 3) sharing Latvia’s knowledge and experience further.⁴²

The WPS Index of 2024 ranks Latvia as 20th among 177 countries, reflecting strong performance in areas such as “absence of legal discrimination against women” and

“women’s financial inclusion”. Yet, Latvia has a relatively high maternal mortality rate of 18.3 deaths per 100,000 live births, as well as low representation of women in parliament.⁴³ A gender pay gap also persists in Latvia, reaching 19.5% in 2023 among full-time workers.⁴⁴ These are areas where progress is still necessary. As for women’s participation, Latvian women are very involved in the National Armed Forces, with numbers that stand out against the background of other NATO countries.⁴⁵ Latvia also has a high percentage of female scientists and, in general, Latvian women are well-educated,⁴⁶ as well as represented in high-ranking political positions.

A recent mid-term evaluation of Latvia’s NAP⁴⁷ yielded key insights for the implementation of the plan. Awareness-raising efforts, while ongoing, must be continually reinforced to address persistent issues such as GBV.⁴⁸ As for GBV, it was an important step for Latvia to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, for which awareness-raising was crucial. Structural limitations also have posed challenges to the NAP’s implementation. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted initial efforts, as it shifted priorities and altered opportunities for cooperation. Furthermore, the absence of a dedicated budget for the NAP creates constraints, with its activities relying on the resources and capacities of involved stakeholders. This issue is not unique to Latvia and is a common obstacle for many countries working to advance WPS.

That being said, the mid-term review shows that the NAP has proven to be flexible and responsive to changing geopolitical realities, with the capacity to integrate WPS priorities into broader current contexts. Another key strength of the NAP’s implementation is the active engagement of civil society organisations, which help with the practical realisation of WPS policies through their direct work with the society and expertise in addressing women’s needs. A very successful initiative has been the organisation “Women for Security”, which helps build connections among women in Latvia, including through mentoring opportunities and awareness-raising on the WPS agenda.

In alignment with the third priority of Latvia’s NAP, which focuses on international engagement, Latvia has actively contributed to global WPS implementation through various diplomatic and development cooperation initiatives. Since 2021, Latvia has served as an elected member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the UN Women Executive Board, the entity’s governing body. Within these formats, Latvia ensures that WPS remains a central item on the agenda. Latvia has joined various groups of friends within international organisations, such as the UN Group of Friends “On Women, Peace and Security”. Furthermore, Latvia’s voluntary financial contributions to UN Women and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (with a focus on women in Ukraine and in Afghanistan) demonstrate a consistent and proactive stance in supporting

international efforts to combat CRSV. Latvia has also voluntarily contributed to specific projects of the Organisation of American States, the UN Development Programme, and in 2024, the OSCE's "Peace and Security" programme for young women and the WIN project for gender equality.

A key area of Latvia's foreign policy is consistent support for Ukraine, including its reconstruction. Since 2022, Latvia has focused efforts on gender equality, digitalisation, education, governance, and economic growth in Ukraine, including support for the opening of women's resource centres and contributing to the documentation of war crimes. The "MARTA" centre has played a central role in facilitating cooperation with Ukrainian civil society and implementing these practical projects, helping to adapt Ukraine's NAP to the realities of conflict. Beyond that, Latvia also works with development cooperation projects in Central Asia and Africa, led by "Riga TechGirls", "#esiLV", and "SUSTENTO". Initiatives such as technology schools for girls in Egypt, Cameroon, and South Africa, as well as the "She Rebuilds the World" programme, highlight Latvia's focus on empowering women and promoting gender equality. These programmes aim to bridge gender gaps in education, entrepreneurship, and conflict prevention, contributing to long-term stability.

As highlighted in the 2023 Annual Report of the Foreign Minister, advancement and implementation of the WPS is a principal part of strengthening Latvia's security and the rules-based international order.⁴⁹ This commitment to WPS is one of the aspects that shapes Latvia's international engagement, which includes an important event: the elections for the UN Security Council non-permanent seats for 2026–2027, now just about six months away. Latvia has submitted its candidacy, and one of Latvia's aims is to continue highlighting the importance of the WPS agenda. Especially in light of CRSV being on the rise worldwide, addressing these violations remains of high importance.

Looking ahead, Latvia's commitment to gender equality and WPS creates concrete opportunities for expanding regional and global cooperation. Strengthening partnerships with Nordic-Baltic (NB8) countries can enhance regional coordination, while expanding collaboration to include, for instance, African countries is also essential. Canada, a key partner and the leading nation of NATO's multinational battle group in Latvia, remains a crucial ally in advancing the WPS agenda,⁵⁰ particularly through integrating gender perspectives into security and defence. WPS is not only a matter of promoting gender equality but also relates to our security. Increased efforts to engage women in meaningful participation within the defence sector can contribute to a more inclusive and resilient national security framework.

CONCLUSIONS

As 2025 unfolds, the WPS agenda remains as relevant as ever. While institutional frameworks have expanded through NAPs, regional strategies, and increased attention to WPS in international forums, the reality for women in conflict zones remains concerning. The rise in CRSV cases and continued exclusion from peace processes is accompanied by emerging challenges like climate change. Similarly, digital technologies and tools create both opportunities and risks. Here, the work on capacity-building opportunities for women must be noted and continued.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has highlighted both the continued relevance of the WPS agenda and the possibility of maintaining institutional progress even during an active conflict. Ukraine's revision of its NAP during wartime, supported by international partners including Latvia, demonstrates how WPS mechanisms can adapt to emerging challenges. The documented cases of CRSV and attacks on healthcare infrastructure in Ukraine, alongside women's active participation across various sectors, from military service to business leadership, illustrate the complex interplay of vulnerabilities and resilience that the WPS agenda must address.

As for Latvia's engagement with WPS, it involves both active domestic and international implementation. Latvia's practical support for Ukraine, particularly in helping adapt its NAP and establish women's resource centres, demonstrates a meaningful and a very practical contribution to the implementation of WPS.

Moreover, through development cooperation initiatives in Africa and Central Asia, Latvia is extending its impact beyond its immediate region. Its focus should be on strengthening existing partnerships, particularly within the Nordic-Baltic region and with Canada, while expanding cooperation with new partners, since the WPS agenda is highly relevant globally. Latvia's candidacy for the UN Security Council 2026–2027 presents an opportunity for a platform to further advance the WPS agenda, particularly regarding CRSV prevention and response. It is also an opportunity to promote a greater integration of non-traditional security threats, such as disinformation and climate change, into WPS discussions at the UN Security Council. For the international community, the year 2026 will mark a crucial moment as it selects its next UN Secretary-General, opening a potential historic opportunity to appoint the first woman to lead the organisation in its 81-year history.

Looking ahead, Latvia's WPS priorities should focus on three main areas: strengthening domestic implementation through dedicated resources and continued awareness-raising; expanding practical assistance to Ukraine while sharing lessons learned with the international community, as well as expanding the possible network of cooperation on WPS, taking into account the current state of women's rights globally; and continuing to advocate for concrete measures addressing CRSV and women's meaningful participation

in governance, including if Latvia is elected to the UN Security Council. Success in these areas would reinforce Latvia's position as a committed actor in advancing global peace and security through gender equality.

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“I WON’T GIVE IN WITHOUT A FIGHT!”¹ LATVIA-UKRAINE RELATIONS AMIDST THE UNPREDICTABILITY

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In the context of Latvia-Ukraine relations, 2024 continued to strengthen a long-cherished vector of Latvian foreign policy – a targeted support for Ukraine’s fight against the aggressor state Russia along with the support for Ukraine’s europeanisation efforts. This has led to an international perception of Latvia as a state that identifies itself with Ukraine and its foreign policy and security challenges. As a result, Latvia, together with other EU Eastern border countries, has become an ambassador for Ukraine and has been able to successfully “translate” its security dilemmas to the Western public. As we remember the fallen in this full-scale war that lasts already more than thousand days, it is possible to conclude that the Ukrainian war has served as an opportunity for Latvia’s foreign policy to strengthen its small state agency at the European level and to actively shape Western policy. Latvian foreign policy makers should take into account in 2025 that changing factors in the foreign policy environment beyond the actions of the aggressor Russia, namely, the US policy towards Ukraine and the ability of the EU and its member states to use the opportunities arising from unpredictable developments and absorb their challenges, will present difficulties. A successful foreign policy could be built by applying the recommendations put forward by the authors.

RELATIONS BETWEEN LATVIA AND UKRAINE IN 2024: STILL NO CLOUDS

Latvia's relations with Ukraine were strengthened in 2024, with Latvia maintaining one of the leading positions among EU member states regarding support for Ukraine in all areas.² Latvia's interest in Ukraine is evidenced by the fact that from January to October 2024, senior and high-ranking Latvian officials have paid important visits to Ukraine and/or held meetings with their Ukrainian colleagues in almost all months of the year, with the exception of March, June and July.³ Latvia's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Ukraine, Ilgvars Kļava, has been named the Best Diplomat of 2023 in Ukraine by the *Kyiv Diplomatic* magazine.⁴ In 2024, Latvia continued to support Ukrainian citizens who fled the war and came to Latvia, as well as to represent the common interests of Ukraine and Latvia in international organisations.

Economic cooperation

Compared to 2022 and 2023, Latvia-Ukraine trade experienced a decline in 2024, especially in exports from Latvia to Ukraine. But this decline can be simply explained: the vast majority of exported goods in 2022 was subject to military secret. They accounted for almost half of total exports – 203.88 million euros (out of a total of 521.29 million euros). In 2023, Latvia exported 200.29 million euros worth of goods to Ukraine that were subject to military secret. In turn, the decline in 2024 exports is due to the exclusion of this category – goods subject to military secret – from the trade data (until 25.11.2024). These data may not have been updated or may no longer be categorised as such. Against the background of other trading partners, Ukraine ranks 16th in both exports and imports.⁵

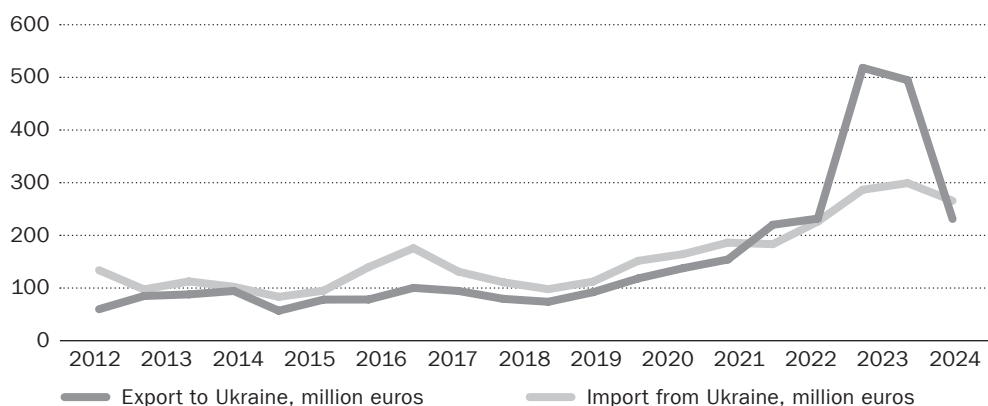


Figure 1. Latvia's foreign trade with Ukraine, 2012–2024.

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, Foreign trade with Ukraine, 2012–2024.

Ukraine's direct investment in Latvia in 2024 has increased compared to the previous three years. In the first quarter of 2024, Ukrainian direct investment in Latvia amounted to 244 million euros, and in the second quarter to 243 million euros. Compared to previous years, there has been an increase.⁶ Data on Latvian direct investments in Ukraine in 2024 have not been published by the National Bank of Ukraine.

Latvia and Ukraine have the potential to further strengthen their economic relations. On May 23, 2024, Viktors Valainis, the Minister of Economics of Latvia, and Oleh Nemchinov, the Minister of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, met in Kyiv and defined modernised transport corridors, cooperation in the energy sector and the promotion of digitisation processes as priorities.⁷

Various forms of support and military support of Latvia to Ukraine

According to information published by the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, the total planned Latvian government support to Ukraine will exceed 200 million euros in 2024, including 112 million euros in military aid (0.25% of GDP in total).⁸ On April 9, 2024, Latvia and Ukraine signed an agreement not only confirming Latvia's support for Ukraine, but also committing Latvia to contribute 0.25% of its GDP for the military and other assistance to Ukraine until 2026. The agreement outlines further cooperation in the Latvian-led Drone Coalition, training of soldiers, supply of military equipment, as well as reconstruction of Ukraine and countering hybrid threats.⁹

In 2024, Latvia also continued to support the reconstruction of Ukraine, confirming Latvia's interest in building long-term relations with Ukraine. On April 2, 2024, the Cabinet of Ministers approved an order allocating an investment of 5.3 million euros for the reconstruction of Ukraine in 2024, in particular in the Chernihiv region, which Latvia has chosen as the geographical focus for the support measures funded by the Latvian national budget¹⁰, as well as a contribution of 4.3 million euros to the European Peace Facility in support of the Armed Forces of Ukraine¹¹.

In addition to the Latvian state support, the Latvian non-governmental sector and the society continue to support Ukraine both financially and with necessary goods and transport vehicles. The Latvian state facilitates customs formalities by allowing to include VAT and donations as eligible expenses in the annual income tax return, which makes it possible to carry out aid campaigns.¹² The Kiel Institute provides data calculations on the value of bilateral military, financial and humanitarian aid provided by the member states of the European Union and G7 from 2022. The Data Set, which includes information from January 24, 2022 to August 31, 2024, shows that the value of

aid in this period against the GDP of 2021 ranks Latvia as the fourth biggest contributor after Denmark, Estonia and Lithuania.¹³

On September 11, 2024, the Prime Minister of Latvia, Evika Siliņa, visited Ukraine, where she announced a third military assistance package to Ukraine with the total worth of 40 million euros.¹⁴ Given that Latvia has a domestic drone production industry and that drone warfare has become one of the dominant forms of warfare in the Ukrainian war, Latvia was also the initiator of the above-mentioned Drone Coalition. The Drone Coalition is an agreement signed on 14 February 2024 by 16 member states to ensure the delivery of drones to Ukraine in a timely and expeditious manner. Latvia allocated 20 million euros for the purposes of Drone Coalition in 2024.¹⁵

Ukrainian diaspora and war refugees in Latvia

Historically, the numbers of Ukrainian ethnic minority in Latvia rose as the result of moving labour and Soviet army personnel into Latvia after it was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union. Before the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1989, there were 92.1 thousand Ukrainians living in the territory of Latvia, while in 2016, the number of Ukrainians had decreased to 44.6 thousand people.¹⁶ And, with Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, more and more Ukrainians are seeking refuge in Latvia. As of 1 January 2024, there were 74 419 Ukrainians living in Latvia. These numbers make it the second largest minority in Latvia.¹⁷ On January 1, 2024, there were 43 430 Ukrainian civilians with temporary protection status registered in Latvia, particularly from the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. However, according to the Central Statistical Bureau, only 25 650 Ukrainians were living in Latvia at that time.¹⁸ It is currently unknown how many have returned to Ukraine or left for other countries.

Already at the beginning of the war, on 3 March 2022, Latvia adopted the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians (*Ukrainas civiliedzīvotāju atbalsta likums*) to address the following topics: coordination and scope of support, employment and education rights, and visa or residence permit application procedures.¹⁹ On 21 November 2024, the Saeima decided to support changes to this Law that would extend and improve the state's support for Ukrainian asylum seekers. It was decided to increase the one-time crisis allowance, to test the national language of doctors after three years' service and to continue issuing temporary residence permits for the period of three years instead of two. In turn, the 2025 budget provides for the allocation of 65 million euros for the support of Ukraine's civilian population.²⁰ There are also various additional support mechanisms in place. One of them is the Latvian UN Regional Refugee Response Plan 2024, which has received 9.7 million US dollars from local and international NGOs, as well as UN agencies.²¹

In 2024, the public policy think tank *Providus* conducted a study on Ukrainian refugees in Latvia. The study made recommendations on engaging Ukrainians in promoting their rights, on promoting official employment of Ukrainian civilians, on engaging children in quality education and on other improvements.²² Challenges have been observed concerning the education for children of Ukrainian civilians. According to the *Providus* study, almost every third Ukrainian refugee in Latvia is a child, but there are no available data on the integration of children in schools. Moreover, it was concluded in spring 2024 that there were 1 842 children of Ukrainian citizens who were not enrolled in any educational institution of Latvia. This is mainly due to the language barrier.²³

LATVIA – THE AMBASSADOR OF UKRAINE’S INTERESTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

Latvia has consistently served as the ambassador of Ukraine’s interests in international organisations and frameworks. The Third Parliamentary Summit of the International Crimea Platform aims to build and maintain international understanding of Ukraine’s territorial integrity and to highlight the crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine.²⁴ By hosting this summit (which has so far been organised in Croatia and the Czech Republic), Latvia both strengthened its international support for Ukraine and underlined its bilateral support. It served as a platform for Latvia’s campaign to become the non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the period of 2026-2027. If elected, Latvia pledges to uphold the rules-based international order, indicating its interest in defending Ukraine’s right to territorial integrity and independence also in the future.²⁵

On 11 January 2024, Evika Siliņa, the Prime Minister of Latvia, met with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine. At the beginning of the meeting, the Prime Minister emphasised, “We have made and we will deliver on our promises both in Latvia, in the European Union and in support of your paths towards NATO membership.”²⁶ At the EU level, Latvia supports the extension of sanctions against Russia. EU foreign ministers approved the 14th sanctions package on June 24, 2024. Latvia’s proposal to put a complete ban on the export and transit of manganese ore to Russia was included in this package.²⁷ Moreover, Latvia also supported Sweden’s proposal to the European Commission at the end of 2024 to raise tariffs on imports of Russian and Belarusian products into the EU.²⁸

Latvia is in favour of providing joint EU assistance to Ukraine. On February 1, 2024, EU leaders, for instance, agreed at the European Council to allocate 54 billion euros for Ukraine’s reconstruction, modernisation and other reforms.²⁹ This also contributed to

Ukraine's euro-integration, which officially started on June 24, 2024 with the opening of accession negotiations.³⁰ In this context, focusing in particular on Chapters 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, freedom and security) of the EU enlargement negotiations, the EU is implementing an EU Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform in Ukraine, which includes 4 experts from Latvia.³¹

In the context of NATO, Latvia sought to strengthen the alliance and to advocate for allied support for Ukraine until its victory.³² This was acknowledged on October 23 during the meeting of Daiga Mieriņa, the 14th Saeima Speaker, and Ruslan Stefanchuk, the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. The Saeima Speaker expressed her hope that “[...] next year, at the NATO summit in the Hague (we will be able) to take a political decision on inviting Ukraine to join NATO.”³³ This year, the B9 Summit of the NATO Eastern Flank countries was organised in Riga (June 11), with the President of Finland and the Prime Minister of Sweden attending the summit for the first time. The purpose of this B9 meeting was to develop a common position among member states on various issues in preparation for the NATO Washington Summit (9-11 July). As a result of the summit, the member states announced in their statement that they would push for Ukraine's membership in NATO.³⁴ At the NATO Summit in Washington, Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs stated that it was necessary to bring Ukraine closer to NATO membership and to provide a long-term support for Ukraine.³⁵ Although Ukraine did not receive an invitation to join NATO in the Washington Summit, the member states reaffirmed their commitment to support Ukraine.³⁶ Given the lack of unity among member states on this matter, Latvia's work on this issue will certainly continue.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Latvia has been stressing the territorial integrity of Ukraine.³⁷ Latvia defended Ukraine's interests at the UN also in 2024. On July 9, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Baiba Braže, delivered a statement on behalf of the Nordic countries and the Baltic States at the UN Human Rights Council, underscoring the violations of human rights and war crimes perpetrated by Russia. This report was presented at the 56th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva (July 9).³⁸

RELATIONS BETWEEN LATVIA AND UKRAINE IN THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF 2025 AND POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

When projecting possible scenarios for 2025, two critical factors need to be taken into account. The first is the oncoming handover of power into the hands of the President Donald Trump on January 20, 2025. As he begins to build his cabinet, he has chosen

Marco Rubio (Senator for Florida since 2011) as the Secretary of State.³⁹ Like the future President, he sees the need to break the *stalemate* in which the war is now.⁴⁰ So, in the eyes of the emerging US political elite, the remarkable 2024 achievements of the Ukrainian Army, for instance, the victory in the Black Sea, are underestimated.⁴¹ The future President has chosen Keith Kellogg as his Special Envoy for Ukraine and Russia war.⁴² The so called “Kellogg Report” has been circulating in public. It proposes “ending the war by withdrawing weapons from Ukraine if it doesn’t enter peace talks – and giving even more weapons to Ukraine if Russia doesn’t do the same.”⁴³ The conclusion is that Ukraine’s allies across the ocean do not believe in its victory and can therefore be expected to call for an end to the war as soon as possible.

