

Toms Rostoks and Kate Elizabete Kanasta*

Foreign and Domestic Policy Implications of Latvia's Reaction to Russia's Aggression against Ukraine

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Abstract: Latvia has consistently supported Ukraine since Russia's unprovoked invasion. Importantly, Latvia took considerable risks and provided military support to Ukraine even before Russia invaded despite the strong possibility that Russia might win quickly. These concerns subsided when it became clear that Russia's plan to take Kyiv and achieve decisive victory against Ukraine failed. In retrospect, Latvia's support for Ukraine was both morally right and politically prudent. This article, however, looks at the potential long-term implications of Latvia's foreign and domestic policy responses to Russia's war against Ukraine. The article looks at such key foreign policy aims as support for economic sanctions against Russia, holding Russia responsible for war crimes in Ukraine, and ensuring stronger NATO military presence in Latvia. On the domestic front, the article examines the potential consequences of removal of Soviet-era monuments in Latvia, limiting access to Russian media, and reducing the role of the Russian language in public communication. The article concludes that although these foreign and domestic policy measures are entirely appropriate, they may still backfire in the long run if Russia is not defeated in Ukraine and if domestic responses to the war further alienate Latvia's Russian-speakers.

Keywords: Latvian domestic policy, Latvian Foreign Policy, Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Russian-speakers, public opinion in Estonia and Latvia.

* **Corresponding author:** Toms Rostoks, e-mail: toms.rostoks@mil.lv Latvian National Defence Academy, Centre for Security and Strategic Research

Co-Author: Kate Elizabete Kanasta, e-mail: kate_elizabete.kanasta@lu.lv, University of Latvia, Department of Political Science.

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reflected its maximalist foreign policy objectives. It did not aim to deprive Ukraine of just another chunk of its territory. Instead, the aim was to install a friendly government in Kyiv and perhaps to absorb Ukraine either partly or entirely into Russia at a later stage. Latvia's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been equally ambitious as it perceived Russia's aggression against Ukraine as an existential threat. Latvia has tried to punch above its weight in terms of arms supplies to Ukraine and consistently advocating on behalf of Ukraine within NATO and the EU. According to data provided by Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Latvia comes second right after Estonia in terms of the amount of aid provided on a bilateral basis and as part of EU assistance to Ukraine (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2023). Importantly, Latvia provided crucial military assistance to Ukraine, such as Stinger anti-aircraft systems, shortly before Russia's invasion. That was well before it became clear that Russia's advance on Kyiv would fail. In addition to government-led initiatives, civil society and businesses have aided various Ukraine-related causes. In Latvia, this has been a matter of considerable national self-esteem.

However, Latvia's support to Ukraine and its foreign policy efforts to push the Western coalition to adopt a tougher stance on Russia have also exposed Latvia even further as a potential target for Russia's aggression. In many ways, Latvia's approach to Russia is not much different from that of Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland. Other Central and Eastern European states have provided considerable military and economic assistance to Ukraine, and Latvia does not stand out among them in a radically different way. In addition, the common Western position towards Russia has hardened and become more similar to that of the Baltic states and Poland. Moreover, there is little indication that the consensus on helping Ukraine would potentially weaken in the short-term.

The long-term implications of Latvia's stance on Russia, however, are less certain. Outcome of the war is contingent on many factors, and it is entirely possible that Ukraine will not achieve a decisive military victory over Russia and that Vladimir

Putin will remain Russia's president in the foreseeable future. In this case, Latvia will find itself next to a Russia that will be under Western economic sanctions and harbour revanchist sentiments against its neighbours and the West more generally. Also, it is likely that Russia will retain decisive military advantage vis-à-vis its Baltic neighbours, as it is unlikely that NATO military presence in Latvia will be increased to a point where sufficient number of troops and military capabilities would be deployed that would make successful territorial defence likely. In the worst-case scenario, Latvia may face an outcome where Ukraine has not won the war (although Ukraine had not been defeated either), aggressive and revanchist Russia on its doorstep, and insufficient NATO commitment to make deterrence work.

