

THE PERILS OF ATTRACTIVENESS: NATO'S EASTERN FLANK COUNTRIES FACING AMERICAN UNCERTAINTY

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Abstract:

This study examines the evolving national security strategies of four NATO eastern flank countries – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Latvia – amid growing uncertainty surrounding U.S. commitment to European defense, particularly during and after the Trump administration. Prompted by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, each nation has revised its strategic posture, emphasising NATO's central role while downplaying the EU's capacity as a standalone security guarantor. Despite similarities in threat perception and the prioritization of deterrence, notable differences exist in strategic focus, procurement policies, and levels of domestic consensus. All four countries remain heavily reliant on U.S. military presence and funding, with limited investment in hedging strategies or EU-based security alternatives. This dependency exposes them to heightened vulnerability should U.S. foreign policy shift away from European commitments. The paper concludes that without diversified security frameworks, these states risk deepening strategic insecurity, underscoring the limitations of their current „logic of attractiveness“ toward the United States.

Keywords: NATO; Russia; Autonomy; Deterrence, Threats.

Introduction

The arrival of Trump in the White House represents a major challenge to the security approach of the countries on NATO's eastern flank. While these countries have begun to review their strategic priorities following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, they are now facing concerns about the future of American commitment to their security and a rapprochement between the United States and Russia. This contribution proposes to discuss these questions through a comparative study of the national security strategies adopted by four small nations on NATO's eastern flank following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022: Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, and Latvia.

These nations are part of the so-called Bucharest nine format of cooperation established in 2025 under a joint Polish and Romanian initiative.¹

Their selection of these countries is justified by the fact they revised their national security strategies following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Their geographic distribution along the eastern flank also allows for an analysis through the lens of both differences and similarities in their strategic approaches.

Finally, these countries can be examined as small states in light of their military capabilities. While they are not in a position to lead strategic discussions within NATO and the European Union, their voices cannot be entirely ignored. Indeed, these countries play a role in the decision-making processes of both institutions, which operate under the rule of unanimity, and their vulnerability to external influence poses a risk to internal consensus within these bodies.

This contribution proposes, in the first part, to compare the content of these documents, and in the second part, to discuss the implications of possible changes in Trump's foreign policy direction regarding European security.

Our main argument is that these changes, if confirmed in the future, would place these small countries on the eastern flank in an extremely delicate position from a security perspective, and they currently lack a plan or credible alternatives for continued American and NATO engagement for their security. Indeed, each of the countries have followed a logic of attractiveness towards the US for their security, and have not yet address the possibility of any diversification of their security cooperation within the European Union.

National Security Strategies

The practice of releasing national security strategies is quite a recent one. It was established in USA when Congress required, since 1986, each President to publish a national security strategy.² In Europe, the practice of publishing security strategies is even less established. For example, Germany published its first ever national security strategy in 2023.³ In other countries, there is no systemic traditions of drafting national security strategies. Usually, the need for such national security strategies is triggered by some major changes at the international level. For example, the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian crisis led a number of mostly Central and Eastern European states to release national security strategies. The 2022 unprovoked Russian aggression on Ukraine was also considered as an event of sufficient importance to justify the reviewing of these national security strategies.

¹ Nagy, Th. (2024, March). The Bucharest Nine Enhancing Security on NATO's Eastern Flank, GMF. Link: <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/The%20Bucharest%20Nine-%20Enhancing%20Security%20on%20NATO%E2%80%99s%20Eastern%20Flank.pdf>

² Chin, J. J., Skinner, K., & Yoo, C. (2023). Understanding National security Strategies through time, pp. 104-105. Link: <https://hdl.handle.net/2152/122025>

³ Schreer, B. (2023, June 20). Germany's first-ever National Security Strategy, Online Analysis. Link: <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/06/germanys-first-ever-national-security-strategy/>

While the relevance of national security strategies is sometimes questioned⁴, they still serve important functions⁵. The first is to provide a framework for a common understanding of national security objectives at all levels of government and bureaucracy. The second is to communicate national security priorities to both allies and potential adversaries and enemies. The third function is to share national security priorities with various non-state stakeholders, such as analysts and experts, as well as members of the academic community, with these documents rarely attract public attention.