It can be equally expected that Trump’s administration will not hesitate to use various “carrots and sticks” and thus will create a new environment for interactions between Russia and the West already next year. For instance, the US might soften its stance on the international justice and human rights accountability – areas that were advocated by the outgoing administration of President Joe Biden. It is possible that lifting of some sanctions will be discussed, in exchange for some other action that would be favourable to President’s administration. Ukraine’s NATO membership is unlikely to be seriously discussed at NATO summits over the coming years.

On a brighter side, the cyclical changes in US policy may be partly mitigated by the second critical factor – the EU ability to successfully absorb the changes brought by the new US policies and translate them into a constructive, pragmatic foreign policy. Brussels, the beating heart of Europe, has just seen the arrival of a Commission that will scrupulously focus on Ukraine’s ongoing reforms to deliver the desired changes in the accession process. Kaja Kallas, the new EU High Representative from Estonia, made her first visit to Kyiv just a few hours (!) after officially taking office.⁴⁴ The ability of France and Germany as the “engine of Europe” to deliver on their pledge to continue to support Ukraine is also important. Kyiv is concerned about seemingly uncoordinated actions that do not take into account Ukraine’s interests. For instance, following the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s phone call with the Russian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed his indignation, describing this move as opening a “Pandora’s box”⁴⁵ for the normalisation of communications with Russia. In this context, the period of unpredictability that lies ahead for Germany after the collapse of the Scholz coalition is not encouraging either. France has also been criticised for a while for not providing enough support to Ukraine (i.e., beyond rhetoric, France allocates less resources to Ukraine than Germany).⁴⁶ Moreover, the government of French Prime Minister Michel Barnier collapsed at the beginning of December 2024. As a result, the French and German preoccupation with their domestic politics creates grounds for concern that Ukraine-related issues could be caught in the crossfire of power struggles instead of getting the attention and solutions they need in 2025.

In the light of what has been discussed here, it is possible to outline four development scenarios regarding the Russia-Ukraine war in 2025. Latvian decision-makers can build their policies on the basis of these scenarios.

Freezing the conflict indefinitely (frozen conflict). This is the most realistic scenario for 2025. A decline in Western support and/or (consequent) peace talks could lead to a situation where the front-line is temporarily “frozen”. In retrospect, it can be argued that the signing of the infamous Minsk agreements (in 2014 and 2015) did not contribute to stopping Russia’s illegal activities, but it did give the country a time to make significant reforms enabling the Ukrainian Army to withstand the full-scale Russian attack in February 2022.

The figure below shows the changes in public opinion in Ukraine over the period from May 2022 to October 2024 about the readiness for territorial concessions to gain peace. The blue section shows the percentage of people who agree that Ukraine can give up some of its territories in order to achieve peace and preserve independence – almost 1/3 of respondents. The orange section represents the percentage of people who are not ready to cede any territory to Russia. Green – undecided. This dynamic reflects the war fatigue and the “weight” of sacrifices on the public opinion in Ukraine.

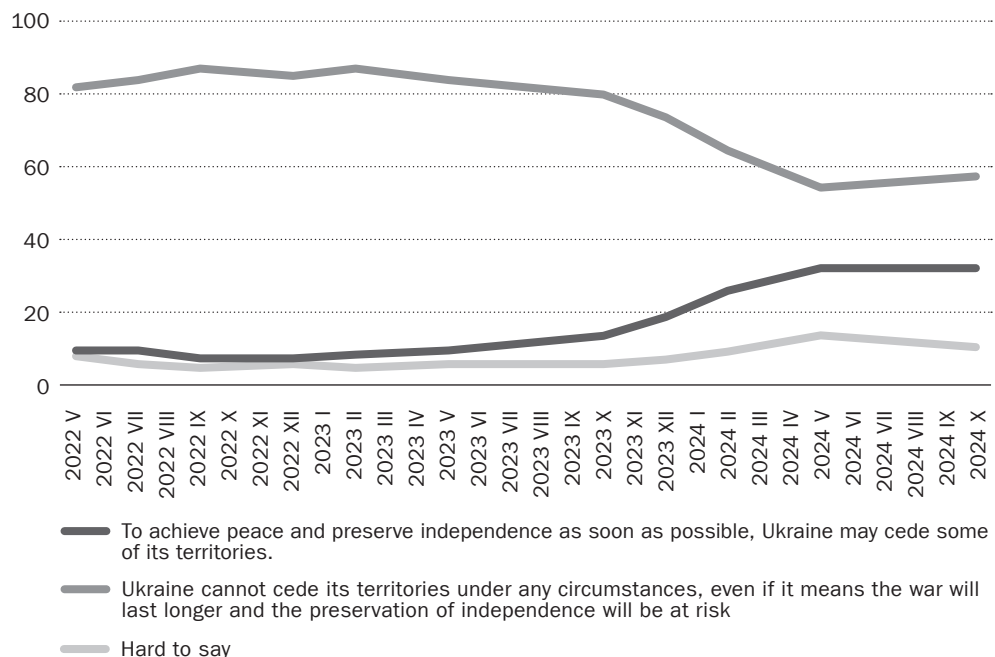


Figure 2. The changes in the public opinion in Ukraine about the readiness for territorial concessions to Russia.

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, Dynamics of readiness for territorial concessions and the factor of security guarantees for reaching peace agreements⁴⁷

While the number of people willing to trade some territories of Ukraine for peace is growing, it will be difficult to justify such a decision to the Ukrainian society. President Zelenskyy will have to justify the military losses.⁴⁸ The most crucial task for the Ukrainian presidential administration in Kyiv will be to avoid positioning the frozen conflict as a loss for Ukraine, which could have a significant impact on public morale and critically undermine the legitimacy of decisions of the wartime administration. Part of the blame could also be laid at the door of the inert West, which has often dragged its feet as far as provision of aid is concerned. Kyiv still often talks about the Budapest Memorandum⁴⁹ and the security guarantees that were pledged and ignored by the US and UK in the eyes of Ukraine, i.e., betrayal of Ukraine.

The long war continues. The outcome of the war is an existential question for both Ukraine and the regime of Russia's autocratic leader Vladimir Putin. Immediately after the US elections, Ukraine was publicly given permission to deploy long-range missiles against targets in Russia. In response, Russia fired an intermediate-range ballistic missile *Oreshnik* at the city of Dnipro on November 21, which was perceived as a serious step towards war escalation. Although statistics vary from source to source, Ukraine may have lost as many as 1 million people in the war so far (civilian and military casualties combined).^{50,51} According to Ukrainian estimates, the losses of Russian military personnel by November 2024 are around 735 410 thousand people.⁵² A prolonged conflict will further weaken both sides.

Victory for Ukraine. For the victory for Ukraine as the most desirable scenario for Latvia and the entire transatlantic security space to materialise, it would require a rapid and decisive change in Western policy. Ukrainian allies would have to respond to Zelenskyy's call to deliver all types of weapons without delay, to provide the necessary funding for the state to carry out its functions, and to continue to enhance the pressure of sanctions on Russia and Belarus, while cutting their economic ties with the aggressor countries.⁵³ Meanwhile, Ukraine would have to be able to both mobilise up to 500 000 new troops⁵⁴ and to confidently continue its work on applying European standards. Only under such conditions would it be possible to build a new narrative about Ukraine and to restore the moral standing of Ukrainian society vis-à-vis the enemy. The image created in February 2022 of Ukraine as the European champion waging a heroic struggle against Russian forces and seeking to attest its western identity is no longer really effective, either internationally or nationally.⁵⁵ Therefore, both the West and Ukraine must be able to move from rhetorical promises to practical actions.

Victory for Russia. This scenario would require Ukraine to accept Russian terms, including the change of government, abandonment of the Western course and future NATO membership, demilitarisation, and loss of control over territories that Russia would declare as "its own". Under these circumstances, further euro-integration of Ukraine is unlikely to be possible. Losing the war would consolidate pro-Russian

elements of Ukraine's power elite and the so called "deep state" that would function a lot like Russia, i.e., it would ground upon patronage power ties rather than the rule of law. This course of events would render useless Latvia's foreign policy efforts to bring its Eastern partners closer to European values and would make the EU and NATO's Eastern borders even more vulnerable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of 2024, it is impossible to forecast the evolution of the above scenarios (ideal types). The recommendations in this chapter are therefore general and can be applied to each of them.

- To continue to support Ukraine's europeanisation vector in an open dialogue. Latvia's support for Ukraine should also serve as an instrument of "expectation management". Ukrainians often mention the experience of the Baltic States and perhaps that is why they repeat bold phrases, claiming that Ukraine would join the EU "within five years"⁵⁶. There is a lot of work to be done in Ukraine at the moment, and it is not even possible to adequately estimate the amount of work required in the context of temporarily occupied territories, for instance. Particularly pressing is the need to tackle corruption as the related scandals (which must be distinguished from Russia's targeted disinformation) are critically undermining the credibility of the Ukrainian authorities in the eyes of its own people and the Western world.
- To raise international awareness regarding Russia's (neo-)colonial and criminal policies. The Ukrainian war has provided an incentive to recognise the trauma created by the Soviet occupation and its impact on the evolution of national identities, as well as economic and political structures in Eastern Europe. In 2025, Latvia should continue to seek like-minded partners that are conscious of the importance of these negative external factors and are beyond the borders of the European continent. In this way, Latvia would be able to underline in the eyes of its allies the long-standing (neo-)colonisation and crimes perpetrated by the Soviet Union and its successor Russia against their neighbours – and the fact that their impunity has paved the way for events we are currently witnessing in Ukraine. This process is a prerequisite for ensuring that Russia's past and current crimes are condemned internationally, and therefore tried by the international tribunal.
- To further strengthen the joint agency of the Baltic and other international formats within the international frameworks. The unity of the Baltic States in the face of Russian aggression has created unique circumstances where the foreign policy

potential of smaller countries is much greater. Kaja Kallas took the reins of power in Brussels as early as December 2024. Her accession, along with that of Andrius Kubilius, the Lithuanian Commissioner for Defence and Space, most likely indicate that: a) these high-level choices are not random; and b) the Baltic voice will sound louder and louder in the EU. Poland will hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU from January 2025, and its dominant priorities will be to strengthen ties within the transatlantic security community, to promote euro-integration of Ukraine and to achieve the energy independence of the EU.⁵⁷ The interests of this “fourth Baltic state” coincide with those of Latvia in a large number of areas in this unpredictable international situation, thus creating the conditions for the promotion of regional priorities in Brussels. Latvia therefore needs to maximise its engagement not only in the Baltic Trio and NB8, but also in the context of the Riga format and the B9, in order to achieve its interests in a wide range of areas in the near future as well.

- To further polish the plan for the worst-case scenario: non-recognition policies, migration flows and rising international tensions. While Latvia insists on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, we need to prepare for a scenario where its restoration can only be achieved in a distant future. In the event of peace talks, Russia could become de facto *occupying power* in Crimea and the territories of Eastern Ukraine according to the international law. It will be crucial for Latvia, together with other Western allies, to pursue a policy of non-recognition and to prevent the normalisation of relations with Russia. The continued application of sanctions will also be particularly important in a climate where war-fatigued EU countries could rush to return to the *status quo ante*. It is important for Latvia to use the platforms at its disposal and to communicate with the public at international and national level about the broadest implications for future freedoms of trade and movement in Eastern Europe and to demand the strengthening of the independence of European economies from Russia. At the same time, we need to prepare for possible new refugee flows, either as the result of these peace talks or in the event of a further escalation of the conflict.

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BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN LATVIA AND BELARUS UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE UKRAINIAN WAR: WITHOUT EXCESSIVE HOPES AND WITH GREAT CAUTION

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Until 2022 and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, Latvia viewed Belarus as an "inconvenient neighbour". Given the political reality in Belarus – an authoritarian political regime, its failure to respect human rights, and its close ties with Russia – a political dialogue was usually only possible up to a certain point. But now it is no longer possible to talk about Belarus only in terms of just an "inconvenient neighbour". Viewed from today's perspective, the illegitimate presidential election of 2020 and the subsequent brutal suppression of mass protests, the repressions against the opposition and the following introduction of a distinctly militarised regime can be seen as merely the first stages on the path towards the lowest point in relations between the Belarusian regime and Latvia, as well as the European Union as a whole, and towards both isolating Belarus from opportunities to cooperate with the West and recognising that we should not expect any improvements in Belarus in the context of democratisation anytime soon.

Currently, at the end of 2024 and given the close integration of Belarus with Russia, we see that it plays a significant role in Russia's war against Ukraine by allowing military infrastructure and nuclear weapons to be deployed on its territory, by participating in joint military exercises, and by Belarusian leader Aliaksandr Lukashenka expressing support for Russia in his rhetoric. Belarus is also actively continuing to exert orchestrated and illegal migration pressure directed toward NATO's eastern border,¹ thus providing a clear and unequivocal confirmation that it should be regarded as a threat to Latvia's

external and internal security. Looking back through the prism of 2024, we can conclude that relations between Latvia and Belarus have not only reached the most critical point but have also become a reference point for the need to assess the extent to which any political dialogue can be resumed in the future. On the one hand, it is necessary to call for the clear recognition that Belarus, as we traditionally perceived it until 2022, has transformed from simply an “inconvenient neighbour” into an aggressor state, and on the other hand, it is necessary to signal a general need to evaluate the European Union’s ongoing policy towards Belarus and to clearly recognise that it needs to be radically and completely transformed, not only to maintain even a small hope for the country’s future direction towards democratisation, but also to limit Russia’s influence in the Eastern region.

2024: STRENGTHENING THE PERCEPTION OF BELARUS AS AN AGGRESSOR STATE

When we look at the last year through the prism of bilateral relations between Latvia and Belarus, it would be best described as having brought a clear realisation to Latvian decision-makers about the impossibility of talking about a normalisation of mutual relations in the near future. At the same time, Latvian decision-makers have clearly accepted the new political reality and regard Belarus as co-responsible for Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.² Belarus is directly providing support for Russia’s military operations in Ukraine. As indicated by the Foreign Minister of that time, Krišjānis Kariņš, in his address at the annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament on 25 January 2024, Latvia must implement a consistent and robust policy on wider sanctions against Russia and Belarus, in which we need to put more emphasis on tackling the risks of circumventing sanctions³ through Belarus. The position of Latvian decision-makers has been consistently united – it is necessary to create maximum pressure on Belarus through the application of a new sanctions package that aligns the sanctions with those imposed on Russia. On 30 June 2024, EU member states approved the 8th package of sanctions targeting Belarus, imposing trade restrictions.⁴ From this, it follows that Latvia in 2024 placed a significant emphasis on understanding the need to strengthen its economic security. Already at the beginning of the previous year, the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia adopted amendments to the Law on Agriculture and Rural Development developed by the Ministry of Agriculture in cooperation with other institutions, stipulating that henceforth the import of agricultural and feed products from Russia and Belarus is prohibited in Latvia, as is the import from other third countries of agricultural and feed products originating from Russia and Belarus.⁵ This decision was also reinforced by the statement made by

the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Baiba Braže, on 17 July 2024 while chairing the 20th meeting of the Foreign Economic Policy Coordination Council, where she pointed out that it was essential to sever economic ties with Russia and Belarus to the maximum,⁶ thus not only reducing the influence of both aggressor states on the Latvian economy but also, in a broader context, displaying an understanding that economic security is an inseparable element of internal security. It should be noted that the decision to reduce Belarus's economic presence in Latvia is not only a significant political signal to Belarus but also marks new trends in Latvia's foreign and internal security strategy regarding Belarus. A clear red line is drawn, indicating that economic profit, which up until the war in Ukraine initiated by Russia in 2022 has historically characterised the dynamics of Latvian and Belarusian bilateral relations, is no longer an element to be considered when working on a potentially new future bilateral relations strategy for both countries.

THE SITUATION ON THE EASTERN BORDER: READY TO FACE THE POSSIBLE INTENSIFICATION OF HYBRID THREATS

Recognising the reality of economic security threats is just one of the challenges that Latvia has faced in the context of Belarus in the past year. A significant role has been played and continues to be played by Belarusian hybrid threats against Latvia, as well as other EU member states, at the external borders of Latvia. As expressed by the Belarusian authoritarian leader Aliaksandr Lukashenka in his rhetoric last August, Belarus will not stop illegal immigrants on their way to the EU; in fact, it is not in the official interests of Minsk to delay immigrants who are passing through Belarusian territory on their way towards any of the EU member states.⁷ His rhetoric only further intensifies the existing security reality, in which Belarus deliberately uses illegal immigrants as a weapon to create pressure against the EU's external borders, thereby not only expressing the official position of Minsk towards the West of it being a threat to the existence of the Belarusian regime but also, on a broader scale, assisting Russia in carrying out a hybrid attack against NATO's eastern border. The hybrid threats executed by Belarus constitute a direct response from the Belarusian regime to the political decisions made by Latvia, as well as other Western countries, regarding Belarus – namely, the application of sanctions mechanisms and the suspension of economic cooperation. Although the situation at the border is considered seemingly stable, the influx of migrants, as indicated by the State Border Guard, is cyclical.⁸ Given this factor, it is commendable that Latvia has completed the construction of a nearly 145-kilometres long border fence on the Latvian-Belarusian border, with plans

to complete the necessary infrastructure by the end of 2024,⁹ including patrol trails, footbridges, and other solutions needed to protect the border to ensure security along its entire 173-kilometre length.¹⁰ The construction of Latvia's infrastructure is only one part of the overall decision of the Baltic States regarding a unified concept of building anti-mobility defensive installations on the borders with Russia and Belarus,¹¹ which are aimed at deterring and, if necessary, defending against military threats. It is important to note that both aggressor states, Belarus and Russia, have conducted several joint military exercises over the past year, including a joint simulation of deploying tactical nuclear weapons.¹² As indicated by the Belarusian leader, Lukashenka, joint military exercises should be seen as Belarus's response to the sanctions policy implemented by Western countries against Belarus,¹³ thus confirming that the official position of Belarus is distinctly hostile towards the West. Therefore, we can conclude that the unity of the Baltic States regarding border construction should be viewed in light of the new security reality of the Baltic States, namely, the potential threat to the borders and internal security of the Baltic States, which is unlikely to diminish in the near future. On the contrary, the aggressor states, particularly Belarus, will seek to promote repeated hybrid attacks by using flows of immigrants, and Belarus will also actively provide military assistance to Russia in the war against Ukraine.

LATVIA'S SUPPORT FOR THE BELARUSIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES: BEING AWARE OF THE REPRESSIONS EXECUTED BY THE REGIME IN BELARUS

Last year, Latvia made the significant decision to amend the Road Traffic Law to stipulate that vehicles registered in Belarus and located on Latvian territory have until 31 October 2024 to be moved from the country or registered for participation in road traffic in Latvia.¹⁴ Before that, a similar decision was made regarding vehicles registered in Russia. The aim of the new amendments is to enhance Latvia's internal security by reducing the risk that individuals who could create security risks enter Latvia. However, it should also be noted that the new law amendments, with certain exceptions, will significantly restrict the opportunities of Belarusian civil society to move within the territory of Latvia and other EU member states. It is noteworthy that in response to Latvia's step, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry pointed out that Belarus does not plan to make a symmetric decision and allows Latvian citizens to freely enter Belarus even without a visa.¹⁵ Belarusian rhetoric on this issue indicates efforts to send unambiguous signals about Latvia's attempts to sever ties with Belarusian civil society and thereby to use this decision to seemingly strengthen Lukashenka's position. At the same time, the reality on the ground is harsh, as Latvian citizens

face the risk of being detained or even imprisoned. According to information at the disposal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26 Latvian nationals had been detained in Belarus by September 2024,¹⁶ indicating not only security risks but also confirming the current domestic and foreign policy trajectory of the Belarusian regime, where anyone, including citizens of EU member states, can be considered a threat to the regime's stability.