This article explores the potential medium and long-term consequences of Latvia's foreign and domestic policies that it has pursued in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although Latvia's commitment to support Ukraine is understandable and constitutes a viable short-term strategy, this approach may trigger consequences beyond the ongoing war that may turn out to be less favourable for Latvia. This article looks at domestic and foreign policies that Latvia's government has pursued since Russia's invasion of Ukraine with the aim to identify potential problematic aspects of Latvia's approach in regard to future consequences.

While moving forward with an 'all-in' strategy opposing Russia has made sense for Latvian decision-makers hoping to ensure territorial integrity of Ukraine and preservation of the rules-based world order, there might be more than a few potential problem areas created by the same policies in the long-run. The subsequent sections explore foreign and domestic policies that Latvia has pursued in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in a more detailed manner. The first section looks at Latvia's efforts to impose Western sanctions against Russia, hold Russia's war criminals accountable, and ensure greater NATO military presence in the Baltic region. The second section, in turn, delves into domestic policies that the Latvian government has pursued since Russia's full-scale invasion and aims to identify problematic aspects of those policies. The article concludes that Latvia's assertive foreign policy may still end up falling short of achieving key objectives, such as Ukraine's victory, swift demise of Putin's regime, persistent

Western support for Ukraine, and sufficient military presence of allies on NATO's eastern flank, while some elements of domestic policies, such as elimination of Soviet-era monuments and banning of Russia's state media channels from the information space in Latvia may have alienated Russian-speaking population.

Foreign policy - when going 'all-in' might not take you all the way

Since the beginning of Russia's escalated invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Latvia has remained an ardent supporter of Ukraine, providing military and humanitarian aid, pushing for tough sanctions, making the case for a special tribunal for war crimes, with senior Latvian government officials and diplomats advocating for a continued robust international response. Latvia's strong stance against Russia has been a viable strategy from both a moral and political standpoint and is a logical reaction to the persistent threat that Russia poses for European security. Nonetheless, these efforts are somewhat hampered by sanctions evasion of Latvia's companies, while the initiative to hold Russia accountable for the war crimes may turn out to be a largely futile effort that may only materialize in the case of profound political transformation in Russia and/or its decisive defeat on the battlefield. Russia's aggressiveness and blatant disregard for human lives lost in its war against Ukraine also pose a threat to its NATO neighbours. Reducing that threat, that is, strengthening NATO deterrence and forward defence in the Baltic states is of great importance. Keeping this in mind, it is worth exploring the consequences of Latvia's assertive and norm-based foreign policy beyond the outcome of the war in Ukraine. The subsequent paragraphs mainly focus on Latvia's efforts to enforce economic sanctions against Russia, hold Russia accountable for the war crimes that it has committed against Ukraine, and work with allies to ensure greater allied military presence in Latvia.

First, Latvia has consistently favoured imposing stronger economic sanctions against Russia in the wake of its aggression against Ukraine. European Union member states have imposed diplomatic and economic policies against Russia, including targeted restrictive measures (individual sanctions), broader economic sanctions, and visa restrictions to thwart Russia's ability to continue its aggression. In total (including earlier sanctions imposed after the 2014 annexation of Crimea), the EU has sanctioned 1,473 individuals and 207 Russian entities, including banks,

the military industry, political parties, media, and many others. According to the European Commission, since February 2022, the EU has banned over €43.9 billion in exported goods to Russia and €91.2 billion in Russian imports. Compared to 2021, 49% of Russian exports and 58% of imports are currently sanctioned (European Council 2022). Nevertheless, it is debatable how effective sanctions are in achieving their desired outcomes, which countries actually end up absorbing the costs of sanctions, and how effective countries are in implementing sanctions. But another question to ask is how truthful countries are in the applications of those sanctions? Last year, Latvia saw a spike in the number of reported suspicious transactions that may have been used to circumvent sanctions against both Russia and Belarus. In 2022, the Financial Intelligence Unit of Latvia¹ received 281 reports of circumvention cases (compared to 2021, when only 12 cases were reported). This illustrates that regardless of the sanctions agreed upon by the EU, individuals and organizations will attempt to continue business as usual with sanctioned entities or to continue to circulate sanctioned goods (The Financial Intelligence Unit of Latvia, 2023). Moreover, these figures only pertain to reported actions and do not address legal loopholes. The total number of direct or indirect sanction violations may be even higher.