Despite the official Minsk statements, Latvia over the last year has continued to actively provide unequivocal support to the Belarusian democratic forces in their efforts to achieve the democratisation of Belarus and to undermine the stability of Lukashenka's regime. In July 2024, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Baiba Braže, met in Riga with the leader of the Belarusian democratic forces, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The minister underlined the need to enhance international pressure on the Belarusian regime in order to secure the release of all political prisoners in Belarus, while Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya expressed her gratitude for Latvia's support of Belarusian democratic forces. As pointed out by the leader of the Belarusian democratic forces, Latvia's support for the Belarusian struggle for democracy has been unwavering, and Latvia's activities in strengthening its internal and external security are highly commendable,¹⁷ as this policy creates an increased pressure against Lukashenka's regime.

NO LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL: ON THE WAY TOWARDS THE 2025 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN BELARUS

On 23 October 2024, the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus announced that the presidential election in Belarus would take place in early 2025.¹⁸ It is important to note that this decision violates the provisions of the Constitution of Belarus, which states that, firstly, a president may be re-elected to office no more than twice (for the incumbent Belarusian leader, this will be his seventh presidency), and secondly, that a presidential election may be held no earlier than two months before the end of the previous term – that is, no earlier than June 2025.¹⁹ Given the current political climate in Belarus, namely the scale of repressions against civilians, we are unlikely to see mass protests on a par with those after the 2020 presidential election. The Belarusian opposition and its leaders have fled outside the borders of Belarus, their return to Belarus is not possible, and the political opposition still in Belarus that could resist Lukashenka is completely suppressed and imprisoned. The massive repressions against civilians currently do not point to the possibility that there could be a rival next to Lukashenka's name on the ballot for the upcoming presidential election – someone who could at least formally serve as a facade for conducting

a democratic electoral process – notwithstanding the fact that, according to Lukashenka himself, political parties in Belarus were more than welcome to nominate candidates.²⁰ It is important to note that the decision to organise earlier presidential elections is likely related to several factors. Firstly, Lukashenka is attempting to become a “legitimate leader” in the eyes of the international system, thereby trying to somewhat reduce the chill between the Western democratic world and Belarus while simultaneously strengthening his domestic political positions. Secondly, he is trying to reduce the mobilisation opportunities of the Belarusian democratic opposition while seeking to “end” Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya’s current political mandate with the help of new elections, providing, in Lukashenka’s view, a clear signal that he must be regarded as the legitimate Belarusian leader. Another important factor in the context of conducting earlier elections is undoubtedly the probable development scenarios in the Ukrainian war. From the perspective of Belarusian foreign policy, Lukashenka is guided by two scenarios. Firstly, discussions about Ukraine’s future could take place as early as the beginning of 2025, after the new US president takes office, thus the Belarusian presidential elections could be seen as Lukashenka’s attempt to “repeat history”, whereby he would be invited to the negotiating table to discuss Ukraine’s future, taking on the role of a mediator, as happened after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Secondly, if a scenario arises where there is a rapid escalation of military operations, Russia would clearly exert more intense pressure towards using Belarusian territory, infrastructure, and potentially also the army to carry out military operations against Ukraine, thereby reducing the likelihood of holding a presidential election on the scheduled date (in August) and diminishing Lukashenka’s chances of running for this office.

According to a statement by the European Parliament, elections held in the current atmosphere, in conditions that are contrary to all internationally recognised standards, with no possibility for Belarusians living abroad to exercise their right to vote or stand as candidates in the election, with no transparent system for counting of votes and without the participation of international observers, cannot be considered as fair and free.²¹ This allows us to conclude that Lukashenka’s intended attempt to become a legitimate leader in the eyes of Western society most probably will not be met with standing ovations. The EU seems to have learned from its past mistakes and will not accept such a simple and quick “friendship invitation” from Lukashenka today. Belarus’s involvement in Russia’s war against Ukraine has changed the situation forever, with Minsk officially sending a clear political signal that a democratisation of Belarus is not possible under Lukashenka’s regime.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Belarus has become an inseparable part of Russia's war against Ukraine. Despite Belarusian attempts to avoid a direct engagement in the conflict, it is most likely that in the future this task will become increasingly complicated. Latvia's string of decisions to consistently strengthen its internal and external security dimensions are commendable and should be continued, regardless of the outcome of the upcoming presidential election in Belarus and possible attempts by Aliaksandr Lukashenka to "restore ties" with the Western institutional community.

Not only Latvia but the EU as a whole has the task of sitting down at the negotiating table at the moment and deciding on the necessity to review their current policy towards Belarus. Freezing relations or reaching the lowest point at the bilateral level (in the context of all EU member states, not just Latvia) is commendable and sends a clear political signal. But it would be even more crucial to review the EU strategy regarding the future of Belarus – namely, the EU should decide on its actions over the coming years, keeping in mind both the democratic will of Belarusian civil society and the need to detach Belarus from even closer integration with Russia in the future, in order to ensure security not only in the Eastern region but also along the external borders of EU member states. Finally, given that Belarus, as we knew it until the beginning of 2020 and 2022, has disappeared, we should continue to work on a new strategy that corresponds to the current political reality where Belarus has become an aggressor.

At the same time, both Latvia and the whole EU should prepare for a scenario where Lukashenka is most likely re-elected as president after the presidential election scheduled for January 2025. This will enhance the need to seek possible cooperation channels in an effort to achieve the release of political prisoners, while also trying to find legally legitimate ways to hold the official Belarusian regime accountable for its repressions against the opposition and civilians. Latvia's task is to keep its eyes wide open as it prepares for a probable increase of hybrid threats at its borders, further strives to strengthen its internal and external security, and recognises the reality of bordering two aggressor states – Russia and Belarus.

The above conclusions make it possible to provide specific policy recommendations for Latvia regarding the dynamics of its relations with Belarus in 2025.

- First of all, priority must be given to Latvia's security in 2025, putting security on the Latvian-Belarusian border at the forefront. Decision-makers should allocate additional funds and investments for border control security technologies and infrastructure to prevent illegal border crossings, smuggling activities, and provocations from Belarus. Additionally, cooperation with Latvia's EU and NATO partners on the intelligence data collection should be strengthened.

- Secondly, Latvian decision-makers must be strategically prepared for the possible direct involvement of Belarus in the Russian war against Ukraine. The responsible institutions of Latvia should prioritise active monitoring measures regarding the possibility of more direct Belarusian involvement in Russia's war against Ukraine by keeping track of the dynamics of military equipment and personnel movements within Belarusian territory, as well as the provision of logistical support to the Russian Armed Forces.
- Thirdly, it is necessary to strengthen Latvia's readiness to respond to hybrid threats by developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy to combat the hybrid threats artificially created by Belarus (including disinformation and cyberattacks). This requires close regional and international cooperation both with the partners in the Baltic States and with partners in the EU and NATO.
- Fourthly, it is necessary to actively advocate for the need to enhance the regime of targeted sanctions against Belarusian officials. Latvian officials must continue to express unwavering rhetoric in 2025 regarding the need to exert pressure against the official regime in Minsk by advocating for the need to strengthen the current sanctions regime. This must be done not only at the regional level but also by actively representing this position at the EU level by advocating for the restoration of any political dialogue only on the condition that significant improvements in human rights are achieved in Belarus.
- Fifthly, Latvia must continue to support Belarusian civil society and the pro-democratic Belarusian opposition. Latvian decision-makers should develop a clear strategy to support Belarusian civil society by offering conditions that would facilitate their stay outside the borders of Belarus. Here, we should indicate the need to follow the good practices of Lithuania and Poland, the *de facto* coordination centres for the Belarusian opposition. In the context of civil society, Latvia must be ready to offer favourable conditions for the acceptance of these people in Latvia, providing them with opportunities for education, work, and business development.
- Sixthly, decision-makers must pay more attention to the need to investigate the crimes committed by the Belarusian regime against Belarusian civil society following the illegal presidential election of 2020 and up to the present day. Latvia should also become more active by following the example of Lithuania, which has requested the International Criminal Court to initiate an investigation into what it considers to be crimes against humanity. Latvia should not limit itself to only expressing firm rhetoric against the human rights violations committed by the Belarusian regime, but it should also seek legal solutions that would allow the official regime of Belarus to be held accountable as soon as possible.

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LATVIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AMID MIDDLE EASTERN TURMOIL: INSIGHTS FROM THE GAZA WAR AND BEYOND

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The past two years have been transformative for the Middle East, marked by pivotal events that have reshaped its geopolitical landscape. The October 2023 attacks and their aftermath set the stage for escalating conflicts in 2024, including the prolonged Gaza War, which has inflicted substantial economic, military, and humanitarian costs. Iran's direct attacks on Israel, coupled with Israeli retaliations targeting Iranian military assets and Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon, have heightened fears of a broader regional war. By the end of 2024, the collapse of Syria's Assad regime further shifted the region's dynamics, ushering in a period of uncertainty and transition.

Amid these developments, Latvia has had to navigate the complexities of international diplomacy. While the Middle East is not a primary focus of its foreign policy,¹ Latvia remains vigilant about the spillover effects of instability in the region. As a small state in a geopolitically sensitive area, Latvia is particularly concerned about the implications of Iran-Russia cooperation on European security and the diversion of US resources from Ukraine to Middle Eastern conflicts. Latvia's foreign policy reflects a balance between aligning with its NATO and EU allies and addressing its security concerns by taking a pragmatic and multilateral approach, emphasising adherence to international law and global stability.

OVERVIEW OF THE MIDDLE EAST

In 2023, Hamas launched a series of attacks on Israel, resulting in the deaths of over 1,200 people and the capture of hundreds of hostages. In retaliation, Israel conducted a campaign of airstrikes and launched a ground invasion of Gaza, rapidly creating a dire humanitarian crisis. The conflict has since dominated regional and global discussions. Scholars and experts worldwide have provided varied analyses, exploring the crisis through the perspectives of humanitarian challenges, international law, political developments, and security concerns.

As the conflict between Israel and Hamas continued into 2024, Israel started the year by achieving a significant victory with the assassination of Saleh Al-Arouri, Hamas's Deputy Leader and a key orchestrator of the 7 October attack, in Beirut.² This operation further intensified tensions between Israel and Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed group active in Lebanon, which had already been escalating since 7 October 2023.

Since October 2023, the Houthis have targeted commercial shipping in the Red Sea and launched attacks on Israel, declaring their intent to continue until Israel ceases its military operations in Gaza, which were initiated after the Hamas-led attacks on 7 October 2023.³ In response, the US military, supported by international partners, conducted limited strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen in January 2024. These strikes targeted missile and drone storage sites, production facilities, and launch platforms, marking the first offensive airstrikes by the global coalition established to safeguard shipping in the Red Sea.⁴

Later in 2024, aiming to eliminate the last Hamas strongholds in southern Gaza, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced plans for a ground invasion of Rafah. This decision raised significant concerns both regionally and internationally for months. Rafah, an area bordering Egypt, had been regarded as a safe zone where many Palestinians sought refuge from Israeli bombardment. Despite widespread apprehension, Israel initiated an operation in Rafah in May, initially describing it as a "limited" mission targeting Hamas fighters. However, months later, the humanitarian crisis in the region has only intensified. The events in Rafah have underscored and drawn heightened attention to the extensive Israeli violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) occurring there and throughout Gaza. Despite this, the international community has been unable to prevent these violations or address the escalating humanitarian crisis. To meet their legal obligations under IHL, the relevant states should have taken decisive actions, such as halting the Rafah invasion, opening all land crossings, and removing internal barriers to allow humanitarian aid. Unfortunately, these steps were not taken. Democratic nations bear a responsibility to prevent and ensure accountability for grave breaches of IHL, particularly in cases like this, where the humanitarian impact has been devastating.⁵

In July 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an Advisory Opinion, requested by the United Nations General Assembly, stating that Israel's continued presence in the occupied Palestinian territory is unlawful and must end "as rapidly as possible". The court identified a wide range of Israeli policies – including the construction and expansion of settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the exploitation of the area's natural resources, the annexation of land, the imposition of permanent control, and discriminatory measures against Palestinians – that it determined to be in violation of international law. The ICJ declared that Israel has no right to sovereignty over these territories, is contravening international laws prohibiting the acquisition of territory by force and is obstructing the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. The court further emphasised that all states have a duty not to recognise Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories as lawful. States are also obligated to withhold any assistance that would sustain the situation created by this illegal occupation. In alignment with the UN Charter and international law, the ICJ called on all states to ensure that any barriers preventing Palestinians from exercising their right to self-determination are dismantled.⁶

Nevertheless, the most anticipated yet astonishing turning point occurred in November, when the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, and a former Hamas commander. The warrants were based on allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁷ This case sparked particular outrage because it marked the first time the ICC has taken action against the leader of a democratic country and a close ally of the United States.

Israel's fight against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon is closely tied to its relationship with its regional adversary, Iran, the primary supporter of both organisations. In April, following the killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander Mohammad Reza Zahedi at the Iranian embassy in Syria, Iran launched a massive and unprecedented drone and missile attack on Israel. This represented the most dangerous escalation between the two nations in decades and marked the first direct assault on Israel by Iran.⁸ A deeper escalation between Iran and Israel occurred in October last year, when Israeli troops launched an invasion of southern Lebanon, aiming to eliminate what the military described as "Hezbollah terror targets" in border villages who posed a threat to northern Israeli residents. In response, Iran carried out its second attack on Israel that year, launching nearly 200 ballistic missiles towards Israeli territory. This dramatic escalation heightened fears within the international community of a potential regional war, with concerns that such a conflict could draw in both Iran and the United States, further destabilising the Middle East and wider international security.⁹

As if the situation lacked sufficient drama and speculation, last May saw an Iranian Air Force helicopter crash in Azerbaijan, claiming the lives of eight individuals, including

Iran's former President Ebrahim Raisi and his foreign minister. While Raisi's death may have sparked internal power struggles within the regime immediately following the incident, it had little effect on the Islamic Republic's overall policies. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continues to exercise firm control over the country's foreign policy, nuclear programme, and internal repression, ensuring the regime's direction remains unchanged despite the loss of prominent officials.¹⁰

The most significant recent development in the region is undoubtedly the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. In December 2024, armed rebels (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham [HTS]) seized control of Damascus, forcing President Bashar al-Assad to flee the country after years of authoritarian rule.¹¹ The sudden collapse of one of the Middle East's most repressive regimes has been widely celebrated by Syrians both within the country and in the diaspora across the globe. Assad's downfall marks a major setback for its strategic partners in the region, such as Russia and Iran. Simultaneously, it disrupts the efforts of Gulf Arab states that had been working to normalise relations with his government, weakening their influence. In contrast, Türkiye, a long-time supporter of the Syrian opposition, stands to benefit significantly from the resulting shift in regional dynamics.

LATVIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST

As in 2023, Latvia's foreign and security policy on a global scale in 2024 continues to be shaped by its candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with elections scheduled for the summer of 2025 for the 2026–2027 term. This candidacy underscores Latvia's commitment to multilateral diplomacy and adherence to international norms, shaping a foreign policy that prioritises stability and constructive engagement. As Latvia awaits the election results, its foreign and security policy remains focused on its traditional priorities, such as regional security, transatlantic cooperation, and the principles of international law.¹² In contrast, Latvia has refrained from adopting controversial or outspoken positions regarding the ongoing tragic events in the Middle East. This restrained approach reflects a deliberate focus on aligning with broader European Union and NATO strategies while maintaining a pragmatic stance that avoids inflaming sensitive geopolitical issues outside its immediate strategic interests.

In the 2023 annual report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the section addressing the Israeli-Hamas war was notably brief and formal, positioned within the context of the EU's foreign and security policy. This placement underscores Latvia's alignment with the EU's collective stance on the issue, reflecting a unified approach to international crises. The report's tone and content were clearly in line with the sentiments expressed

by the President in his 2024 speech to the UN General Assembly, which emphasised adherence to international law, the importance of humanitarian considerations, and a call for stability in the region.¹³ The limited attention to this issue in the report suggests that while the conflict is acknowledged, it is not among Latvia's primary foreign policy priorities, instead being viewed through the broader framework of EU policy and multilateral diplomacy. Latvia acknowledges Israel's right to self-defence, emphasising the importance of adherence to international law, particularly humanitarian law. In solidarity with Israel, and in line with EU policies, Latvia has also provided support for Palestinian civilians through humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, Latvia endorses the efforts of international organisations to mitigate immediate and regional tensions. As a pathway forward, the report advocates for a return to political dialogue aimed at achieving a sustainable two-state solution.¹⁴ Notably, terms such as "Gaza" and "war crimes" (in the context of Gaza) were not mentioned even once.

As the situation unfolded rapidly throughout 2024, Latvian policymakers were relatively reserved in their public diplomacy concerning the war in Gaza. Nevertheless, their position became evident through several actions, most notably in various United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) votes. Among the many votes, a few are particularly important to highlight. Most recently, after countless tries, the UNGA on December 11 adopted a resolution demanding a ceasefire in Gaza; Latvia, similar to previous attempts, voted "in favour" of supporting this resolution.¹⁵ Also in December, Latvia used its vote to support several resolutions addressing funding and resources allocated to support Palestine refugees through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).¹⁶ Those resolutions underscore the importance of UNRWA's role in providing essential services to Palestinian refugees, including education, healthcare, and social services. They call upon UN member states to ensure adequate funding and support for UNRWA to continue its operations effectively. The adoption of those resolutions reflects the international community's recognition of the agency's critical work and the need to uphold its mandate amidst ongoing challenges faced by Palestinian refugees. Latvia also voted "in favour" of a resolution requesting an advisory opinion from the ICJ on Israel's obligations to ensure humanitarian assistance to Palestinians through the UN and other organisations. This includes the court's examination of Israel's responsibilities regarding the work of UN agencies, including UNRWA, in the occupied Palestinian territories.¹⁷ This step is particularly significant in light of Israel's aggressive policies towards UNRWA and other UN agencies. It underscores the resistance of UN member states to unilateral actions that undermine the values and principles of these organisations.

Another resolution, titled "Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine", was adopted by the UNGA with Latvia's support. The resolution reaffirms the principle that acquiring territory by force is inadmissible and stresses the urgent need to resolve the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a two-state solution, where both nations coexist peacefully within internationally recognised borders. It calls for the resumption of direct negotiations to address critical final status issues, including borders, the status of Jerusalem, refugees, and security. The resolution condemns all forms of violence and emphasises the necessity for both parties to adhere to international humanitarian and human rights laws.¹⁸

A remarkable move was made by Latvian policymakers by voting “in favour” of the UNGA resolution titled “The right of the Palestinian people to self-determination”, which reaffirms the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination, including the establishment of an independent state of Palestine. It emphasises the urgent need to resume and accelerate negotiations within the Middle East peace process, aiming for a two-state solution where Israel and Palestine coexist peacefully. The resolution calls upon all states and specialised UN agencies to support the Palestinian people in realising their right to self-determination.¹⁹ Just a reminder for our readers: “self-determination” is a universal human right recognised in key international legal frameworks, including the United Nations Charter and the International Covenants on Human Rights.

Additionally, despite its limited resources as a small state, Latvia actively engages in several international missions in the Middle East, playing a meaningful role in promoting peacekeeping, stability, and conflict resolution in the region. Through NATO, Latvia participates in the “NATO Mission in Iraq”, focusing on enhancing the capacity of Iraqi defence and security institutions, with a small but skilled contingent of personnel providing expertise. Under the United Nations, Latvia contributes to the “UN Truce Supervision Organization” with personnel stationed in Jerusalem and surrounding areas to monitor ceasefires and promote stability. Additionally, Latvia supports the “UN Interim Force in Lebanon” by assisting in peacekeeping efforts to maintain security along Lebanon’s borders. These missions exemplify Latvia’s steadfast commitment to multilateral collaboration and its dedication to fostering international stability.²⁰

While the 2023 report by the Minister of Foreign Affairs²¹ offered minimal analysis of the events in Gaza and presented a pessimistic outlook on Latvia’s positions for 2024, the reality proved to be far more positive than anticipated. Despite limited visibility in public diplomacy, Latvia’s representatives demonstrated a series of meaningful actions grounded in international law. In today’s world, it is evident that the realpolitik of small states cannot thrive without the integration of international legal frameworks. Therefore, Latvia’s bold efforts to strengthen its stance on this matter are both commendable and significant.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS IN 2025

In 2025, the Middle East remains a focal point of international concern, with critical developments in Syria, the Iran-Russia-US triangle, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shaping the geopolitical landscape. For Latvia, these interconnected challenges underscore the importance of adapting its foreign policy to a rapidly changing environment. By balancing its alignment with its Western allies and its commitment to international norms, Latvia has demonstrated its ability to navigate complex global issues while advocating for stability, multilateralism, and adherence to international law.

Post-Assad transition and challenges

The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 initiated a critical political transition in Syria, with a caretaker government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa. This transitional government has focused on maintaining security, consolidating militias into a unified national army, and laying the groundwork for elections, which are expected to take up to four years.²² This cautious approach reflects lessons learned from previous regime changes in the region, emphasising stability over rapid political shifts. Among the issues to be addressed, economic recovery has become a top priority, as the Syrian economy has contracted by 80% since 2011,²³ leaving much of the population in poverty and key infrastructure severely damaged. Humanitarian assistance is critical for addressing immediate needs, while international support is essential for long-term reconstruction and institutional rebuilding. The unconditional lifting of economic sanctions has been highlighted as a necessary step to enable Syria's recovery. The return of millions of refugees remains contingent on restoring safety, economic opportunities, and basic services.

For Latvia, the situation in Syria is significant, as its geopolitical implications resonate beyond the region. Latvia's contributions to UN peacekeeping missions and advocacy for multilateral solutions underscore its support for international efforts to stabilise Syria and aid its recovery.

Iran, Russia, and the United States: A volatile triangle

The strategic partnership treaty expected to be signed between Iran and Russia in January 2025 has redefined regional dynamics. This long-anticipated agreement, encompassing 47 articles, addresses diverse areas such as defence cooperation, cybersecurity, nuclear energy development, counterterrorism, and environmental protection.²⁴ It has strengthened Iran's regional position while solidifying Russia's influence in the Middle

East. For Latvia, this alliance underscores the interconnectedness of European and Middle Eastern security, as Russia's enhanced role in the region directly impacts its activities in Ukraine and the broader European theatre.

Meanwhile, US policy on Iran under the Trump administration remains a combustible mix of hardline sanctions under the "maximum pressure" strategy and the reluctant consideration of diplomatic engagement as a last resort. The influential role of AIPAC in shaping the US's Iran policy²⁵ and their congressional support has further complicated efforts for a balanced approach. Israel has sought increased US involvement in its confrontations with Iran, raising concerns about potential escalation. Military strikes on Iran remain a dangerous possibility, with the risk of destabilising the entire MENA region and provoking severe retaliation. Despite recent challenges, Iran retains significant military capabilities, complicating conflict outcomes.

Latvia, as a NATO member and strong advocate for multilateralism, faces challenges stemming from this volatile triangle. Russia's collaboration with Iran and the US's shifting focus towards the Middle East highlight the need for Latvia to maintain strategic vigilance and adaptability in balancing regional and global priorities.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Ongoing crises and international responses

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a critical issue in 2025, shaped by the prolonged Gaza War and escalating tensions between Israel and its adversaries. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza has intensified, with international law violations drawing attention from global institutions such as the ICJ and ICC. The ICJ's advisory opinion in 2024 declared Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories unlawful, while the ICC's arrest warrants for Israeli leaders marked a historic move, sparking global debates on accountability and justice that will continue to develop throughout 2025.

Despite international calls for ceasefires and a return to dialogue, progress towards a two-state solution remains elusive. Latvia has maintained its alignment with the European Union and NATO collective strategies, voting in favour of key UN General Assembly resolutions advocating for Palestinian self-determination, humanitarian aid, and accountability for human rights violations, and that should continue. However, its limited resources as a small state highlight the importance of leveraging partnerships within the EU and NATO to advance meaningful progress towards peace in the region.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Latvia's foreign and security policy remains deeply rooted in the principles of international law and a commitment to a multilateral world order. However, the developments in the Middle East, while significant, do not align closely with Latvia's primary strategic priorities, which are centred on regional security, transatlantic cooperation, and issues directly impacting European stability. Events in the Middle East nonetheless serve as a crucial test of the effectiveness and resilience of international organisations, the applicability of international law, and the overall role of international organisations in shaping international relations.

The challenges faced by the multilateral system are very evident in the Middle East, often influenced by the geopolitical ambitions of major powers, underscoring the importance of smaller nations like Latvia advocating for a rules-based international order. Latvia's steadfast adherence to principles of sovereignty, human rights, and the peaceful resolution of disputes highlights its commitment to a just global framework. At the same time, these challenges reflect the limitations of smaller nations in shaping outcomes in regions beyond their immediate strategic focus.

Latvia's approach to the Middle East, particularly in the context of the Gaza War, has demonstrated a pragmatic balance between alignment with its Western allies and an independent commitment to international norms. Through its actions, Latvia has reinforced the importance of multilateralism and the need for a cohesive international response to ongoing crises. As the regional landscape continues to evolve, Latvia's adaptability and principled stance will remain key to its role on the international stage.

As for the recommendations:

- Reassessing cooperation with Israeli representatives. Based on the July 2024 advisory opinion of the ICJ regarding Israel's presence in Palestine and its subsequent recommendations to UN member states, Latvia should carefully evaluate and, if necessary, limit cooperation with representatives of the Israeli government. This step would align with international law principles and signal a clear stance against the ongoing actions in the occupied territories.
- Fostering EU multilateral discussions. As an EU member state, Latvia should take the lead in initiating multilateral discussions among EU member states to review EU-Israel bilateral relations, including the EU-Israel Association Agreement. These relations should be reassessed considering the ICC-issued arrest warrants and the ICJ's recommendations to ensure alignment with international legal norms.
- Considering EU sanctions. Given the documented violations linked to Israel, Latvia should advocate for the EU to consider the implementation of sanctions as part of

its economic statecraft. Such measures would reinforce the EU's commitment to upholding international law and holding violators accountable.

- Incorporating UN reports into public diplomacy. Latvia should ensure that reports from the United Nations, including those by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other relevant UN agencies, are consistently integrated into its public diplomacy. This approach should encompass not only reports on human rights violations in Ukraine but also on the Gaza conflict, fostering balanced public discourse and mitigating the risks of selective narratives or misinformation.
- Advancing a two-state solution. In line with the Latvian Foreign Minister's Annual Report,²⁶ which stresses the necessity of returning to political dialogue to achieve a sustainable two-state solution, Latvia should transition from rhetorical support to concrete actions. This includes active engagement with international partners in collaborative peace-building initiatives. For example, participation in projects such as the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, which has convened in Norway, Saudi Arabia, and Brussels, can help Latvia play a constructive role in advancing this goal.
- Recognizing the Palestinian state. Formal recognition of the Palestinian state is essential for the realisation of any two-state solution. Latvia should prioritise this critical step, as recognising both states establishes the foundation for meaningful dialogue, mutual respect, and progress towards a sustainable and peaceful resolution of the conflict.

ENDNOTES

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WESTERN WITHOUT THE PRIVILEGE: HOW LATVIA CAN BE AN ASSET TO WIN OVER THE G77

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This article assesses three waves of Latvian foreign policy expansion: the traditional transatlantic and neighbourhood approach; the East Asia direction; and Global South outreach. Given the contested nature of the term “Global South”¹, the article uses the name “G77”, a grouping of postcolonial and developing countries that “jointly advocate for their collective economic interests to enhance their negotiating capacity at the UN”.² This article stresses the importance of the G77 not just for Latvia’s UN Security Council non-permanent seat bid but also for the geopolitics of the EU at large, and it argues that if the nation wants to be heard among G77, it should communicate its unique history of being part of the non-oppressive, non-colonial, and values-based West.

THE FIRST WAVE: THE HOMECOMING

Fifty years of Soviet occupation following World War II robbed Latvia of its natural and burgeoning governmental, economic, and cultural links with the West. The pre-war generation showed their children and grandchildren yellowing advertisements for the 1920s direct Liepāja–New York steamship passenger line, shared stories of holidays in France, and spoke of possible family members in London, to the amazement of the Soviet-locked youngsters. Understandably, then, in the years since the regaining of the national independence, Latvian foreign policy had a clear focus: to join the European Union, to enter NATO, and to reconnect with the West from which the

Soviet occupation had torn the country away. Given Russia's seeming democratisation, establishing stable neighbourly relations and expanding economic relations with the Russian Federation³ was also a priority direction for the Baltic nation, before the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014⁴ brought it to an end.

After Latvia had achieved its goal of becoming fully institutionally integrated with the Western community, the expectation was that a natural expansion of Latvia's diplomatic, economic and people-to-people presence in other regions globally would follow. However, the opposite happened. In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, Latvian public spending had gone into survival mode, and the government saw investing in having a presence further from home as a vanity expense better suited for a wealthier time, not a geopolitical necessity. The budget of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was cut by almost 40%: from LVL 41.1 million in 2008 to LVL 25.9 million in 2010.⁵ The nation had to resort to a skeleton crew approach in its existing diplomatic representations outside Western countries, and the harsh austerity measures precluded it from opening any new representative offices for half a decade to come.⁶

THE SECOND WAVE: THE CRISIS AFTERMATH AND THE CHINA DREAM

Even in the depth of the financial crisis, however, Latvia realised that transatlantically minded small states need an expanded global vision to survive and thrive. The first step Latvia took towards a more global outlook was in the Central Asian direction, reflecting its interest in leveraging the historic ties with Central Asia to provide “a transport branch for cargo from Central Asia and Afghanistan to ports in the Baltic Sea region”.⁷

This also sparked Latvia's interest in the nascent New Silk Road vision of the People's Republic of China. In 2013, the Annual Report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs was quite optimistic about exploring the China direction: “[T]he foreign minister met with the Chinese premier, discussing transit options and trade volumes, as well as submitted projects for possible Chinese investments in Latvia, in transport-aviation, ports and logistics, as well as in the financial sector”.⁸ The Russian 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Western sanctions that followed only strengthened the need to provide Latvian port and railway infrastructure with diversification opportunities. The interest later culminated in the controversial “16+1” Riga Summit of 2016, but this failed to produce any real economic success stories.

Then, as the discourse on “China as challenge” gradually began replacing the “China as opportunity” outlook in the United States and Europe in the late 2010s, Latvia

along with other Western nations realised it had to have a plan for diversification away from China, and it began to expand its gaze to prioritise East and Southeast Asia. This push coincided with the US shift towards the Indo-Pacific, which was not least driven by security considerations: “This intensifying American focus is due in part to the fact that the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC. The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world’s most influential power. The PRC’s coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific”,⁹ reads the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Latvia, along with its Baltic neighbours, joined the US-Baltic dialogue on the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰ What began as a wave of Latvian foreign policy expansion to include China ended with cementing partnerships that would mitigate Chinese pressures.

THE THIRD WAVE: THE SECURITY COUNCIL CHARM OFFENSIVE

To gain a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council has been one of the central Latvian long-term foreign policy goals since 2011¹¹ – it was written in the National Development Plan for 2021–2027,¹² with an officially launched campaign in 2023.¹³ Latvia, a stable and fully integrated member of the Western community, but nonetheless a small state acutely aware of its security being at the mercy of global geopolitical developments, needed to be heard and needed to grant its voting support to facilitate UN Security Council decisions that would add to, not rob it of, its security.

Facing off against Montenegro, Latvia now needs to secure support from at least two-thirds of UN member states, or 129 votes from 193 voting countries.¹⁴ A total of 134 UN member states belong to the Group of 77, “the largest intergovernmental organization of developing countries in the United Nations, which provides the means for the countries of the South to articulate and promote their collective economic interests and enhance their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the United Nations system, and promote South-South cooperation for development”.¹⁵ Simply put, there is no non-permanent UN Security Council seat in store for Latvia without the Global South: the third wave of Latvian foreign policy internationalisation involves the rest of the world.

The Latvian UN bid comes at a special time for the EU as a whole. At the beginning of her second European Council presidency, Ursula von der Leyen doubled down on her geopolitical vision for Europe, stating that the world has entered an age of geostrategic rivalries, not least between Europe and China: “The more aggressive posture and

unfair economic competition from China, its “no- limits” friendship with Russia – and the dynamics of its relationship with Europe – reflect a shift from cooperation to competition”.¹⁶ Latvia is on board with the European de-risking approach, as the Annual Report of the Foreign Minister on the accomplishments and further work with respect to national foreign policy and the European Union (2023) states: “The EU continues its work to reduce risks by promoting the EU’s competitiveness and resilience, making full use of autonomous trade instruments, and further developing a strategy for market diversification. Latvia is taking part in the formation of the EU’s policy for China, including by standing up for the importance of the geopolitical background and respect for economic reciprocity”.¹⁷ In a testament of deeds, not just words, Latvia supported the Commission in the vote of EU members to impose tariffs of up to 45% on imports of Chinese-made electric vehicles.¹⁸

The approach includes, among other things, ensuring European economic security by establishing direct links with nations that can help European businesses and governments to secure access to critical raw materials and to protect supply chains. The European Critical Raw Materials Act, adopted by the European Council in March 2024, speaks of the Union’s need to diversify its imports of raw materials, using trade agreements to secure trade by expanding the EU’s network of strategic partnerships – which takes a value chain approach and has a strong sustainability dimension – as well as using the Global Gateway for soft and hard infrastructure to deploy projects along the raw materials value chain.¹⁹

Chinese analysts admit that “the proportion of China’s overseas rights and interests is relatively low, and its right to speak and influence are still limited [compared to the US and Europe], which is not commensurate and equal to the status of China as the world’s second-largest economy and the world’s largest producer and consumer of mineral resources”.²⁰ To close this gap, China has strategically moved towards strengthening overseas supply corridors and creating partnerships with the G77 nations to ensure unimpeded access to critical materials. While Chinese businesses provide investment and sub-contract infrastructure projects, China-connected local media networks in those countries spread information on the positive aspects of cooperation with China and underreport challenges.²¹

This means that Europe must act fast to sustain and develop its own partnerships with these nations. However, often enough, relationship baggage is an issue. The G77’s image of Europe is often that it is hypocritical, self-serving, and post-colonial.²² a narrative China-affiliated media networks help spread in relation to Western European powers. From the G77 perspective, Shada Islam argues, “the EU’s outreach has often gone hand-in-hand with simplistic and reductive Eurocentric ‘us and them’ narratives that, despite the rhetoric about ‘equal partnerships’, relegates developing nations to little more than attractive markets, investment destinations and raw-material suppliers – and

increasingly as gatekeepers to Fortress Europe”.²³ This is where the Latvian diplomatic voice can prove useful – it carries none of the baggage, and neither does it have centuries of privilege to account for. Quite the opposite: as unplugged by the European parliamentary advances in far-right borderline-racism in European parliaments, stable in its pursuit of democracy, and a responsible neighbour and regional player, Latvia, the underdog who made it, embodies the values of Europe without the hypocrisy.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In her mission letter to the incoming High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Estonian politician Kaja Kallas, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen entrusted her with a truly global mandate. It calls to develop a new Pact for the Mediterranean; to take forward a comprehensive EU Middle East Strategy; to ensure new impetus in the EU’s mutual partnership with Africa; to work on a renewed approach to the Sahel region; to deepen the EU’s engagement with partners across the Indo-Pacific; to develop a new Strategic EU-India Agenda; to work to strengthen cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean; and to take forward the partnership between the EU and Central Asia.²⁴

This is not a coincidence, as the specific Baltic brand of diplomacy has made a name for itself in the EU and beyond. Recent developments have contributed to this perception, including the immediate, joint and unwavering Baltic support for Ukraine, as well as the Lithuania’s stance against Chinese pressure.

Latvia has the tools to help Europe with the Global South. It can push back against the anti-Western narratives distributed by China and Russia, explaining the fight of Ukraine from the perspective of a shared neighbourhood trauma caused by Russian imperialism, and creating people-to-people links that are indispensable for EU’s future. At the same time, Latvia can raise its national profile and increase its chances for the coveted non-permanent UN Security Council seat, as long as it avoids a certain widespread trap: mentioning Trinidad and Tobago, or Gambia, as Latvian colonies.

Mentioning the link with Trinidad and Tobago feels interesting, but Latvia’s strategic communications must avoid repeating the nationalist propaganda narratives of the 1930s.²⁵ Driven by an angst that Latvia’s European status would somehow be contested, and Latvians viewed as barbaric or not Western enough, the Ulmanis-times misconception took root that painting the colonies as Latvian would somehow signal that the nation shared the Western history of conquest, which would then put it on par with the United Kingdom, France, or Spain – the quintessential Europeans. During the

first years of its regained independence in the 1990s, colonial pride came back with a vengeance, making its way into the public education system. Even though today the approach has shifted, Latvia's "colony pride" still finds unexpected outlets. This should be explicitly rooted out of the national strategic narrative. First, Latvia never had a colony. The folklores of the 17th Century overseas colonies of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia, albeit romantically depicted in popular culture,²⁶ don't have much to do with the history of Latvians, who were themselves practically enslaved at the time: "A peasant from Courland is a serf, subject to his lord with one's body and one's life".²⁷

Second, there is nothing particularly respectable in having taking part in colonisation – and even though Duke Jakob reportedly requested that his subjects handle indigenous groups with respect, "Courland's colonists arrived on Tobago without acknowledging indigenous sovereignty or economic structures".²⁸ Colonialism is a shameful period in human history, not a point of misplaced national pride. If anything, Latvians were colonised themselves, and are undergoing de-colonisation until this day, as they belong to a region historically dominated by various forms of imperialism and colonial violence, "theorised and described from the outside, often from positions of power and domination" that rely on "tendentious and extractivist narratives".²⁹ It is with this shared understanding, trauma and reclaiming narrative that the nation should approach others in the Global South.

If Europeans want to convince the G77 of risks associated with an asymmetrical influence of China in their countries, be it in resource extraction, trade imbalances, or the information environment, those should be Baltic, and Latvian, stories to tell.

If the EU wants to amplify respect for Ukrainian agency among the G77 and push back against the Russo-centric worldview of influence zones and buffer states, those should be Baltic, and Latvian, neighbour testimonies to share. Latvians stand by Ukraine in the face of shared challenges, not some Western privilege. Ukraine matters to us because it embodies the plight of small and medium states in terms of stability and safeguarding the existing global order: this Latvian perspective offers a potent pushback against the Russian and Chinese narratives of Europeans being "running dogs" of the US,³⁰ acting only in the US's interests and not their own.

After three waves of expansion, Latvia's foreign policy outreach today covers all of the UN and more. It is now time for it to go full circle and connect Latvia's transatlantic interests in pursuit of its unique "power of discourse" among the G77.

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THE DUAL ROLE OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH IN WORLD AFFAIRS

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Experts, politicians, and world leaders increasingly hear the term “Global South”. Many countries have voluntarily assigned themselves to this category, not forgetting to add that the population of the Global South is more than half of the world’s population.

In 2023, India, which has ambitions to lead the Global South, held two virtual Voice of the Global South Summit (VOGSS) events as part of its presidency of the G20 group. The second of these two VOGSS events, held five days before the final annual virtual summit of the G20, brought together 125 countries of the Global South¹ to share their views and priorities on a common platform. There are a total of 195 recognised sovereign states in the world. Thus, 64% of the world’s nations are ready to belong to the Global South or are ready to share its agenda. BRICS+ is today considered to be the voice of the interests of the Global South. The involvement of China and Russia, or rather the risks posed by the increasing influence of these two forces on the countries of the Global South, is the biggest foreign policy challenge for Western countries and European Union member states, including Latvia.

With limited resources, weak historical ties, and often virtually no diaspora, should Latvia make efforts to build relationships with the Global South, or should it avoid spreading its resources thin, considering the risks posed by the Russian and Chinese presence in these countries? By following a path of self-restraint, from a strategic perspective, if Latvia gives up its ambitions to invest in this undoubtedly complex and demanding area, then Latvia’s foreign policy risks falling into the position of “catching up”, and by concentrating only on relations with traditional allies, it may lose significantly from the perspective of the next ten years.

EMERGING POWERS OR PERSISTENT PROBLEMS?

What is this group – how monolithic is it, does it pose a threat to the Western world, or will it become a future driver of economic growth and a mediator between democratic and authoritarian regimes?