While sanctions are the result of agreements negotiated by the state leaders, in practice private individuals and companies play a more crucial role in their implementation (The Financial Intelligence Unit of Latvia, 2023). Although businesses might support government policies in principle, they might still decide in favour of sanctions' evasion if their profits are threatened. According to the Financial Intelligence Unit of Latvia, the threat of sanctions violations in Latvia is high. Historically, a significant part of Latvia's market has maintained strong trade

¹ The Financial Intelligence Unit of Latvia is an independent authority whose responsibility is to prevent money laundering in Latvia, with the goal of eliminating the possibility of using the Latvian financial system to launder money or finance terrorism. The main task of the Financial Intelligence Unit of Latvia is to collect and analyse financial data, reports of suspicious transactions, and hand this information over to Latvian law enforcement authorities to investigate cases of money laundering and terrorism and proliferation financing.

relationships with both Russia and Belarus. Prior to the war (but post the annexation of Crimea in 2014), in 2021, Russia was ranked as the 5th biggest export country for Latvia, while Belarus was listed in 20th place. The total value of the exported goods to Russia made up 7.3% of Latvia's total export value (1.1% for Belarus). Similarly, Russia was Latvia's 4th biggest importer (€1.7 billion, 9.1% of total import value).

One would expect trade engagement to weaken in 2022 due to economic sanctions, but this has not been the case. 2022 data provided by the Bank of Latvia illustrates that Russia ranks 6th and Belarus 27th in trade with Latvia, with their combined export value almost 4% of Latvia's GDP, almost the same as in 2021. Although the value of Latvia's trade has remained largely the same as in 2021, this has mostly been due to substantially higher energy and raw material prices, while the volume of trade has decreased considerably (LSM 2023d). There has also been a marked increase in Latvian exports to CIS countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia in 2022, with the trade volume having almost quadrupled from the previous year. This may be due to the greater ease of Latvia's private sector shifting focus from the Russian market to those of Central Asia, as opposed to countries like France or Italy. At the same time, it is likely that these countries are simply intermediaries for goods that are currently restricted for export to Russia (Helmane 2023). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is currently evaluating and trying to identify, as much as possible, what percentage of transactions are intended to circumvent sanctions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). Notably, there has been a marked increase of reports on sanctions evasion to Latvian authorities which means that sanctions enforcement is likely to remain an issue in the coming months and years (LSM 2023c).

It is worth noting that, while sanctions against Belarus are less restrictive than those against Russia, the two countries have a near unrestricted flow of goods between them. This enables businesses to maintain existing operations, to an extent, within legal boundaries. It might be too soon to tell how effective sanctions are in terms of hindering Russia in the long-term or whether sanctioning countries will be able to uphold their commitments. Even in the best-case scenarios, Latvia could still find itself neighbouring a hostile and threatening Russia, with the Latvian and wider European public becoming more sceptical about sanctions against Russia, the

power of the EU, or the effectiveness of diplomatic tools when facing old-school hard power aggression.

Second, Latvia has consistently supported international efforts to hold Russia accountable for its war crimes against Ukraine and its people. This effort has been spearheaded by Latvian President Egils Levits. Given Levits' extensive experience as a judge of the European Court of Justice, it is unsurprising that he has been outspoken in advocating for legal proceedings to uphold international law and hold Russia accountable for its actions in Ukraine. Levits has outlined several possible scenarios how Russia could face justice from a legal standpoint. The International Court of Justice represents the first scenario. Ukraine has filed a claim against Russia for unjustly accusing Ukraine of genocide, which has served as the public justification for Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, the International Court of Justice does not hold jurisdiction over the commencement of war.