There is a simplified approach that defines the Global South based on gross domestic product per capita. All countries with a GDP per capita in 2021 above USD 15,000 are considered part of the Global North, with the addition of EU members Bulgaria and Romania (GDP per capita of USD 12,221 and USD 14,858, respectively).² According to this definition, Russia and Ukraine belong to the Global South, as do China and India. Conversely, some geographically southern countries, including Chile and Uruguay, fall into the Global North by this GDP per capita criterion. Thus defined, the Global South represents 85% of the world's population and nearly 39% of global GDP.³

The Global South does not have a common political goal, ideology, religion, or any other common strong cohesive component. For this reason, many people – experts and politicians alike – refuse to use the term, stating outright that the Global South does not exist.^{4,5} Nevertheless, the term cannot be ignored – it is becoming more and more widespread and is being voluntarily applied by Brazil, India, China, and South Africa, which act as the frontmen of the Global South. With their growing political, economic, and demographic weight, emerging middle powers, such as India, Brazil, and South Africa (IBSA), are key players in global problem-solving, and they also formed the G20 troika in 2024.⁶ Nevertheless, it is generally believed that the Global South includes most of the countries that have maintained and even strengthened relations with Russia since February 2022, not condemning its attack on Ukraine and helping it to circumvent sanctions.⁷

However, there are studies showing that the majority of countries in the Global South do side with Ukraine in this conflict. Objectively, each country's position in the Russia-Ukraine war was revealed by its vote in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on 23 February 2023, the results of which were broadly similar to the UNGA vote on Ukraine in 2022. While specific motivations may vary, it is natural to classify votes in favour of a resolution that requires Russia to “immediately, fully, and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from Ukrainian territory” as votes in favour of Ukraine and votes against it as votes in favour of Russia. The other two options – abstentions and no-shows – are lumped together as signalling neutrality.⁸ According to the voting results, 141 countries supported the resolution, and if we subtract the 53 votes of the Global North countries from the voting results, we will see that more than half of the Global South countries supported Ukraine at 61.8%, while 33.1% of the Global South countries, including China and India, abstained from voting and only 5.1% took a pro-Russian position.⁹

At the same time, IBSA prefers not to support one of the sides in the war between Russia and Ukraine but to mediate instead. They view the dominance of the dollar unfavourably and are optimistic about BRICS+, although even within IBSA, some are critical of the group's expansion to include Iran. The Global South is a political – or rather a diplomatic – grouping that includes those countries that, for a variety of reasons, do not associate themselves with either the Global West or the Global North and, in international rhetoric, often resort to the thesis of an unjust world order in which Western countries and countries of the Global North – which are by definition more successful and wealthier – have priority access to resources. A prime example of such resentment was the distribution of vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic. The US, UK, EU, and Japan lined up for the coronavirus vaccine and pre-ordered billions of doses of the vaccination even before a working formula had been created.¹⁰

Since the end of 2023, the conflict in the Middle East has further deepened this divide, as Western solidarity with Israel is in stark contrast to the widespread support for Palestinians in the Global South.¹¹ Furthermore, by comparing the West's stance towards Russia's war against Ukraine and Israel's war against Hamas, the EU has been widely criticised by the Global South for applying a double standard.

EXPLORING LATVIA'S CONNECTION WITH THE GLOBAL SOUTH: NEW PERSPECTIVES (?)

In June 2025, the UN General Assembly will vote on Latvia's candidacy as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. To be elected, Latvia must be supported by at least two-thirds of UN member states, namely, it must receive 129 votes out of 193 countries eligible to vote. At the same time, it must strive for as much support as possible.¹² Sentiment surveys in Global South countries show that these countries are ready to actively support a reform of the UN Security Council – there is widespread support for its expansion.¹³ Its position on increasing the role of small countries in the UN Security Council provides an opportunity for Latvia to secure votes from the Global South in support of its membership in the Security Council for the period of 2026–2027.

Although the term Global South was not used once in the 2023 Annual Report of the Foreign Ministry,¹⁴ Foreign Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, speaking before the parliament in foreign policy debates in January 2024, used it twice, as he called for seeking friends among these countries, developing economic relations and opening new markets outside the OECD, and he pointed out the importance of Global South votes in UNGA voting.¹⁵

Although, based on the frequency of references, we understand that relations with the Global South have not been singled out as a separate priority of Latvia's foreign policy, Latvia has experience in cooperating with countries of the Global South.

In 2024, Latvia worked actively to strengthen political and economic ties with African countries, as well as to implement projects aimed at sustainable development and prosperity on both sides. The main areas of cooperation included education, digitalisation, agriculture, and forestry. Among the countries with which Latvia actively cooperates are South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe. On 3–4 June 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised an international forum entitled “Latvia and African Countries: Partners for Peace and Resilience” in Riga. The Forum brought together more than 100 participants, including public and non-governmental sector representatives, entrepreneurs, and guests from 18 African countries.¹⁶

Latvia is transforming from a recipient of international aid, as it was in the 1990s and early 2000s, into a donor country,¹⁷ and this opens up new opportunities for it in diplomacy. Latvia justifiably pays special attention to supporting the least-developed countries, and these efforts contribute to the realisation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and help combat global challenges.¹⁸

At the same time, Latvia's relations with the Republic of South Africa are characterised as limited,¹⁹ which does not look justified, as South Africa is one of the leading countries in Africa in terms of political influence. It actively participates in international organisations, such as the African Union, and is the only African country that is a member of the G20. In terms of GDP, South Africa is considered one of the most developed on the continent – together with Egypt and Algeria, the country is one of the three largest economies on the continent.²⁰

Latvia's relations with India and Brazil look more dynamic. In February 2024, there was a working visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Kariņš to New Delhi, where he participated in the Raisina Dialogue security conference.²¹ The Raisina Dialogue conference is called India's “Munich”, referring to the Munich Security Conference, which speaks of the level of the Indian expert platform and the seriousness of the issues raised for the region. The Latvian delegation is taking part in the conference for the second time, and its annual participation in the Raisina Dialogue can contribute to understanding agendas relevant to India, its allies, and the entire region.

Relations with Brazil are characterised by a slightly higher intensity and a large number of mutual interests – Brazil has the largest Latvian community in Latin America, with about 20,000 Latvians and their descendants. After the occupation of Latvia in 1940, Brazil unofficially declared that it did not recognise Latvia as part of the Soviet Union.²²

In February 2024, after a long break, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andris Pelšs visited Brazil. The 3rd Latvian–Brazilian political consultations were held, and Pelšs met with the Brazilian Latvian community in Novaodesa.²³

Undoubtedly, these are not all the countries of the Global South with which Latvia cooperates. Although objectively we have to admit that due to geographical remoteness, a limited number of common interests, and often an almost total absence of diasporas in the countries of the Global South, Latvia's foreign policy towards them can be called rather modest. But even given its limited resources, Latvian foreign policy has made a number of significant efforts that have increased the dynamics of relations in the last few years.

2025 AND BEYOND: THE GLOBAL SOUTH'S EMERGING ROLE IN WORLD AFFAIRS

It is highly likely that 2025 could be a decisive year in negotiations to end the war in Ukraine. The experience gained by Global South countries in mediating conflicts in their regions should be utilised when the time is right. For example, South Africa and six other African countries established the African Peace Mission to mediate between Russia and Ukraine. Even if it was not successful, it demonstrated the willingness of non-Western countries to address the issue.²⁴

The China–Brazil peace plan for the Russia–Ukraine conflict was introduced in May 2024. This joint proposal emphasises de-escalation, humanitarian assistance, and the prevention of nuclear proliferation. This plan reflects the collaborative efforts of China and Brazil to promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Among other things, China and Brazil have indicated that they can be accepted and heard in both Kyiv and Moscow, making their mediation more effective. Global challenges such as climate change, poverty alleviation, and technological transition are critical for all countries in the world, regardless of their geographical location or level of economic development. The countries of the Global South, to the same extent as Latvia, face these challenges, and addressing them requires joint efforts and international cooperation.

Technological transition, including digitalisation and the development of new technologies, is a key driver of economic growth and sustainable development. Countries of the Global South and Latvia can benefit from knowledge and technology exchange. Latvia should continue organising educational programmes and trainings to share knowledge of new technologies and digital skills. In the fight against poverty, Latvia and the Global South should share successful strategies and programmes to

reduce poverty and social inequality. They should also implement joint projects aimed at improving access to education and economic opportunities.

Climate change is having a devastating impact on ecosystems and economies in both the Global South and Latvia. In the Global South, rising sea levels and extreme weather threaten the lives of millions of people. In Latvia, climate change is causing changes in weather patterns that affect agriculture and forestry. Latvia and the Global South can cooperate in developing and implementing technologies for climate change adaptation and mitigation.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSING NEXT STEPS

Reflecting on the relevance of finding a path to building relations between Latvia and the Global South, one can start with three simple precepts.

1. New challenges should not be feared or avoided: In the near term, the voices of the Global South will be impossible to ignore – they already play an important role in the world and have ambitions to increase their influence, both as growing economic powers and as important regional and global players. Emerging middle powers want to reform the international system but not turn it upside down. They are status quo powers. The goal of the emerging middle powers is to ensure that the changing economic, political, and demographic distribution of power in the world is reflected in international bodies such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, and the G20.²⁵

The IBSA also have a strong interest in reforming the United Nations Security Council by expanding it. And this can be used by Latvia in many ways to achieve its goals – in particular while lobbying Global South countries for support for its candidacy as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2026–2027.

2. There's no need to attempt to cover all the countries that belong to the Global South, nor can they be generalised into one institutionalised group – an analysis of goals and opportunities should be conducted, and a narrow circle of countries from the Global South should be identified as having a significant influence in their regions, which will allow a further scaling up of the efforts of Latvian diplomacy in relations with these countries' neighbours.

Emerging middle powers, such as Brazil, India, and South Africa, should be included in the list of countries requiring increased attention and effort. This does not, however, preclude diplomatic efforts directed at other countries in the region when politically

or economically justified. The most important criteria for focusing on these countries are their democratic structure, their commitment to a rule-based world order, and the fact that they are becoming influential players in world politics due to their economic success, demographic dynamics, and political aspirations. Latvia's priorities should be to open embassies in Brazil and the Republic of South Africa.

3. There is no single approach to foreign policy implementation, even for IBSA. According to 2024 surveys, respondents from India, Brazil, and South Africa see different foreign policy challenges for their countries – climate change for Brazil, relations with China for India, the war in Ukraine and the Middle East for South Africa, and international trade for all three countries. Latvian diplomacy should develop relations with the countries of the Global South not only to promote its agenda and interests but also to listen and try to understand the concerns of these countries.

Expertise regarding the countries of the Global South and the growth of their economic and political influence, as well as the need to understand these countries and accept that their view of the world and their interests may be very different not only from the view and interests of the Western world but also from other members of the club of countries of the Global South, form the basis for successful relations with these countries.

The countries of the Global South prefer to remain neutral in the Sino-American rivalry due to China's growing economic importance. They have traditionally pursued a policy of non-alignment, multilateralism, or neutrality, avoiding the logic of alliances. Allowing them opportunities for focused cooperation without long-term commitments is more in line with their foreign policy traditions. It is important to avoid a situation where they have to choose sides on many issues – such an approach shows respect for their independence and an understanding that relations with them should go beyond the traditional centre–periphery logic.²⁶

Latvia has a unique tool for building relationships with countries of the Global South. Although it is a Northern European nation and an EU member, Latvia can also speak a similar language as post-colonial countries due to its history. Having survived occupations and being part of the Russian Empire – and, even earlier, the Swedish Empire – Latvia shares common concerns about finding its place in the global world, justice, and colonial legacies. These shared challenges can foster mutual understanding and cooperation. Although this tool should be used with caution – such a message from a country that's part of Western civilisation may not be immediately perceived positively – it can nevertheless be a magic key for Latvian diplomacy to the doors of the Global South.

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AML, SANCTIONS, AND THE BANKING SECTOR: LATVIAN LEADERSHIP IN THE FINANCIAL INTEGRITY MOVEMENT

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The year 2024 marked the climax of a long Latvian journey in contemporary international public diplomacy and security policy tied to reining in its historically non-resident-oriented banking sector and national anti-money laundering (AML) and sanctions enforcement system. Two events exemplify the year's unique status. First, Latvia volunteered to participate in the 6th round of MONEYVAL mutual evaluations.¹ The evaluations will take approximately two years, with the results being expected by the end of 2025. Second, the US Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) withdrew its finding and proposed rulemaking regarding the infamous ABLV bank, which was linked to significant Russian money-laundering activity.² As financial integrity increasingly becomes a subject of Allied defence policy, both of these events are timely positive signals of Latvia remedying its historically impaired reputation as a Russian financial transit centre, as well as exemplifying Latvia's leadership role in the financial integrity domain.

These two events come as the climax to a dense Latvian history of grappling with its envisioned role as a financial centre that acts a "bridge" between east and west.³ What used to be government policy was rapidly overturned in 2018, when FinCEN published a report with the intention to implement the fifth and most severe special measure allowed by the Patriot Act – a prohibition on correspondent accounts in the US and a shut-out from the US-dollar-dominated global financial network.⁴ The report accused ABLV of "[institutionalising] money laundering as a pillar of the bank's business", and it was followed by an intense high-level visits from US officials regarding broader systemic policy issues that engender high levels of non-resident banking in Latvia, which, by 2014, accounted for more than half of Latvia's bank deposits.⁵ Stemming from a relatively low

MONEYVAL evaluation, Latvia almost ended up on the “grey list” of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which would have significantly limited Latvia’s access to financial markets and its liquidity.⁶ This, in turn, would have dire consequences for the Latvian economy, as it could significantly affect Latvia’s access to foreign capital.

In response, the Latvian government engaged a major overhaul of the Latvian AML system, successfully enacting reforms leading to it being taken off of the FATF’s enhanced surveillance list and removing the immediate risk of being placed on the grey list.⁷ Latvia began its pivot to AML leadership by becoming the first MONEYVAL member state to successfully implement all of the FATF’s recommendations in 2020. Since then, Latvia has continued to excel in AML policy, and with the beginning of the second invasion of Ukraine in 2022, also in the closely related sanctions policy. While the sanctions policy has a different remit than AML, both of them concern evaluating who has ownership of certain assets and both require strong government efforts to ensure enforcement capacity.⁸ Latvia’s enthusiasm and leadership manifests in its sanctions policy through it adopting US OFAC sanctions as its own.⁹

However, while Latvia exemplifies leadership in its effective approach to AML and sanctions policy, not all Western allies are aligned, and political tensions remain. In the financial integrity domain, discord is a death knell to the effective execution of policy and regulation, because the weakest link in the financial system creates an opening for malign actors to reach the economies of any nation within the Western alliance. Without more concerted and direct European Union-level efforts at signalling the importance of territorial awareness and control of financial flows, the systemic weaknesses to malignant state-sponsored activity will continue in the coming years. The instrumentalisation of economic and financial tools by countries like Russia has become a core part of their tactical toolkit against the West, as was highlighted within the NATO 2022 Strategy Concept.¹⁰ Thus, there is ample space for recognising financial integrity as an independent goal by Western leadership in the upcoming short to medium term.

The following contribution will first assess international trends in regard to financial integrity policy, followed by analysing Latvia’s national activities in this domain. The contribution will finalise with recommendations.

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS IN FINANCIAL INTEGRITY

Sanctions evasion continues to be a deliberate and organised threat, and it is unclear to what extent EU sanctions enforcement is impactful. This was formally manifested through the adoption of the 14th sanctions package against Russia by the EU – the focus

of the latest package is no longer on increasing the scope of punitive pressure on Russia, but on ensuring that the sanctions regime “responds to the needs and findings on the ground, and tackles enforcement issues”. The broader sanctions regime is still lagging behind in enforcement capacity compared to something like its AML framework cousin in terms of regulatory strictness.¹¹ While a centralised AML authority is expected to begin work in the next two years, there are as of yet no such plans for a sanctions authority.

In 2024, Latvia continued to take a leadership role in sanctions, however, other EU member states are not as keen to take a punitive stance on Russia. In 2024, Latvia became the first country in the EU to ban Russian agricultural imports.¹² It also became the first to ban Belarussian vehicles from entering its territory.¹³ However, the leadership of countries that have politically warmer stances towards Russia, like Hungary, for example, are bringing further sanctions discussions to a halt, while they import a variety of Russian natural resources.¹⁴ Conflicting views on the importance of sanctions to Western defence is in part responsible for the estimated amount of sanctions evasion reaching between EUR 3-4 billion annually.¹⁵

The acknowledgement of financial integrity as a sub-goal of broader EU initiatives like strategic autonomy is, however, growing increasingly common. Discussions of operational financial resilience have been highlighted among von der Leyen’s six policy priorities under “Security Union 2.0”.¹⁶ The European Union Security Union Strategy highlights the importance of advancing cross-border cooperation between member states, which rests mostly on information exchange. The Strategy notes that the regulatory framework was “designed over 30 years ago” and makes carrying out operational activities difficult, in part because in many cases the information is not accessible to authorities or is not structured to be accessible. This remains one of the main gaps in solidifying an asset-tied traceability network at any level in the European Union, and it requires significant attention in the upcoming work planning cycles.

NATIONAL ATTAINMENTS

The current MONEYVAL assessment offers the opportunity for a better rating than the 2018 evaluation, which rated Latvia’s AML system as ineffective, with many strategic weaknesses.¹⁷ The negative assessment was felt by Latvia’s businesses and reflected in foreign investment numbers, mostly due to reputational loss but also due to cutting correspondent banking relationships with certain large German and US banks.¹⁸ The opportunity to remedy this via the latest round of assessment is important for Latvia’s banking sector, financial development, and national security. A positive assessment will

help attract investors, who concurrently become stakeholders in Latvia's reputation, acting as additional allies with a stake in Latvia's geopolitical security. However, it is also an important signifier that Latvia has managed to stem backsliding in what has previously been identified as a chronically lingering issue. The assessment continues to be a significant national undertaking, with over 20 different institutions participating in the process.¹⁹

The FinCEN draft decision was one of the main “stimuli” for an overhaul of Latvia's financial integrity policy, regulatory framework, and enforcement capacity.²⁰ The resulting overhaul prevented Latvia from being included in the FATF grey list, and it also set Latvia up as a figurehead of financial integrity and a model country for others. The United States retracted the draft in September of 2024, highlighting details about the infamous ABLV bank undergoing an irrevocable wind-down and indicating that: “FinCEN recognizes the notable progress made by the Government of Latvia to substantially strengthen its AML/CFT regime through a series of meaningful legal and regulatory reforms of its financial sector. These reforms have resulted in strengthened authorities, institutional capacity, and substantially reduced non-resident deposit activity in Latvia, a principal source of FinCEN's money laundering concern at the time the NPRM was issued.”²¹

FinCEN's decision is remarkable not only because it removes a stain that directly correlated with the cutting of several important banking correspondent relationships, but also because it signifies both Latvia's political will and executive capacity to implement real policy change. Several Latvian banks have been on FinCEN's 311 special measure list of entities of primary money laundering concern (the only ones from the European Union).²² Latvia has a long history of weak regulatory enforcement in the banking sector. The inability to remedy these weaknesses for close to 20 years was a notable wrench in the bilateral relationship between Latvia and the United States. Thus, the proactive removal of a Latvian bank from that list marks a major reversal in American confidence in the Latvian government, which will spillover in every other facet of cooperation – especially defence and security, in which the United States is a key Latvian partner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The MONEYVAL evaluation round that Latvia is currently undergoing is a highest-level priority in the short to medium term. The successful completion of the evaluation yielding a higher score will confirm the permanency of Latvia's financial policy overhaul. It will place Latvia as not just a successful reform story, but as an international leader in

financial integrity policy. This directly opens more investment opportunities, channels more stakeholders to Latvia, and strengthens Latvia's relationship with its existing partners. Following on from that, Latvia must ensure that there is no backsliding after receiving the evaluation in 2025, especially with respect to new assets like crypto, where jurisdictions are competing for business.

Second, Latvia must ensure that the financial integrity policy becomes a European Union-level security priority. Currently, Latvia has been working to implement best practices and policy recommendations from FATF, the Egmont Group, MONEYVAL, and other institutions. However, with the completion of the ongoing evaluation round, Latvia must take a leadership role in developing its financial integrity policy internationally. This should entail a campaign of soft public diplomacy measures, like seeking leadership positions within the new European Union Anti-Money Laundering Authority, while also promoting financial integrity as a delineated and individual function of the European Security Strategy through the Council and working group-level structures.

Latvia can work to build coalitions within the European Union, bringing together like-minded member states that also prioritise financial integrity and strong sanctions enforcement. By leading efforts to form a unified group within the EU that consistently supports and advocates for robust financial measures against malign actors, Latvia can create additional pressure on countries with softer stances. This coalition could also collaborate on strategies to mitigate the effects of sanctions evasion and work towards a more cohesive EU-wide response.

Third, Latvia needs to take a stronger stance against any European Union member states that are warming to Russia, such as Hungary. Latvia should adopt a more assertive position regarding its leadership role in sanctions policy and financial integrity, giving it moral and diplomatic authority to challenge any EU members that undermine the collective efforts of sanctions enforcement. This is essential not only to protect Western financial systems from malign actors but also to maintain cohesion within the EU and its security apparatus.