The second scenario is a case via the International Criminal Court, which is better suited for examining individual criminal responsibility. At this stage, prosecutors have initiated proceedings against individuals associated with Russia, such as Vladimir Putin, for war crimes committed in Ukraine. These investigations are still underway. A third scenario is the establishment of a special war crimes tribunal, similar to those created for Rwanda, Cambodia, Yugoslavia, and the Rafik Hariri tribunal. The difficulty lies in establishing such tribunals since they must be formed by resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, which includes Russia as a permanent member. Theoretically, a resolution by the UN General Assembly could provide an alternative, or the tribunal could be operated by other international organizations like the Council of Europe. Levits has strongly argued in favour of creating a special tribunal, emphasizing that international law is the basis for world peace and that the fact that Putin might never actually face a judge should not stop Western countries from pursuing this option (Levits 2022a; Levits 2022b).

On March 17, 2023, the International Criminal Court issued warrants for the arrest of two individuals for war crimes in Ukraine, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova. Based on the prosecution's application it was

concluded that there are reasonable grounds to believe that each suspect bears responsibility for the war crime of the unlawful deportation of children and the transfer of the population from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation (International Criminal Court 2023). Regardless of the actions by the ICC, it is highly unlikely that either individual will ever face the court, since the court lacks mechanisms to enforce the warrants. Nevertheless, the warrants can limit travel for both individuals. While it is pleasant to imagine that Vladimir Putin might not ever enjoy a foreign vacation, it is even more important that other foreign leaders think twice before inviting Putin, a war criminal, for diplomatic engagements.

Gathering evidence and making judgments might not lead to detention and prosecution of Putin and others from the Russian political and military elite. While pushing for special tribunals or rulings from international courts might seem futile, for small nations with limited hard power like Latvia, belief in international norms may be as important as religion. If the public lose faith and doubts that aggressors will be held accountable under international law, governments may struggle to demonstrate the value of international organizations all together to their constituencies. Ultimately, visible consequences for flagrant violations of human rights, such as the arrest of Russia's authoritarian leader, are often necessary to demonstrate the validity of an ICC warrant and strengthen the consensus on international norms.

Third, Latvia has worked with its allies towards ensuring a more robust NATO military presence to deter Russia. Although Russia might seem weak now, with its military decimated in Ukraine, it still poses a threat for its smaller neighbours, and Russia is still likely to pose a threat to Latvia and its Baltic neighbours in the long run. Much of the argumentation in the context of the ongoing war focuses on the possibility that Russia may prepare for the second round of aggression against Ukraine if it fails this time, but Russia could as well set its sights elsewhere and exploit the *salami tactic* that has worked well for it before (Maas 2021/2022). By being in such close proximity to Russia and by being at a disadvantage in terms of military power, adversary's hostile intentions may matter more than its structural weakness against vis-à-vis NATO. Thus, Latvia needs allied military presence to deter Russia.

At the NATO summit in Madrid in 2022, allies committed ‘to deploy additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on our eastern flank, to be scaled up from the existing battlegroups to brigade-size units where and when required, underpinned by credible rapidly available reinforcements, prepositioned equipment, and enhanced command and control’ (NATO 2022). The decision that was taken at the NATO summit in Warsaw in 2016 to deploy battlegroups to the eastern flank was a major achievement for Latvia, but the battlegroup was relatively small,² especially when compared to the scale of warfare in Ukraine. Russia’s readiness to absorb losses of equipment on troops has been a cause of concerns for Latvian policymakers. Arguably, a larger presence was needed. This, however, would be a major financial commitment on the part of Latvia’s allies (especially Canada), and allies may not have the troops ready to be deployed. Establishing additional battlegroups on NATO’s Southeastern flank means that most nations whose troops are currently deployed to Latvia would not have the troops available. Military aid that has been sent to Ukraine has also considerably reduced the available stockpiles of weapons and ammunition. Problems of equipment, troop availability, and ammunition shortages also hamper Canada’s contribution to Latvia (Brewster 2023). Fixing that would also require additional military spending for Canada, a problem that has not gone unnoticed to journalists and experts (The Globe and Mail 2023). While Latvia will likely get a brigade-size force in the coming years, Estonia might be less lucky in that regard due to British inability to provide troops in the short-term and tie them down in Estonia.