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DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL ASIA: LATVIA'S OPPORTUNITIES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

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Over recent years, the civil society sector has become increasingly concerned about the decline of democracy, both in Europe and its neighbouring regions as well as globally. Unfair elections, “foreign agent” laws, and attacks on journalists and activists have become commonplace, increasingly narrowing the civic space and safe, democratic participation even in those countries that had previously proclaimed themselves as aiming for democratic development.

Moving towards its candidacy for the UN Security Council, Latvia significantly expanded its development cooperation regions in 2024, as it implemented new activities in various countries in Africa and Oceania, as well as continued various projects in its already traditional cooperation countries within the Eastern Partnership of the European Union and Central Asia.

Latvia has contributed to the development of Central Asia since the beginning of development cooperation – projects have been carried out by the private sector, public administration, municipalities, and non-governmental organisations. This region consists of five sovereign states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Latvia’s development cooperation policy planning documents stipulate that, traditionally, Latvia’s priority countries in Central Asia are Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, Latvia’s cooperation activities are being implemented in all the countries of this region; these countries also interact with each other, thus influencing the overall regional situation. As a result, this opinion article will look at all five countries.

The pivotal role of Central Asia in the overall security policy framework has driven different actors to seek to influence these countries and thus also challenge the potential for the development of democracy even in those countries where positive development

has previously been observed. Given that the European Union cut down its targeted investments in human rights and values in 2024 – while repressions against civil society and journalists continued, and legal restrictions on non-governmental organisations also grew – there comes the need to also examine the added value of Latvia’s contribution to the democratic development of this region.

REGIONAL INFLUENCES IN CENTRAL ASIA

Russia’s aggressive full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked Central Asia as a strategically important element of overall security policy, leading to the particularly active engagement of various parties in the region since 2022, including in 2024. Already in January 2022, China announced an increase in its aid – namely, that it would provide USD 500 million in aid to Central Asian countries over the next three years to implement projects important to society, and it would invite 5,000 healthcare and IT professionals to China to further their professional development.¹ Shortly thereafter, without reviewing the US Central Asia strategy, the Biden-Harris administration announced a new Economic Resilience in Central Asia Initiative in February 2022 in response to Russia’s aggressive war in Ukraine.²

These active efforts of various sides to exert their influence and develop their economic interests in Central Asia continued in 2024. In spring, the British Foreign Secretary of that time, David Cameron, made a high-level visit to Central Asia, where he signed new memorandums of understanding with several Central Asian countries. He announced additional funding to support the sovereignty of states across the region, amounting to GBP 50 million, and particularly emphasised his country’s desire to strengthen the relationship between the UK and Uzbekistan and their common goals for territorial integrity, economic growth, and educational cooperation.³ New relationships and economic investments have also begun between Central Asian and Persian Gulf countries. High-level Saudi ministers touched down in Bishkek and Astana, bringing with them the promise of large-scale infrastructure investments to be funded by the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), thus expanding its portfolio of USD 20 billion across Central Asia.⁴ In turn, the Prime Minister of Japan went to Central Asia in August 2024 and announced a new economic aid package for the development of trade routes to strengthen cooperation and provide support for the region to promote its independence from Russia. Japan also expressed its readiness to accept skilled workers from the region.⁵

In 2024, a new dynamic emerged in the relations between Central Asian countries and Russia, as at the end of the year, they resisted pressure to engage in multilateral

organisations with high Russian dominance – Kazakhstan announced in October 2024 that it would remain an observer in BRICS, while Uzbekistan stated that it would not join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).⁶

We can also observe a noticeable enhancement of bilateral relations amongst countries in the region itself. The President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, for instance, made an official visit to Tajikistan in April 2024, sending a clear signal of the improvement of mutual relations and the strengthening of political and trade cooperation.⁷ Similarly, in 2024, the Caspian Sea states held military drills for the first time without Russia's participation, thus strengthening internal military cooperation within the region.⁸

EUROPEAN UNION ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

The European Union also wants to gradually reinforce its engagement in the region. This was demonstrated, for instance, in 2002 during the high-level visit of Charles Michel, the European Council President of the time, with him describing the meeting in Astana as “a powerful symbol of our reinforced cooperation and a strong signal of the EU's commitment to this region”.⁹ However, if we wish to evaluate actions, it is worth focusing on the Global Gateway strategy announced by the European Commission in 2021.¹⁰ The Global Gateway is a sustainable, values-based and transparent strategy for the Global South, serving as an alternative to China's growing geopolitical and economic influence. It includes plans to invest more than EUR 300 billion within this strategy by allocating resources to the digital, energy and transport sectors, as well as to health, education, and research.

Proportionally, the majority of Global Gateway projects have been implemented in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Very few projects are being implemented in Central Asia. For instance, in 2023, there was one regional digital connectivity project implemented in Central Asia – that is, one climate and energy project in Kazakhstan and one in Tajikistan – as well as one regional transport project (out of a total of 87 projects). In 2024, there was one project dedicated to regional critical raw materials – the Aral Sea project in Uzbekistan (out of a total of 138 projects).

It is also crucial to remember that in the case of projects with economic impact, special attention must be paid to whether the beneficiary is the partner state itself. Thus, when evaluating the first Global Gateway projects, non-governmental organisations like Eurodad, Oxfam and Counter Balance have concluded that 25 out of 40 explored projects have benefited at least one European company, including a large company. It is argued that Global Gateway is not serving as a development cooperation tool, but

rather as a means of expanding European economic influence while increasing risks and having a negative impact on human rights and environment.¹¹

It should be noted that the regional rule-of-law initiative (the Central Asia Rule of Law Programme), which was funded by the European Union and the Council of Europe and has been implemented since 2020 by the Council of Europe in close cooperation with five Central Asian countries, ended in mid-2024 after concluding 190 different activities.¹² As a result, there are currently no extensive democratisation projects being implemented in Central Asia, with the European Union, like other parties, focusing on increasing its economic influence.

DEMOCRACY CHALLENGES

Each Central Asian country has a different situation when it comes to human rights and democracy. For instance, Kyrgyzstan, the only partial bastion of democracy in the region, has seen its democracy significantly decline since the revolution of 2020. Tajikistan has moved towards full-scale authoritarianism, despite its multi-party system, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, although there have been some new initiatives from their new presidents, are still a long way from democracy. Turkmenistan is isolated and repressive. Hopes for the new president to bring changes have not been fulfilled. Even though all five states are formally committed to democracy under their constitutions, they all are, broadly speaking, autocracies.¹³

The region faced several challenges to democracy in 2024.

New legal restrictions

When Kyrgyzstan adopted the law on “foreign representatives” to constrain its civil society at the beginning of 2024, it joined the list of countries with a predominantly repressive authoritarian regime.¹⁴ The new law requires NGOs to register as “foreign representatives”, subjecting them to stigmatising and increasingly intrusive state oversight. NGOs that fail to comply risk closure. Only a few NGOs have complied, while others have shut down or curtailed their activities to avoid the potential implications.¹⁵ In November, the President of Uzbekistan also signed the so-called “undesirable foreigners” law, imposing a five-year entry ban on foreigners “who make public statements or engage in actions that insult the honour, dignity, or history of Uzbekistan and its people”. Twenty-five international rights organisations have called on the Uzbek President to veto this law.¹⁶

Attacks on journalists, and new media laws

Kazakhstan adopted a new media law in 2024. Although experts see some of its aspects as positive changes – for instance, the shortening of deadlines for state responses to media inquiries – the law also has some weak points, such as a mandate for compulsory state registration for media.¹⁷ Foreign media and journalists are also denied accreditation “in accordance with national legislation”. This restriction was applied to more than 30 correspondents of the *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* local service; however, following a legal complaint, an agreement was reached with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan in April 2024 that ensured the accreditation of these journalists. There were also attacks on journalists in 2024. For instance, in April 2024, journalist Daniyar Adilbekov was arrested for allegedly falsely implicating a high-level government official in corruption.¹⁸

In 2023, more than 40 journalists, bloggers, and activists published an open letter to the President of Uzbekistan expressing their concerns about censorship.¹⁹ Censorship continued in 2024. On August 16, for instance, *Gazeta-uz* was forced to remove from its website an article expressing criticism of Uzbekistan for its participation in the Paris Olympic Games and calling for a more transparent and rational use of funds.²⁰

Restrictions on media and journalists that are independent and critical of the government also continued in Kyrgyzstan. Eleven current and former journalists from *Temirov Live*, known for exposing high-level corruption, were convicted in June 2024. Similarly, in July, the *Kloop* news portal was closed, in clear retaliation for its critical reporting. Nonetheless, *Kloop* continues to work on alternative platforms. In September 2024, the Ministry of Culture and Information threatened to block the *Novye Litsa* news site unless it removed an article about alleged ties between the President’s election campaign of 2021 and the late Russian mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin. Just like in Kazakhstan, a new media regulatory law was also being developed in Kyrgyzstan – a new draft version was prepared in June that was considered a government compromise with media representatives. However, as of the beginning of October 2024, the revised version had not yet been submitted to Parliament.²¹

Meanwhile, Turkmenistan released journalist Nurgeldi Halykov in June 2024 after four years in prison, where he had been held because the government found out that he had provided a photograph to a media outlet outside the country.²²

The punishment of civic activists and women's rights advocates

There have been new cases initiated against women's rights advocates in Kazakhstan. Feminist activists were denied the right to a peaceful rally on 8 March, International Women's Day, on the grounds of an alleged risk of disruptions to public order. Furthermore, prominent women's rights activist Dina Smailova, founder of an organisation assisting victims of sexual violence, faced criminal charges and is now subject to an international arrest warrant.²³

Various attacks on activists also took place in Uzbekistan in 2024, against Umida Niyazova²⁴ and Klara Sakharova,²⁵ for instance.

The repression of activists and bloggers continued in Kyrgyzstan as well, where it was based on criminal charges such as "disobedience". The musician and poet Askat Zhetigen was sentenced to three years in prison for criticising the President on *Facebook*.²⁶

Residents of Turkmenistan are even afraid to complain about injustice. For example, in September 2024, cotton farmers in the Lebap region were threatened with criminal charges if they did not hand over their harvest to a state-run factory.²⁷

Persecution of the diaspora

The Uzbek authorities are also persecuting activists in the diaspora, particularly Karakalpaks residing in Kazakhstan. For example, the well-known Karakalpak activist Akylbeq Muratov, an Uzbek citizen who has lived in Kazakhstan for over 10 years, was detained on 15 February 2024 at his home in Almaty, and Uzbekistan has requested his extradition. Similarly, an Uzbek citizen living in Prague and working for *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* was ordered to pay a fine of roughly 7,800 euros for damaging Ultimo Group's reputation by publishing a study on the company's activities in the trade of natural gas.²⁸

Turkmen activists are being forcibly returned from Turkey. For instance, in the summer of 2024, a blogger named Merdan Mukhamedov was deported from Turkey and thereafter prosecuted on serious extremist-related charges for his online criticism of the government. Similarly, Turkmenistan's authorities do not renew passports for activists abroad, thereby increasing the likelihood of their deportation.²⁹

The restricted availability of information

In 2024, the Kazakh government blocked a website aimed at informing young people about LGBTQI+ issues, justifying it on the grounds of the protection of national traditions and children's rights.³⁰

In September 2024, individual activists in Uzbekistan reported that it was impossible to access some online pages of international human rights organisations and independent news platforms from inside Uzbekistan, for instance, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and others.³¹

Civil activists in Tajikistan are particularly concerned about the *Agreement with the Russian Federation on co-operation in ensuring international information security*, which was ratified in February 2024. Activists suspect that this regulation will be used to detain and extradite people who express their opinions on the internet.

There is practically no availability of internet in Turkmenistan. A global comparative study has placed Turkmenistan alongside China, Iran, and Russia as one of the countries with the highest VPN unavailability.³²

Positive episodes

Despite the high restrictions on democracy, there were also some positive episodes in the region in 2024 – for instance, the early release of the blogger Otabek Sattoriy from prison in Uzbekistan.³³ Moreover, in June 2024, Kyrgyzstan announced an unexpected acquittal in the Kempir-Abad case, affecting at least 22 activists, bloggers and politicians who protested against the government's agreement with Uzbekistan on the issue of borders.³⁴

In April 2024, Kazakhstan experienced widespread flooding, declaring a state of emergency in most of the country and evacuating tens of thousands of people.³⁵ The mobilisation of civil society and volunteers played a very crucial role in the rescue operations. During the evacuation of tens of thousands of people, a very large role was played by volunteers, as around 50,000 residents were involved.³⁶ At the same time, regional municipalities decided to deny journalists access to the flood-affected areas, for which they were widely criticised. For instance, Raul Uporov, a journalist from Uralsk, was punished for “petty hooliganism” after criticising media restrictions on flood coverage.³⁷

LATVIA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE CENTRAL ASIA REGION

Latvia's contribution to the Central Asia region has mostly been dedicated to Uzbekistan, primarily in the areas of governance and the private sector.³⁸ LLC SunGIS has been promoting the implementation of a digital management system since 2019, sharing Latvia's experience in GIS technologies as well as implementing pilot projects regarding the digitalisation of water supply and sewage network data. From 2019 to 2022, with the support of development cooperation funding, the clean technology cluster CLEANTECH transferred Latvia's experience and modern technologies in the field of water management to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Since 2022, the Latvian national standardisation body, Latvian Standard, in collaboration with the Latvian National Metrology Centre and LLC Tilde, has provided support to the national infrastructure quality assurance institutions of Uzbekistan by strengthening its governance capabilities in the fields of standardisation and metrology and by promoting the application of digital technology solutions.

The Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development has implemented projects to improve the quality of public service delivery in the regions of Uzbekistan, while the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments carried out a project in 2023 and 2024 to enhance sustainable policy planning in the field of climate change by strengthening the quality of local self-governments, raising public awareness of the socio-economic impact of climate change, and promoting public involvement in decision-making. The Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU) shares Latvia's experience in the field of bioeconomy with higher education and state institutions in Uzbekistan, as well as representatives of the private sector, by organising an exchange programme in Latvia. The State Plant Protection Service has also provided support to enhance the capacity of the Agency of Plant Protection and Quarantine of Uzbekistan with the aim of preventing the threat of a bacterial blight in the agriculture of Uzbekistan. Funding has also been approved for cooperation in 2024 and 2025. Likewise, funding was approved for LLC Bulduri Technical University (*Bulduru tehnikums*) in 2024 and 2025 to implement the project "Improvement of biotechnology and digital skills in climate-controlled agriculture (BioDigiSkills)" in Uzbekistan; funding was also approved for the Food and Veterinary Service project "Strengthening the official control system and improving the compliance of aquaculture farms and establishments processing fishery products in the Republic of Uzbekistan according to EU standards" (for 2024).

The State Audit Office has actively engaged in and will continue to support Uzbekistan by strengthening the Agency for Public Services of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The State Audit Office is also expected to receive funding over the coming years to continue to help with capacity-building for the Supreme Audit Institutions of the EU Eastern Partnership countries (Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova) and Central Asian countries

(Uzbekistan) by establishing a transparent and efficient system of public funds control. This project is implemented jointly with the Kingdom of Sweden.

The first meeting of the newly established Development Cooperation Agency of Latvia (CFLA) was also held in 2024 regarding the project “Support for Capacity-Building for the Public Administration of Uzbekistan”. The project is supported by the German development cooperation organisation GIZ, and the main beneficiaries in Uzbekistan are the Agency for the Development of Public Service (ARGOS), the Agency for Strategic Reforms, and the Academy of Public Administration.³⁹

Despite the long-standing high and diverse risks to democracy in Central Asia, so far, only two projects by Latvian non-governmental organisations have been implemented in this region. Riga TechGirls implemented the international initiative “Female Founders Across Borders” in 2022 and 2023 to promote the engagement of Uzbek women in entrepreneurship within the technology sector. Secondly, the MARTA Centre has been working in the field of gender equality in several countries in the region since 2013. The MARTA Centre is also expected to receive public funding from Latvia for empowering women and vulnerable individuals in Uzbekistan over the coming years.

It should be noted that active cooperation has also been carried out by the Ministry of Education and Science, which has been operating in Central Asia since 2018 to ensure continuity for the EU and Central Asian education platform, to implement individual projects, and to provide Latvian national scholarships for studies and participation in international summer schools for representatives of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The State Probation Service of the Ministry of Justice is expecting to conclude a cooperation memorandum with the Probation Department of the Ministry of Justice of Kyrgyzstan by 2027.

There was a call to submit project proposals for an open competition in 2024, and only a small portion of the applications were submitted for activities in Central Asia, of which four were private sector projects in Uzbekistan, three were public administration projects, and two were university projects in Uzbekistan, as well as one NGO project in Uzbekistan and two NGO projects in Kyrgyzstan. Of those submitted, only one private sector and two public administration projects were approved to be implemented. All three were dedicated to Uzbekistan.

LATVIA'S OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia is a pivotal strategic region for many parties involved in geopolitics, which demonstrate their interest through influential cooperation policies. Mostly, however, these are policies aimed at developing infrastructure and strengthening economic interests, including in the case of the European Union. This approach, which does not set external conditions, allows Central Asian countries to reduce democratic freedoms, both by developing legislation and by actively targeting the media, journalists, and civil activists, including people who have already emigrated (diaspora). Although some initiatives by the countries in this region are positive, such as a review of regulations in cooperation with journalists and NGOs, external cooperation is the area being extensively reduced and bureaucratised. Since there are no broad mechanisms supporting the development of civil society in these countries, this essentially means a decline in the activities of NGOs and even their liquidation.

Latvia has also prioritised principles of human rights and democracy in its development cooperation, while projects implemented in Central Asia are mostly focused on private sector interests and improving governance. Essentially, only the activities carried out by the MARTA Centre can be considered related to human rights and civic activities, and therefore their continued support from the state is commendable.

Good governance projects could also positively impact democracy as a whole. However, it should be noted that more radical positive changes are mostly driven by political initiatives, and therefore, without a targeted enhancement of civil society, they are not possible. If Latvia wants to express its support for democracy, civil society, and respect for human rights not only in words but also in actions, then it must provide contributions to the projects of non-governmental organisations that have such goals.

Given the high security risks, including those posed to organisations in partner countries, it is necessary to allocate resources for projects to be implemented in Central Asia not only for the activities themselves but also for the safe administration thereof and for strengthening the capacity of organisations in both Latvia and Central Asia. This approach would objectively reduce the planned resources for project activities and may decrease their competitiveness in an open competition, as it focuses on greater impact for a lower “price” rather than aiming for actual changes. The changing of values and actions is a slow process, often without loud and visible results.

It should be noted that the focus of NGO project applications was significantly influenced by the priority set by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2024 – namely, to implement development cooperation projects specifically in Africa. Thus, for instance, Riga TechGirls, which had implemented a project in Uzbekistan in 2022 and 2023, submitted an application for activities in Egypt and will receive funding for them

instead. The use of development cooperation for diplomatic PR purposes negatively affects the implementation of real and sustainable change.

It is also true that the high risks of civil society engagement present for both Latvian organisations and their cooperation partners in Central Asia hinder the development of new projects. The new legal framework, which further restricts external cooperation, could only worsen the development of NGO projects in the future.

Taking into account the aforementioned challenges and risks, as well as Latvia's approach of largely focusing on implementing governance projects, intersectoral projects are particularly welcome, as they can, for example, demonstrate the feasibility of productive cooperation between public administration and the NGO sector through practical actions, as well as include the topics of democracy, civic development and human rights as integral parts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although Latvian projects are relatively small in scale, they can serve as striking examples of good practice in the region, giving hope to the people of Central Asia for the possibility of positive change in the development of democracy and the strengthening of human rights.

To promote the development of the activities of non-governmental organisations in Central Asia, it would be necessary:

- to constantly consult with non-governmental organisations already implementing activities in the region or wishing to start them, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs providing the biggest possible level of support;
- to involve non-governmental organisations in visits to Central Asia or host representatives from the region in Latvia, thereby demonstrating ongoing cooperation between the public administration and civil society;
- to create an open information flow about cooperation opportunities in the region by using the information available to the Development Cooperation Agency (CFLA);
- to specifically direct the available grants to non-governmental organisations for strengthening democracy and human rights, rather than providing formal support based on the legal status of organisations;
- to develop intersectoral projects while involving non-governmental organisations in the implementation of good governance and working in collaboration with organisations in partner countries;
- to review project funding to allow the submission of activities that promote actual changes by strengthening civic activities in partner countries.