Although NATO has stepped up its efforts to deter Russia in the Baltic region recently with deploying troops, prepositioning ammunition and equipment, and upgrading defence plans, Latvia has also taken steps to strengthen its military. In summer 2022, Latvia’s defence minister Artis Pabriks announced the return to conscription and establishing a major new military base with the largest training ground in the Baltic states ‘Selonia’ (Latvijas armija, 2022). The parliamentary election that took place on 1 October 2022, somewhat delayed transitioning back to conscription. Defence minister’s political party did not pass the 5% threshold

² In 2023, the battlegroup stood at about 1800 troops from 11 countries (Sargs 2023)

and thus did not make it into the Parliament, but the new ruling coalition eventually managed to pass the necessary legislation in early April 2023. Latvian government has also decided to ramp up defence spending to 2,5% of GDP until 2025 (LSM 2022g) and acquire rocket artillery systems and air defence capabilities that were previously lacking. Latvia is partnering with Estonia to procure IRIS-T air defence systems, and the Baltic states will also be buying HIMARS rocket artillery systems. Latvia's defence budget is also set to reach the 3% of GDP mark by 2027 to accommodate infrastructure and equipment costs of an increasingly large number of conscripts and acquisition of additional weapons systems and ammunition.

In sum, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has caused Latvia to become more active on the foreign policy front. Latvia's outrage over Russia's brutal treatment of Ukraine has not been much different from behaviour of its Western partners and allies. In that sense, Russia is unlikely single out Latvia (or all three Baltic states for that matter) as the next targets of military aggression. The three points detailed above, however, entail various risks for Latvia. Advocacy for stronger economic sanctions against Russia may come back to bite if Latvia does not live up to its own high standards of behaviour. Attempts to hold Russia accountable for war crimes may turn out to be a futile activity if Putin stays in power for the foreseeable future and if Russia does not seek reconciliation with its European neighbours. Activities to ensure more substantial NATO military presence, in turn, may fail if Latvia's allies fail to pursue more ambitious and consistent defence policies in the coming years. Such outcomes are not necessarily likely, but it should be kept in mind that foreign policy activism and moral high ground claims entail not just opportunities, but also challenges and risks.

Domestic policies – (not) winning the hearts and minds of the Russian-speakers

Every crisis is an opportunity, and this age-old expression certainly applies to Latvia's domestic policies in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused outrage and fear in Latvia, especially among Latvians. When Russia's attempt to take Kyiv early in the conflict failed and Russia refocused its military effort towards Ukraine's eastern regions, it became clear that the military confrontation was becoming a long war. Latvia's fears that the Baltic states might

become next victims of Russia's aggression subsided. The outrage over Russia's brutality, however, did not, and this had far-reaching ramifications for Latvia's policies. As the previous section demonstrates, Latvia was active on the foreign policy front, but important decisions were made on the domestic front as well. These were largely aimed at three objectives, to remove the remaining Soviet-era monuments, to limit the exposure of the Russian-speakers to Russia's media and disinformation, and to reduce the role of the Russian language in public discourse. Also, the parliamentary election that was held on October 1, 2022, showcased the profound transformation that was taking place among the political parties that mainly relied on Russian-speakers' votes. While Latvia has been a staunch supporter of Euro-Atlantic integration and pursued a principled foreign policy towards Russia, its population has been deeply divided along ethnic and language lines on these issues. An earlier study of Latvian government's integration policy claims that the effort has been half-hearted and largely unsuccessful (Muiznieks 2010). This necessitates further analysis to address the potential implications of Russia's war in Ukraine for Latvia's domestic political scene. The remaining part of this section discusses the limited success that Latvia has had in using the crisis as an opportunity to pursue domestic policies that were deemed too controversial before the start of the war.

First, Latvia dismantled the remaining Soviet-era monuments that had survived the first wave of removal that took place at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Latvian Parliament – *Saeima* – passed the law on dismantling of the remaining Soviet-era monuments on June 16, 2022, and President Levits signed it into law six days later (Saeima 2022). The law stipulated that all Soviet-era monuments containing symbols of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were to be dismantled by November 15, 2022. Latvia was hardly alone in its attempts to get rid of the Soviet-era monuments, as similar processes took place not just in Ukraine, but also across Central and Eastern Europe (RFE/RL 2022). Also, Latvia was not leading in this effort, as Soviet monuments were being dismantled *en masse* in states that were part of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact back in the Cold War.

The urgency to tear down Soviet-era monuments, however, was demonstrated on May 9, 2022, when a large crowd of (mostly) Russian-speakers showed up at the Soviet Victory monument in Riga to commemorate the liberation of Riga from the Nazi occupiers and pay respect to Soviet troops who perished in the Second World War. For Latvians, however, the Soviet Victory monument was a symbol of re-occupation of Latvia by the Red Army and the continuation of decades long and painful occupation which resulted in the second large wave of mass deportations in 1949 and the forced Russification campaign during the Soviet rule.

The gathering at the Soviet Victory monument caused outrage among Latvians and led to the resignation of the Minister of Interior at the time Marija Golubeva (LSM 2022a). For most Latvians, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a moment of moral clarity, and there was the expectation that Latvia's Russian-speakers would unequivocally condemn Russia's war of aggression and brutality against Ukraine. Although Latvia for the first time since 1991 witnessed a public protest against Russia's war against Ukraine organized by the Latvian Russian-speakers (LSM 2022b), there were also many who supported Russia's policies. And there was no enthusiasm among the Russian-speakers to dismantle the Soviet Victory monument in Riga. According to survey by public opinion research centre SKDS, support for the dismantling of the Soviet Victory monument amongst Russian-speakers in Latvia was only 9% compared to 72% support from Latvian-speakers. Also, only 40% of Russian-speaking respondents condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine, while 12% supported it, and 28% were neutral on that issue (LSM 2022c). Even though there was a clear public demand to dismantle the Soviet Victory monument in Riga, that decision caused consternation among the Russian-speaking part of the population. This may have far-reaching implications in terms of further alienation of the Russian-speakers from Latvian politics.

Second, Latvia took steps to limit the exposure of Russian-speakers to Russia's propaganda and disinformation. It has been long known that Russian-speakers' views on foreign, security, and defence policy issues is very different from those of Latvians. Russian-speakers have been less likely to regard Russia as a threat (Berzina et al 2016), support higher defence expenditure, view Latvia's NATO membership favourably, and support deployment of troops from other NATO member states in Latvia (Rostoks and Vanaga 2016). This was also the reason why Latvia seemed

particularly vulnerable to Russia's malign influence because the Russian-speakers had bought into Russia's key narratives about Latvia, namely that Russian-speakers are oppressed in Latvia, that Latvia is a failed state, and that there was a rebirth of Fascism in Latvia. Many Russian-speakers seemed to be willing to hold onto these beliefs even in the wake of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Krumm, Šukevičs, and Zariņš 2023).

Although Russia's disinformation and influence over Russian-speakers' hearts and minds was regarded as a serious security risk (Ministry of Defence 2016, 2020, Kols 2022, Radin 2017), Latvian authorities were reluctant to reduce access to Russian media because democracies in general tend not to limit the freedom of speech. There were a few cases where Russian TV channels were temporarily banned in Latvia, but the government did not want to pursue a more aggressive approach. This changed overnight when Russia invaded Ukraine. At first, Latvian authorities banned major Russian propaganda channels, but later a blanket ban on all TV channels registered in Russia was enacted (LSM 2022d). Although Russian TV channels have been banned since 2022, there are indications that those who are determined to gain access to them can still do so (LSM 2023a). The ban, however, has reduced the exposure of both Latvians and Russian-speakers to Russian media. A recent report based on public opinion survey indicates that in 2023, just 11% of respondents consumed information from the Russian state-controlled media, while back in 2019 it was 40%. Still, approximately 20% of Russian-speakers self-reported in October 2022 that they were still consuming Russia's state-controlled media (Berzina 2023). Media expert Gunta Lidaka, in turn, claims that 60% of all respondents and 95% of Russian-speaking respondents would prefer to continue watching Russian TV channels that are currently banned (Timofejevs 2023).