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THE REPERCUSSIONS OF WAR AND ELECTIONS ON LATVIA'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

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During 2024, Latvia's foreign and security policy was confronted with two challenging global trends – war and elections. Both trends will unavoidably influence policy in 2025 and beyond.

Two wars in Europe and its vicinity dominated the agenda, namely, Russia's 10-year war against Ukraine and Israel's war against Iran's proxies – Hamas and Hezbollah.

2024 was crucial for the usual cycle of democratic (and non-democratic) elections during the course of the year, with just some of them directly implicating Latvia. November brought elections in Latvia's most important strategic partner country – the United States of America. Closer to home, there were elections in both France and the UK (as well as Lithuania), with an announcement that early elections in Germany were to be scheduled in February 2025. In the European Union, elections took place for the European Parliament and a new Commission was appointed. A new Secretary General of NATO took up office.

Latvia changed its Foreign Minister in April. Career diplomat and recent Assistant Secretary General of NATO, Baiba Braže, took over from former Prime Minister, Krišjānis Kariņš, (in office as Foreign Minister since September 2023) following his resignation.

This contribution will, firstly, examine how wars and elections guided Latvia's foreign policy during 2024, and secondly, consider what to expect and what should be done during 2025.

WAR

Russia's full-scale war of February 2022 continued to directly and significantly affect Latvia's foreign, security and defence policies in 2024. Earlier hopes for a successful Ukrainian counter – offensive dissipated as a stalemate in the fighting set in. Russia failed to make significant territorial gains. During 2024, Ukraine suffered considerable delays in receiving military equipment from both the USA and European supporters. Some of the equipment to help Ukraine defend its territory was given with “strings attached”, for example, to prevent Ukraine using missiles to attack legitimate military targets on Russian territory. Ukraine was described as being forced to fight “with one hand tied behind its back”. In spite of that, in August Ukraine made a surprise incursion into the Kursk region of Russia, territory it continued to hold as the year ended.

As Russia's war grinded on during 2024, a sense of urgency amongst supporters evolved. But it failed to turn into urgent action. “Too little, too late” became the by-word, as Russia's missile and drone attacks on civilian targets and electric power stations increased on a massive scale towards the end of the year.

Some urgency appeared at the beginning of December, as the outgoing Biden Administration scrambled to spend all military assistance funds for Ukraine approved by Congress earlier in the year. This involved some \$7.1 billion in weapons, including counter-drone systems and munitions for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS)¹. Additional anti-personnel mines and consent to fire long range missiles from the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACAMS) were also given soon after the US election results in November.

Seeking a role within the group of 57 countries offering military support for Ukraine, known as the Ramstein Group, in February 2024 Latvia decided to form and co-lead with the UK the “Drone Coalition”. Seventeen countries participate. The aim is to provide a speedy, large and diverse supply of drones to Ukraine while developing a robust domestic industry revolving around the needs of Ukraine. Within the coalition, Latvia alone estimated providing some 4,000 drones to Ukraine by the end of the year.

The war against Ukraine also witnessed a consolidation amongst the “quartet of chaos” countries aligned with Russia – China, Iran and North Korea. China was identified as increasingly being involved in supporting Russia’s war efforts by exporting to Russia “goods that fill critical gaps in Russia’s military industrial base”². Iran supplied weapons and North Korean soldiers were deployed to fight in Europe against Ukraine. The quartet’s mutuality of interests lies in disrupting if not destroying the rule-based international order. Together they also present a threat to Latvia. The extent to which the quartet will stay in tune and play from one sheet of music remains to be seen. Two of them, Russia and Iran, received a humiliating setback in early December when the regime of fellow authoritarian leader Bashar al-Assad in Syria that they had supported, was toppled with a lightening attack by rebel forces within the country. The thirteen-year civil war was over within two weeks. This was a clear blow to Russia’s global influence and as the year drew to a close, it was unclear whether Russia’s strategic naval base in the Mediterranean and the supporting air bases would remain on Syrian territory.

Despite Latvia’s reliance on the rule of law and international norms including those of the UN, Latvia pursued a more nuanced approach to the other war in Europe’s vicinity. Israel’s right to defend itself, strong condemnation of the murderous attacks of 7th October 2023 and the ongoing holding of hostages by Hamas were policies that remained unbending. However, criticism of the proportionality of Israel’s actions in the Gaza Strip and the excessive number of deaths of the civilian population remained muted. There was a divided response amongst EU countries and also with the USA. The UN General Assembly resolution of 17th September 2024 concerning Israel which demanded an end to Israel’s unlawful presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory saw Latvia voting in favour of adopting the resolution, a position not taken by all other EU member countries³.

ELECTIONS

United States of America

The global responses towards Donald Trump’s re-election to the White House after a four-year absence appeared rapidly after the election results became known on 6th November. Amongst the first congratulatory telephone calls that he took was from President Macron of France. As a result, President-elect Trump took his first trip abroad to Paris on 7th December to join some 50 other Heads of State and Government for the re-opening of the restored Cathedral of Notre-Dame. Amongst world leaders that Trump received in Florida during November 2024 was NATO Secretary General,

Mark Rutte. Similar to Macron, Rutte as Prime Minister of the Netherlands had experience of dealing with Trump during his first Presidency. Likewise, in his capacity of Foreign Minister, Latvia's President Edgars Rinkēvičs has first-hand experience of dealing with a Trump Administration and hence their telephone call, tweeted by President Rinkēvičs on social media "X" on 19th November, shows that Latvia's leadership also wasted no time in making direct contact with the President elect⁴. The same report also refers to Lithuania's President having a telephone call with President Trump that same week. Due to scheduling issues, President Rinkēvičs failed to join the Baltic Presidents and many others in Paris on 7th December and therefore missed an opportunity to meet President elect Trump, his French host President Macron and Ukraine's President.

Political activities in various European formats following the US elections also intensified during November 2024, with an underlying theme that Europe needs to do more for its own defence and security and in support for Ukraine.

As well as contacting President – elect Trump on 6th November, France's President Macron also telephoned German Chancellor Scholz and arranged for their two Defence Ministers to meet that same evening in Paris. This was followed up by an expanded meeting of Defence Ministers from Europe's major military powers (France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and Poland and dubbed the "E5" by UK Defence Secretary Healey) in Berlin on 25th November⁵, with the Foreign Ministers of the same countries convening in Warsaw a few days earlier⁶ (19th November). The Foreign Ministers met again on 12th December in Berlin in an expanded coordination format (with Spain and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy as well as Ukraine's Foreign Minister joining) and adopted another statement.⁷ Nordic-Baltic Heads of State and Government met in Sweden, issuing a statement on 27th November⁸. They included the Polish Prime Minister in the meeting and had President Macron linked in through a telephone call. From Latvia's regional perspective, Poland's presence at the decision-shaping table is of particular importance. It was further boosted by Macron's bilateral visit to Warsaw on 12th December.

United Kingdom

Labour won a convincing majority in General Elections in the United Kingdom in July, thereby bringing 14 years of Conservative-led rule to an end. Strong support for Ukraine was maintained by the new Government. Given that Brexit came about during the Conservative period in power, the Labour Government began to prioritise more positive relations with the EU, in particular in defence and security policy where a "UK-EU Defence Pact" is envisaged to allow UK participation in military and civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions.⁹ UK engagement in Europe's

defence and security remains crucial from a Latvian perspective given their leadership of both the regional Joint Expeditionary Force as well as the NATO brigade level presence in Estonia, not to mention their role as a nuclear power within the NATO Alliance.

France

The other European nuclear power, France, held snap elections to the National Assembly called by President Macron in June. This resulted in a three-way split between the left wing New Popular Front alliance, Macron's centrist alliance and the far-right National Rally. A right of centre Government led by veteran politician Michel Barnier was voted into office in September, but lasted only until 4th December. Mr. Barnier became the shortest serving Prime Minister in the history of France. On 13th December he was replaced by Francois Bayrou, another veteran politician, this time from the centre of the political spectrum. Calls for President Macron to resign early from his 2027 term will likely continue to be ignored. France is a Presidential Republic. President Macron's global role may well not be diminished, as shown by his convening of so many world leaders in Paris on 7th December, but political uncertainty and chaos in France was caused by the 2024 legislative elections.

Germany

Europe's other leading power, Germany, also announced early legislative elections for 23rd February 2025 following the break-up of the coalition led by Chancellor Scholz in November and a vote of no-confidence being passed on 16th December.

European Parliament

The results of elections to the European Parliament saw a swing to the right and populist groupings. President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen succeeded in obtaining a second term with all her fellow Commissioners being confirmed by a vote in Parliament on 27th November. The Commission took up its duties on 1st December, which despite being a Sunday, saw the immediate visit to Kijiv that same day of the new President of the European Council Antonio Costa together with the Commission's new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas. The influence of Baltic politicians in the new Commission received a particular boost. Alongside Estonia's Kaja Kallas, Lithuanian Andrius Kubilius became the first Commissioner with sole responsibility for Defence and Space, whilst Valdis Dombrovskis took up his third

term as Latvia's Commissioner, this time with a portfolio dealing with the Economy and Productivity, Implementation and Simplification¹⁰. These high-level portfolios within the EU were a reflection of Latvian and other Baltic politicians being able to continue to punch above their weight during 2024. Latvia also held on to the Secretary- General position of the EU Commission, with Ilze Juhansone being once again selected as President von der Leyen's top official for a second term.

Russia, Moldova, Romania, Georgia

There were no surprises from the non- democratic elections in Russia in March 2024 with President Putin extending his term in power until 2030. Russia's interference in other elections in surrounding countries during the rest of the year remained active. Moldova, Romania and Georgia were all implicated, causing internal disruptions and endeavours to influence Euro -Atlantic integration in all three countries. The main focus of Latvia's foreign policy concerns was on Georgia, when a statement was adopted during Parliament's 2025 budget discussions on 5th December. It expressed support for Georgians' choice of Euro-Atlantic integration, criticised the conduct of recent elections and supported sanctioning Georgian officials responsible for violence against demonstrators¹¹.

EXPECTATIONS AND POLICIES FOR 2025

There is one word that will dominate the foreign and security policy of Latvia (and many other countries) during 2025 – unpredictability. This is based on the “20th January” effect, when newly elected President Donald Trump will take up office.

As indicated, the pre- 20th January period during 2024 already witnessed actions taken in anticipation of Trump 2.0.

Despite wanting to settle Russia's war against Ukraine in 24 hours, it remains unclear what President Trump would do to get agreement on the Russian side. Details of Trump's actions remain obscure. Whilst there is a risk that financial and other support will be stopped, there have equally been indications that if Russia fails to come to the negotiating table, US military support to Ukraine could actually be quickly bolstered.

Ukraine will remain as Latvia's top foreign and security policy priority in 2025. Latvia will continue to be actively engaged in the Drone Coalition in support of Ukraine by encouraging the supply of drones to Ukraine and engagement with Ukraine's drone

manufacturing industry. Latvia is likely to host a “Drone Summit” in May 2025. An amount of 0,25% of GDP will be maintained for military support to Ukraine. In parallel, there will be a focus on building up Latvia’s own defence capabilities through a defence budget of around 3,5% of GDP, with an ongoing engagement with, and encouragement of, Latvia’s developing defence industry.

Latvia will be guided by Ukraine about any prospective end to Russia’s war, but will also follow closely how the new Trump Administration will deal with this question. It may be that Ukraine itself will come to accept “the least bad deal” as expressed in the lead article and front page of the Economist on November 20th 2024.¹²

NATO could well be bruised by President Trump during 2025, but the Alliance will not disappear. The risk will be of the organisation being by-passed. Whatever the case, the need for European countries within the Alliance to spend more on defence and focus on crucial capabilities will be clear. The challenge to keep a strong Transatlantic link, primarily with the USA, will be prevalent. Canada’s Transatlantic engagement in Europe will continue to remain strong through their enlarging military presence and leading role in NATO’s Multinational Brigade Latvia.

The combination of having a new Commissioner for Defence and Space, an Estonian High Representative together with the start of the Polish Presidency of the EU on 1st January will mean that Ukraine and regional security will be high on the EU agenda at the beginning of 2025.

The focus on Europeans doing more for their own defence and security is likely to be sustained during 2025. This will serve to counterbalance the unpredictability and potential chaos that is likely to emanate from Washington. Doubts will prevail about the success of Europe’s endeavours.

During 2025, Washington is likely to continue to focus more on China than on Europe. This is not a new phenomenon – during the Obama Administration there was a declared “pivot to Asia” as well as an attempt to “re-set” relations with Russia. China as a global competitor to the US lead role, will remain the main priority, with consequences for Latvia and the rest of Europe. President Trump is also likely to once again show ongoing US support for Israel and deal more aggressively towards a weakened Iran.

Concerning the Middle East, Latvia will contribute to security in the region by increasing participation in the UNIFIL peace-keeping operation in Southern Lebanon. Three Latvian soldiers participated during 2024; this number will be increased to around thirty during the first months of 2025.

More active engagement in United Nations operations during the last few years has of course been tied to Latvia's campaign to gain a seat as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council during the 2026 – 2027 term. Voting will take place in mid-2025, when the efficacy of the Foreign Ministry's active campaigning over the last few years will be decided. This has been an important foreign policy priority, given that it is the first attempt by Latvia to seek some influence in this global organisation.

There are a number of approaches that Latvia should take based on the ongoing existential threat posed by Russia, which in turn is tied to Ukraine's fate and the need for Europe to provide more for its own security.

Russia is deterred by strength but emboldened by weakness. The strength of Russia need not be overestimated. At the same time, at the Summit in Washington in July, NATO acknowledged that it "cannot discount the possibility of an attack against Allies' sovereignty and territorial integrity".¹³ On this basis, NATO must strengthen its resilience and put instruments and policies in place to constrain, contest and counter threats posed by Russia. Given that Russia poses the greatest and most imminent threat to the whole of NATO, it is incumbent on Latvia to ensure that front-line member countries should not be the only ones to shoulder the burden of confronting the threat.

Latvia should continue to play a lead role in advocating support for Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO and the EU. Close attention will need to be paid to policies being taken by leading NATO countries towards Ukraine, primarily the United States. Coordination with the main European allies (United Kingdom, France, Poland, Germany, the Nordic-Baltic group) will remain imperative. If Russia's war is halted through a peace agreement involving NATO troops being deployed, Latvia should waste no time in expressing readiness to contribute.

Latvia should ensure that sustainability and consistency of effort in supporting Ukraine militarily, financially and practically is maintained amongst Ukraine's allies. This will be the first line of defence against Russia and an indication that the long-term security of Ukraine will remain paramount.

Latvia will need to engage actively with European allies to encourage them to take on more strategic responsibility for European defence. Keeping track of the different European formats where Latvia is not directly involved (see above "Elections – United States") will be crucial. Particular attention needs to be paid to Poland as an emerging European strategic player. The role of the UK led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) should be strengthened, whilst ensuring that any such regional formats are developed in a transparent and mutually compatible way that does not challenge the cohesion of the Alliance. Support for the UK's endeavours to engage more closely with the EU in defence and security should also be encouraged.

Apart from Poland and the UK, Latvia also needs to keep tightly engaged with France and Germany. France should be made aware that President Macron's leadership in European defence and security issues remains indispensable, irrespective of the domestic political challenges that he faces. Encouragement for Germany's leading role in the region through the military presence in Lithuania and other activities should be quickly continued after elections in Germany.

The inauguration of an unpredictable and transactional President Trump on 20th January will set the tone for global developments during 2025. Combined with an undiminishing threat from Russia and a Europe slow to take on more responsibility for itself, Latvia's foreign policy will need to be active and alert in 2025.

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A FEW QUESTIONS ON A NEW WORLD SECURITY ORDER FOR THIS YEAR

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Russia's war against Ukraine is changing the international security system. This is reflected in official security documents, the media, and the speeches of prime ministers and chancellors. The president of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy has put forward a peace plan, and incoming new American President Donald Trump has pronounced that the war must stop and that he will cut military aid to Ukraine if it does not agree to peace talks. It is not clear what he will do if Russia refuses.

The question that arises is what would the peace talks bring about? How will they impact the international security system as we know it? Will the result favour Russia and her allies, China, North Korea, and Iran? This will happen if in a peace agreement Russia is left with huge parts of Ukraine under its control. Frozen conflicts engineered by Russia in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 demonstrate that Russia can gain, not lose, from them. Has the magnitude of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and the West's robust response changed the attitude of the West enough that it will not allow another frozen conflict to enhance Russia's bid to "become great again", as declared by Putin in somewhat different language?

China has an interest in Russia's success. Such success could set a precedent for China's own territorial expansion towards Taiwan and hasten a multipolar international system with itself as the leading power. Can the West rebuild its own arms industry and armed forces to match Russia's growing military strength despite heavy losses in Ukraine? Russia now has a war economy, which the West does not have. Recently the British defence ministry has warned that in a war their army would be destroyed within a few months. There are not enough reserves for a war of attrition with Russia.

Still, Russia's war against Ukraine has consolidated all EU countries except two, Hungary and Slovakia, but even these countries are careful in not provoking Brussels too much. The rearmament of Europe has begun, relations with Great Britain are being mended, including in the military sphere, and the EU now has an ambitious Defence Commissioner. France's call for an autonomous European defence, long disregarded, is now morphing into a robust European defence pillar in NATO. Even the development of nuclear weapons in Germany, however timid, has made its way into the German debate.

Differences between Europe and America with regards to how to deal with a rising China are not that big. Ukraine and Taiwan are understood to be interconnected. Nevertheless, for Europe, seeing that the American security guaranty is decided by election cycles has sent tremors through security establishments. Military aid to Ukraine was blocked by Congress for many months. Yet there are many in the US that still remember that when Article 5 was invoked by Sir George Robertson, the then Secretary-General of NATO, Washington initially did not welcome it. The hard facts in Afghanistan proved that America sorely needed NATO and America quickly embraced Article 5. Europeans fought and died in Afghanistan alongside with Americans.

It is therefore unlikely that the Trump administration will pull America out of NATO, especially now, when many European states are not only spending 2% on defence but even over 3%. Germany, with the largest economy, will be the major military power in Europe when it reaches 2% of its GDP in a few years' time. But will this be enough for Ukraine's, and thereby Europe's, security? It will not be enough to meet Russia's threat if in a frozen conflict a strategy is not drawn up to regain Russian occupied Ukrainian territory.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

The “Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2025” has provided recognised and competent researchers and experts in Latvia with an opportunity to share their opinions on the events of 2024 and offer their recommendations for 2025. While filled with hope, the international security environment of 2024 was nonetheless also full of challenges and growing complications, marked by conditions of geopolitical tension for Latvia and its allies. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, Baiba Braže, acknowledges that despite turbulent times, Latvian policy and foreign policy decision-makers have actively worked to strengthen Latvia’s security and defence capabilities by respecting and promoting the international order, have promoted economic development by increasing prosperity, and have defended the interests of Latvian citizens by promoting public involvement in foreign policy processes and engaging the diaspora. She equally appreciates and recognises the essential contributions that experts, researchers and faculty members bring to international politics, and she calls on Latvian society to engage intellectually and enhance Latvia’s position, as the future of Latvia is the responsibility of each of us.

Since the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, Latvia has also taken upon itself the responsibility to provide all kinds of support to Ukraine on its path to victory. This also holds true this year, as confirmed by Ināra Mūrniece in her article. At the same time, she adds that Ukraine needs more than is currently being provided. She argues that 2024 can be called a time of incompletely used opportunities on the part of NATO Allies, while citing the words of former NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg: “[...] we should have provided Ukraine with much more military support much earlier [...] we all have to admit, we should have given them more weapons pre-invasion [...]”. This has now potentially led to a war of attrition, demonstrating not only the differences between Russian and Ukrainian military capabilities and human resources, but also the way NATO Allies view the future, which includes various

scenarios for ending Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. In conclusion, Mūrniece emphasises that everyone's goal is to end the war, but the decision to end the war started by Russia can only be made with the final say from Ukraine, and Latvia will continue to support Ukraine on its path to victory.