So, is Latvia winning the hearts and minds of its Russian-speaking part of the population? The short answer is that probably not. Data compiled by *Gemius*, a company that regularly tracks data on consumer behaviour on internet, indicates that right after the start of the war in February 2022 Russian-speakers flocked to Latvian online media outlets in Russian language, but that phenomenon was short-lived (Gemius, 2022). Although there are indications that both Latvians and

Russian-speakers were consuming Russian opposition media, such as TV channel *Dozhdj* (TV Rain) (Berzina 2023), the story of this particular TV channel offers a cautionary tale because its arrival in Riga was initially welcomed by Latvian authorities, but eventually its license was revoked due to several reports that were sympathetic of Russia's policies and its soldiers who were fighting Putin's war against Ukraine (LSM 2022e). It has been a fundamental problem in relation to media in Russian language that policies pursued by the Latvian government have been inconsistent and Russian-language media have often been denied financial support (LSM 2023b). As the result, Russian-speakers in Latvia have been reluctant to turn to media in Russian language, and this has made it easier for Russia to strengthen its hold on Latvia's Russian-speakers.

Third, a related issue with potentially far-reaching implications for Latvia's ability to win the hearts and minds of its Russian-speaking population is the place and visibility of Russian language. On the policy-making level, Latvia has only one official language, and that is Latvian. The results of the referendum on Russian as the second official language in 2012 were overwhelmingly against that proposal with 74.8% of the voters rejecting it (Central Election Commission of Latvia 2023). In retrospect, President Levits has even claimed that the referendum was anti-constitutional (Levits 2022c). The role of Latvian language has been gradually strengthened within the education system. In 2022, Latvian Parliament adopted legislation which stipulated that the transition to Latvian-only education in schools will be completed by 2025 (LSM 2022f, LV portāls 2022). In short, 'Latvia is a national state where Latvian language is the basis for democratic participation and national identity' (Cabinet of Ministers 2023, 10).

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has reignited the debate about the role of Russian language in Latvia. As the ongoing war facilitated the decision to dismantle the Soviet-era monuments, there was also a parallel effort to consolidate the role of the Latvian language. The timetable for transitioning to Latvian-only education in schools was sped up, while simultaneously there was a clear need to engage more with ethnic minorities that were particularly susceptible to Russia's media influence. Although there has been some progress in this regard, the list of priorities of the Latvian government indicates that government intends to provide financial support for media content in Latvian language (Government Action Plan 2023, para 325.3),

while the aim in the medium term seems to be phasing out of the media channels aimed at ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities in Latvia (Tomsons and Unāma 2023).

Also, there is a broader effort that is ongoing with the aim to squeeze the Russian language out of everyday communication. Until recently, it was very common for institutions and businesses to provide information to their clients and customers in Russian alongside Latvian and sometimes other languages. Since 2022, a social campaign '*Atkrievisko Latviju*' [Derussify Latvia] has been gaining momentum, and a number of state and municipal institutions and businesses have stopped providing information in Russian. Also, it has been a long-standing complaint that companies often were looking to hire employees who could speak Russian fluently, especially in the hospitality sector, which meant that Latvians who could not understand and speak fluent Russian were discriminated against. Recently, however, this has begun to change, as there is an awareness that everyone who permanently resides in Latvia should be able to communicate in Latvian (Diezina 2022). Although this seems to be a goal worthy enough to pursue, there has been a heated debate about how to strengthen the role of the Latvian language and whether a principled stance on the language issue would eventually produce the intended results or further alienate ethnic minorities who might disapprove of the effort (Rozenberga and Silabriedis 2023).

All in all, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has had major impact on Latvia's domestic politics in many ways. The government and public have responded by limiting the role of Russian language, the presence of Soviet-era remnants has been reduced, while the role of the Latvian language has been considerably strengthened. Although these measures seem entirely appropriate in the light of Russia's brutality against Ukraine and its people, and Russia remains a persistent threat to European security, it remains to be seen how Latvia's society – especially its Russian-speaking part – will respond to government's policies and social campaigns. Despite different views on foreign, security, and defence issues, ethnic relations in Latvia have been largely peaceful, but the question remains whether Russian-speakers will embrace the ongoing transformation or will become further alienated.

Conclusion

Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine represented a direct threat to Latvia's security. Had Russia succeeded in taking Kyiv and toppling the Ukrainian government, this would make Latvia's security precarious. A triumphant Kremlin would feel emboldened by its perceived success and would likely seek to exploit it by driving NATO troops and infrastructure out of Central and Eastern Europe. Understanding full well the gravity of situation, Latvia alongside Estonia and Lithuania rose to the challenge. Latvia was among the first to deliver weapons systems – such as Stingers – to Ukraine to help it defend against Russia's onslaught. Later, Latvia sought to expedite Western arms deliveries and economic sanctions. In that regard, Latvia's policies were the result of its core security interests, that is, it was better to stop Russia in Ukraine rather than do it later in the Baltic region. Russia's invasion of Ukraine also provided Latvia with a window opportunity to make decisions that were long overdue, such as dismantling of the Soviet Victory monument in Riga and banning Russia's propaganda channels. In the short term, Latvia's policies were not just appropriate. They were necessary.

The long-term consequences of Latvia's foreign and domestic policies are somewhat more problematic, and it is too early to tell how successful they have been. The consequences of policies – both foreign and domestic – that Latvia has pursued are potentially problematic. On the one hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents Latvia's 'we told you so' moment. Indeed, there is a great deal of bitterness in Latvia that its concerns about Russia's increasingly assertive policies were casually dismissed by Western policymakers and analysts. On the other hand, however, Latvia's claims on having in-depth expertise on Russia were not supported by visible evidence, such as high-impact academic publications on Russia's domestic and foreign policies. From the many books and academic articles on Russia, too few publications have originated from Latvia. It is possible that Latvia got Russia right but for the wrong reasons.

Regarding more specific issues covered in this article, there are quite a few things that can still go wrong for Latvia. On the foreign policy front, three issues were scrutinized: implementation of economic sanctions, holding Russia accountable for war crimes, and ensuring greater NATO military presence in Latvia for the purpose

of deterring and (if necessary) defending against Russia. Latvia may suffer reputational costs if it turns out that its companies are helping Russia to evade Western economic sanctions. The initiative to hold Russia accountable for the war crimes is unlikely to succeed, unless Putin's regime is replaced by a different political regime that would attempt to re-establish ties with the West and would be ready to hold accountable individuals responsible for war crimes. In any case, Latvia's determination to play a leading role in that process was largely the initiative of President Levits. With a different president at the helm,³ this may no longer be a priority. The aim to ensure more substantial NATO military presence in Latvia, in turn, may fail due inability of allies to deliver on the pledges made during the NATO summit in Madrid. In the worst-case scenario, Latvia can be left eye-to-eye with a revanchist Russia further down the road without having sufficient NATO boots on the ground.

The challenges on the domestic front are no less formidable. The message from the government to Latvian Russian-speakers has been that Soviet-era monuments had to be dismantled, access to Russia's state media channels had to be restricted, and the presence of Russian language in public discourse and education had to be reduced. As such, these are probably worthy goals, but they are unlikely to be met with gratitude. Government's policies are most likely to be a partial success in terms of proficiency of Latvian language, but they are likely to generate further discontent and alienation from Latvian politics among the Russian-speaking part of the population whom the government is trying to win over. The first signs of failure are already on full display. Harmony party (Saskaņa) used to be the most popular political party in Latvia with the largest representation in the Parliament, and its supporters were predominantly Russian-speakers. Leaders of the Harmony party condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine in no uncertain terms, only to find themselves unable to reach the 5% threshold in the parliamentary election in early October 2022. It seems that the Russian-speakers supported For Stability! [original: *Stabilitāte!*] instead, as this party refrained from openly condemning Russia's

³ Foreign minister Edgars Rinkēvičs was elected the President by the Latvian Parliament on May 31, 2023. He replaced President Levits in early July 2023.

aggression against Ukraine. Consequently, For Stability! obtained 11 seats (out of 100). Unsurprisingly, the efforts of the Latvian government to change the minds of Russian-speakers on important foreign, security, and defence policy issues remains a frustratingly slow process whose outcome is uncertain at best.

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