Edmunds Cepuritis acknowledges that following the severe shock experienced by the international environment as a result of Russia's imperialist political interests, the global agenda is becoming increasingly challenging – we currently live in a world of myriad interrelated crises, which outline the difficulties Latvia will continue to face in 2025. He emphasises that in order to address these various crises, firstly, there will be an ever-increasing need for cooperation and jointly developed clear answers. Secondly, technology development not only expands the scope of public awareness but also increases ability to become a weapon to be used as a threat to democracy, which may further contribute to creating additional threats in 2025. And thirdly, an ever-expanding range of actors will seek to make more active efforts to question the rules-based world order. In conclusion, Edmunds Cepuritis argues that by being able to avoid a simple “floating down the stream” approach and creating, defending and explaining a bold vision, it is possible to protect our vital values and provide answers to the great challenges we are bound to face in the future.

The main vision of countries in a dangerous world is aimed at strengthening national security, and in saying this, Dr. Toms Rostoks emphasises through his article that although Latvia has taken firm steps in strengthening its national security, a fundamental component of sustainable security for Latvia is the fact that it depends on (and will continue to depend on) the help of its allies. He unfortunately concludes that although security from the Russian threat is the Latvian foreign policy priority of 2025, the ambitions of NATO Allies in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war are much lower than Latvia's, with Western countries still fearful of the military measures that would have to be taken if there was a need for a proper response following a conflict escalation by Russia. At the same time, he also underlines that, ironically, fear of escalation can lead to escalation. On the bright side, he points out that there were already 23 NATO member states to reach the recommended defence expenditure level in 2024, which means allocating more than 2% of their GDP for defence. Therefore, while looking forward to 2025 and outlining various scenarios for the future course of the war, the expert estimates that the course of the war will not change significantly in the next year. However, he also argues that it would be a mistake to believe that the next year will be similar to the previous one, as it is characteristic of a war of attrition to go through rather rapid changes after a long period of relative stability, which, in turn, implies that Latvia must be prepared to face a range of potential scenarios.

To continue analysing the topic of security, Mārtiņš Vargulis begins his article with a quote from the President of Latvia, Edgars Rinkēvičs, arguing that “safety is not a result, safety is a process”. While the tone of international relations in 2024 continued to be defined by Russian aggression in Ukraine, Latvia’s security was also affected by several other interrelated events: the US presidential election, developments in the Middle East, Chinese activities, internal EU challenges, and domestic political turbulence among its European allies, leading Mārtiņš Vargulis to describe the year 2024 as “the year of continued unpredictability”. The author emphasises that in order to improve its national security process, Latvia should focus on strengthening the defence of the Baltic region by implementing a “deterrence by denial” strategy that would ensure its ability to respond to threats. Latvia should ensure its international participation within NATO cohesion and reform processes, continue to position NATO’s eastern flank security considerations to its Allies, especially the US, Canada, Germany, France and Great Britain, and take an active role in the EU common security and defence policy by developing military mobility and technological capabilities. Mārtiņš Vargulis emphasises that time is still the centre of gravity for the Baltic States, and, although we have taken significant steps in promoting our security and defence, the issue of response capabilities following an attack on the Baltic States remains relevant.

As we move from military security to economic safety, it is essential to highlight that while NATO and its Allies are the main guarantors of Latvia’s security, the European Union is our main ally in shaping economic and social policy. Therefore, also in 2024 – despite internal political disagreements among EU member states, the European Parliament elections and the launch of the new European Commission – Latvia confirmed its unwavering commitment to the values and future vision of the European Union as it takes its seat on the new EU ride until the next EU parliamentary elections in 2029. One of the most crucial tasks is to plan EU multiannual budgets, and the article by Jānis Bērziņš stresses that the draft EU multiannual budget for the period after 2027 will be proposed as early as in 2025. The EU budget is planned to be transformed from a programme-based budget to a policy-based budget, with the aim to create a simpler budget, one with fewer programmes and a plan for each country, linking key reforms with investment and focusing on joint priorities, including the promotion of economic, social and territorial cohesion. While emphasising the future perspective, the author of the article expects negotiations on the EU budget for the period following 2027 to contain significantly smaller funding for the Latvian economy, unless the EU budget is significantly increased or new additional tools are created. As a result, Jānis Bērziņš recommends putting forward one priority interest, instead of more, during the upcoming negotiations. He argues that given the challenges Latvia will face in adapting to climate change and the costs of achieving climate goals, as well as the costs of completing the Rail Baltica railway project, it is necessary to practice a restrained approach towards stating its interests and obtaining benefits.

Continuing on the topic of the European Union, Aleksandra Palkova and Marts Ivaskis notably underline Latvia's achievements in 2024 while also pointing to the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the "big bang" enlargement in 2004. The authors of the article highlight important points within the framework of 2024, where Latvia has proven its position as a strong EU member state, and they indicate points where Latvian policy perspective has changed in 2024. Firstly, by demonstrating a comprehensive approach towards security, Latvia balances its contribution to EU defence formats with innovative cybersecurity strategies, thus strengthening its role as an essential participant in ensuring regional stability, as addressing cyber threats has become a cornerstone of Latvia's security strategy. Secondly, Latvia has provided unwavering support to Ukraine. And, according to estimates, Latvia's total support to Ukraine in 2024 will exceed EUR 200 million. As we look to the next year, the provision of military assistance in the amount of 0.25% of GDP, exceeding EUR 100 million annually, will continue to maintain its priority status. Thirdly, as the EU enlargement policy has gained new vitality, Latvia, which has historically been a relatively passive voice with regard to enlargement, frequently choosing to follow the voices of other EU member states, has now become an active supporter of enlargement, especially with regard to the so-called Eastern Trio of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. In conclusion, the authors indicate the new priorities of the European Commission and provide their recommendations for Latvia. This list of recommendations emphasises that, for the purpose of overall security, Latvia should increase its involvement in PESCO projects, take advantage of the benefits of the European Defence Industry Programme, continue advocating for higher defence budgets within the EU, and foster greater cooperation between NATO and the EU, as well as encourage cooperation between its own defence companies and their EU counterparts.

As the word "security" permeates all the articles in the Yearbook 2025, Anna Eliza Lazdiņa highlights the essential role of women in international politics and how vulnerable this role still is as far as the security domain is concerned. She argues that there is a link between international security and gender equality. Within this context, 2025 will mark 25 years since the adoption of the Resolution 1325, which addresses the disproportionate and violent impact of armed conflicts on women and their security. Notably, the WPS (Women, Peace and Security) Index developed within this Resolution ranks Latvia as the 20th among 177 countries, reflecting strong performance in areas such as "absence of legal discrimination against women" and "women's financial inclusion". Yet, the author also indicates that Latvian policymakers and society must still continue to work on problems related to the high maternal mortality rate, the gender pay gap, and the low proportion of women in the parliament. In conclusion and looking ahead, Anna Eliza Lazdiņa argues that Latvia's "Women, Peace and Security" (WPS) policy priorities should focus on three main

areas: strengthening domestic implementation of the WPS agenda through dedicated resources and continued awareness-raising; expanding practical assistance to Ukraine while sharing lessons learned with the international community, as well as expanding the possible network of cooperation on WPS, taking into account the current state of women's rights globally; and continuing to advocate for concrete measures addressing the prevention of violence and the promotion of women's meaningful participation, including if Latvia is elected to the UN Security Council. Success in these areas would reinforce Latvia's position as a committed actor in advancing global peace and security through gender equality.

As we return to EU policy, Dr. Inna Šteinbuka provides an expert opinion on challenges regarding the competitiveness of both Latvia and the EU as a whole, stating that competitiveness is one of the key priorities of economic policy in the context of the last decade and that its improvement presents a complicated task for the entire EU, especially the "new" member states. Her article references the famous report of the former President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, where he outlined his personal vision on the future of European competitiveness. Mario Draghi points to changes in three key areas – trade, energy and defence – which stimulated growth in Europe after the end of the Cold War. By highlighting three main areas for action, this report recommends that Europe carefully refocus its economic policies on closing the innovation gap with the US and China, especially in advanced technologies. Secondly, it is necessary to synchronise plans for decarbonisation and competitiveness, and thirdly, Europe must achieve increased security and reduced dependency. Latvia is still falling behind in its task of increasing competitiveness and productivity, and the author of the article argues that it is impossible to promote competitiveness without investments and innovations, without further digitalisation, and without implementing a smart industrial policy that is synchronised with the Green Deal action policy. In order to improve Latvia's progress in the field of innovations, the largest private companies and state-owned companies must engage in more active R&D funding. The resources and knowledge at the disposal of large companies allow for significant investments that could substantially accelerate innovations. The government of Latvia must look for the most effective ways to encourage private investment.

And now, it is time to move from conceptual assessments of Latvia's foreign and security policy to travel the world, and Elizabete Elīna Vizgunova-Vikmane and Rebeka Zvirbule take us on a journey to nearby Ukraine, providing their insights and recommendations on Latvian-Ukrainian bilateral relations. Latvia's relations with Ukraine were strengthened in 2024. In terms of economic cooperation, trade between the two countries experienced a decline, but Ukrainian direct investments in Latvia increased. Latvia's support remained strong, and according to the signed agreement between the two countries, Latvia intends to invest the aforementioned 0.25% of GDP

in military and other assistance to Ukraine until 2026. Latvia continued to support the Ukrainian diaspora and war refugees in Latvia and to closely cooperate with Ukraine to convey the message of Ukraine's interests internationally. The authors of the article emphasise that looking towards 2025 scenarios, we must take into account two critical factors, namely, the new administration of Donald Trump in the US and the ability of the European countries and the new European Commission to successfully absorb the changes brought by the new US policies and translate them into a constructive, pragmatic foreign policy. The recommendations for 2025 stress the need to continue to support Ukraine's Europeanisation, to continue to raise international awareness regarding Russia's criminal policy, to further strengthen the joint agency of the Baltic and other international formats within international frameworks, and finally, to further polish the plan for the worst-case scenario: non-recognition policies, migration flows and rising international tensions.

While still navigating in nearby waters, we have reached Belarus, our second aggressor-neighbour. Here, Beāte Livdanska argues that as we look at this country's possible future scenario, we should do so without excessive hopes and with great caution. The author stresses that in the context of 2024, Latvia has accepted a clear political reality: Belarus is co-responsible for Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Thus, active steps have been taken to apply sanctions, and the eighth package of sanctions against Belarus has already been approved. Moreover, Latvia has adopted several national laws to restrict the presence of Belarusian citizens within its borders. Presidential elections are expected in early 2025 – however, Beāte Livdanska admits that given the current political climate in Belarus, namely the scale of repressions against civilians, we are unlikely to see mass protests on a par with those that followed the 2020 presidential elections. As Belarus has become an inseparable part of Russia's war against Ukraine, Latvia's consecutive decisions to consistently strengthen its internal and external security dimensions are commendable and should be continued in an effort to avoid the ongoing threats of hybrid attacks on its eastern border. In the list of recommendations, the author also emphasises that Latvia must continue to support Belarusian civil society and the pro-democratic Belarusian opposition to help maintain hope for the country's future direction towards democratisation.

While continuing our journey, we have come to another region full of challenges and complications – the Middle East, with Sintija Broka outlining Latvia's foreign policy amid its turmoil. The past two years have been transformative for the Middle East, marked by pivotal events that have reshaped its geopolitical landscape. The October 2023 attacks and their aftermath set the stage for escalating conflicts in 2024, including the prolonged Gaza War, which inflicted substantial economic, military, and humanitarian costs. Iran's direct attacks on Israel, coupled with Israeli retaliations targeting Iranian military assets and Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon,

heightened fears of a broader regional war. By the end of 2024, the collapse of Syria's Assad regime further shifted the region's dynamics, ushering in a period of uncertainty and transition. The author of the article acknowledges that during these developments, Latvia has had to navigate the complexities of international diplomacy. While the Middle East is not a primary focus of Latvia's foreign policy, it remains vigilant about the spillover effects of instability in the region. As a small state in a geopolitically sensitive area, Latvia is particularly concerned about the implications of Iran-Russia cooperation on European security and the diversion of US resources from Ukraine to Middle Eastern conflicts. As the regional landscape continues to evolve, Latvia's adaptability and principled stance will remain key to its role on the international stage. Therefore, the author's recommendations are as follows: reassessing cooperation with Israeli representatives; fostering EU multilateral discussions and encouraging the consideration of potential sanctions against Israel; advancing the two-state solution; and recognising the state of Palestine, which is essential to achieving progress towards implementing a two-state solution. In conclusion, Latvia's approach to the Middle East, particularly in the context of the Gaza War, has demonstrated a pragmatic balance between alignment with its Western allies and an independent commitment to international norms.

And now, as we have said our farewell to our neighbours and the Middle East, we have reached the shores of the Global South, with Sergejs Potapkins describing the region's dual role in global politics. Although there is no direct geographical definition of the Global South, the author of the article emphasises that according to a simplified approach of defining the distinction between the Global North and Global South based on national GDP per capita, the Global South represents 85% of the world's population. It is also worth mentioning the divide between the two hemispheres, and the author of the article points out that the current geopolitical situation only expands the scope of the global South, as well as deepens the divide between developed and developing countries. While assessing Latvia's connection with the Global South, Sergejs Potapkins emphasises that the UN General Assembly will vote on Latvia's candidacy as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in June 2025. To be elected, Latvia must be supported by at least two-thirds of UN member states. Sentiment surveys in Global South countries show that these countries are ready to actively support reform of the UN Security Council – there is widespread support for its expansion. The close positions on increasing the role of small countries in the UN Security Council provide an opportunity for Latvia to secure votes from the Global South in support of its membership in the Security Council for the period of 2026–2027. Given that Latvia has a unique tool for building relationships with countries of the Global South, the author recommends not to fear challenges and, instead, to take risks and build relations with the Global South. He also argues that Latvia's history can serve here as one of the starting points, as it provides an opportunity

to talk to post-colonial countries in a language that is close to them and therefore understandable.

And now, we have come to China, a country that can also be considered as a part of the Global South, and one which is playing an increasingly challenging and uncertain game within international politics. The author of the article, Dr. Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, continues the theme of the Global South, by replacing this term with “G77” and provides a review and recommendations on how Latvia can win over G77 countries – not just for Latvia’s UN Security Council non-permanent seat bid, but also for the geopolitics of the EU at large. She centres her article on the assessment of three waves of Latvian foreign policy expansion that have determined the path of Latvia-China relations, beginning with Latvia’s path of regaining independence and joining the EU and NATO. She notes that in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, Latvia was forced to implement a regime of harsh austerity measures. The second wave included the consequences of the crisis and the respective desire to promote economic cooperation with China, but it had to face a deterioration of international relations, the growth of the US-China rivalry, and associated issues. Finally, the third wave reflects the current situation, where Latvia is seeking to obtain a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council, which has been one of the central long-term foreign policy goals of Latvia since 2011. The author of the article argues that although the international order is currently completely different and plagued with various crises, Latvia has the tools to help Europe build cooperation with the Global South. It can push back against the anti-Western narratives distributed by China and Russia, explaining the fight of Ukraine from the perspective of a shared neighbourhood trauma caused by Russian imperialism and creating people-to-people links indispensable for the EU’s future. At the same time, Latvia can raise its national profile and increase its chances for the coveted non-permanent UN Security Council seat if it avoids a certain widespread trap: mentioning Trinidad and Tobago, or Gambia, as Latvian colonies. Instead, it should find common language and talk about its history under the occupation of the Soviet Union. In conclusion, the author underlines that after three waves of expansion, Latvian foreign policy outreach today covers all of the UN and more. It is now time for it to go full circle and to connect Latvian transatlantic interests in pursuit of its unique “power of discourse” among the G77.

We will now take a pause from our journey around the world and focus on the banking sector for a minute, as Justīne Elferte provides her expert opinion and recommendations regarding Latvian leadership in the financial integrity movement. The author of the article argues that the year 2024 marked the climax of a long Latvian journey in contemporary international public diplomacy and security policy tied to reining in its historically non-resident-oriented banking sector and the national anti-money laundering (AML) and sanctions enforcement

system. She points out that there are two events that exemplify its unique status. First, Latvia volunteered to participate in the 6th round of MONEYVAL mutual evaluations. The evaluation will take approximately two years, with the results being expected by the end of 2025. Second, the US Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) withdrew the finding of proposed rulemaking against the infamous ABLV bank, which was linked to significant Russian money-laundering activity. As financial integrity increasingly becomes a subject of Allied defence policy, both of these events are timely positive signals of not only a remedying of Latvia's historically impaired reputation as a Russian financial transit centre but also an exemplification of Latvia's leadership role in the financial integrity domain. These two events come as the climax to a dense Latvian history of grappling with its envisioned role as a financial centre that is the "bridge" between the East and the West. It is crucial to remember that to increase the probability of successful years in the future, Latvia, as emphasised by Justine Elferte, must ensure that there is no backsliding after receiving its evaluation in 2025, especially with new assets like crypto, where jurisdictions are competing for business. Secondly, Latvia must ensure that financial integrity policy becomes a European Union level security priority. Currently, Latvia has been working to implement best practices and policy recommendations from FATF, the Egmont Group, MONEYVAL, and other institutions. However, with the completion of the ongoing evaluation round, Latvia must take a leadership role in developing financial integrity policy internationally. Thirdly and finally, Latvia needs to take a stronger stance against any European Union member states that are warming to Russia.

We're back on the road, and this time Inese Vaivare provides her expert opinion on democracy in Central Asia and Latvia's opportunities and contributions in the context of this region. She argues that moving towards its candidacy for the UN Security Council, Latvia significantly expanded its development cooperation regions in 2024, as it implemented new activities in countries in Africa and Oceania. At the same time, she also emphasises that Latvia has contributed to the development of Central Asia since the beginning of development cooperation – projects have been carried out by the private sector, public administration, municipalities, and non-governmental organisations. Unfortunately, in the context of 2024, the pivotal role of Central Asia in the overall security policy framework has driven different actors to seek to influence its countries and thus also challenge the potential for the development of democracy, even in those countries where positive development has previously been observed. Given that the European Union has cut down its targeted investments in human rights and values, while the repressions against civil society and journalists have continued and legal restrictions on non-governmental organisations have also grown, there comes the need to also examine the added value of Latvia's contribution to the democratic development of this region. The author of

the article indicates that the proximity of Central Asia to Russia has significantly affected the countries of this region regarding the stability of their democratic systems, and in terms of their economies, and in their ability to be absolutely independent. Despite these factors, Inese Vaivare suggests that although Latvian projects are relatively small in scale, they can serve as striking examples of good practice in the region, giving hope to the people of Central Asia for the possibility of positive change in the development of democracy and the strengthening of human rights. Therefore, she recommends enhanced and targeted cooperation with non-governmental organisations within Central Asia.

We conclude the “Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2025” with a final trip through the countries that held elections in 2024. Here, our guide will be Imants Lieģis. He argues that during 2024, Latvia’s foreign and security policy was confronted with two challenging global trends – war and elections. Both trends will unavoidably influence policy in 2025 and beyond. Elections in the US, UK, France, parts of Germany, Russia, Moldova, Romania, Georgia, the European Parliament and, finally, the change of NATO Secretary-General have considerably shaken the international order. It is not necessarily bad, but the author of the article suggests that there is one word that will dominate the foreign and security policy of Latvia (and many other countries) during 2025, and this word is “unpredictability”. While Imants Lieģis provides an overview of the changes in many countries after their elections, he also outlines some specific recommendations for 2025, emphasising that Latvia should continue to play a leading role in advocating support for Ukraine’s aspirations to join NATO and the EU. Secondly, Latvia should also pay close attention to policies being taken by leading NATO countries towards Ukraine, primarily the United States. Coordination with the main European allies (the United Kingdom, France, Poland, Germany, the Nordic-Baltic group) will remain imperative. If Russia’s war is halted through a peace agreement involving NATO troops being deployed, Latvia should waste no time in expressing its readiness to contribute. Thirdly, Latvia will need to engage actively with its European allies to encourage them to take on more strategic responsibility for European defence. And by concluding this Yearbook, Imants Lieģis argues that the inauguration of the unpredictable and transactional President Trump will set the tone for global developments during 2025. Therefore, combined with an undiminishing threat from Russia and a Europe slow to take on more responsibility for itself, Latvia’s foreign policy will need to be active and alert in 2025.

The year 2024 has taken on many shades of challenges, complications, and unpredictability, and Latvia’s foreign and security policy in 2025 will also continue to face crises and complications. At the same time, as 2025 begins, obstacles and challenges that Latvia’s foreign policy will need to face have already been identified, and providing the recommendations of analysts and experts was the task of the authors

of the publication “Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2025”. The research assessment also allows us to offer recommendations and make additional contributions to the discussion regarding Latvia’s foreign policy interests and goals, while also involving the broader public and thus potentially making our hectic life in international politics easier.

CONTRIBUTORS

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