Logic of Attractiveness vs. Logic of Hedging

Small states or as often called second-tier or small states only have limited options when it comes to their strategic autonomy. If they are part of an Alliance system supported by a patron, their default position would tend to be to align to it and to seek to attract its support for their security following a logic of attractiveness. Any other option such as hard hedging that would consist of making them autonomous from their patron is not really possible.⁶

One solution for these small states may reside in a logic internal hedging, which would consist of diversifying their security options within the US security network. Such an internal hedging offers these countries an alternative to band wagoning and balancing.

In order words, the small Eastern flank countries under consideration can decide between these different options. The choice of a logic of attractiveness may prove risky for these countries in the case of them questioning the reliability of their security patron and its commitment to the Atlantic alliance. Facing the Russian threats, they may decide, instead of a logic of attractiveness to opt for a logic of internal hedging or they may even consider mixing both, one for the short term, and the second for the long term. This logic would lead them, for example, to invest more political capital in an EU security-based system.

Comparative Analysis of National Security Strategies

The four documents analysed here, are: the Estonian National Security Concept⁷, the Czech Republic's Security Strategy⁸, the Latvian State Defence

⁴ Stein, A. (2022, November 3). The case for getting rid of the national Security strategy - war on the rocks. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/11/the-case-for-getting-rid-of-the-national-security-strategy/>

⁵ Szalai, M. (2022). Norm localisation in the process of crafting national security strategies - the case of the Visegrád countries. *European Security*, 32(2), 210-232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2022.2124370>

⁶ Paquin, J., & Colautti-Féré, P. (2023). From attractiveness to hard hedging: US allies' response to Washington's lack of security assurance under the Obama and Trump presidencies. *Contemporary Politics*, 30(2), 221-246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2023.2268880>

⁷ National Security Strategy Concept of Estonia (2023). Link: https://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/eesti_julgeolekupoliitika_alused_eng_22.02.2023.pdf

⁸ Security Strategy of the Czech Republic (2023). Link: https://mzv.gov.cz/file/5161068/Security_Strategy_of_the_Czech_Republic_2023.pdf

Concept⁹, and the Bulgarian National Defence Strategy¹⁰. The Estonian National Security Concept adopted in 2023 follows the previous one adopted in 2017. The Latvian State Defense Concept also dates from 2023, while the Bulgarian National Defense Strategy was published in March 2025. Except for the Bulgarian case, where the strategy has not yet been debated in parliament, these documents were adopted by a large majority in the different countries' assemblies.

The four national security strategies share many similarities but also significant differences in their understanding of security, the identification of threats, security assumptions, and the importance given to NATO and the European Union for their security.

All four strategies adopt a holistic approach to security, recognizing its military, political, economic, social, and informational dimensions. They acknowledge that security is not solely a military matter but requires a holistic response involving the entire government and society. Each strategy emphasizes the importance of collective defense through alliances and partnerships. As small countries, it is not surprising that they prioritize international cooperation over power projection as the main objective of their security.

NATO is systematically presented as an essential pillar of security for the four countries, with a strong emphasis on collective security commitments and interoperability with allied forces. References to Article 5 are present in the Czech and Estonian documents, while the Bulgarian defense strategy also mentions Article 3¹¹ that calls for the NATO member states to maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity and the Latvian document makes no specific reference to Article 5 but mentions the importance of the Alliance as the framework for its defense policy.

The four documents also emphasize the importance of strengthening national resilience in the face of various threats and crises. This includes strengthening critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, civil protection, and societal preparedness. Finally, the four documents agree on maintaining an international order based on rules, respecting international law, and the peaceful settlement of disputes.

Differences and Threat Identification

In terms of threat identification, all four strategies identify Russia as the most significant threat. It is seen as a direct threat to the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Latvia, affecting the European security architecture, while Bulgaria mentions the possibility of a confrontation between Russia and NATO. In second place, the Czech, Estonian, and Latvian strategies cite China, but well behind Russia, while the Bulgarian strategy only mentions China's actions in the Indo-Pacific

⁹ The State Defense Concept (2023). Link: <https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/The%20State%20Defence%20Concept%202023-2027.pdf>

¹⁰ Национална отбранителна стратегия [National Defense Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria] (2025). Link: <https://pris.government.bg/document/a310e4caadd9170d0eadb6d7b6893135>

¹¹ National Defense Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2025), para 155.

region and its influence in the Western Balkans. The Bulgarian document also highlights the risk of confrontation in the Black Sea. Other threats mentioned include cyber threats (Czech Republic), migration and terrorism (Estonia, Bulgaria, Latvia), proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Bulgaria), risks to economic security (Czech Republic), and economic dependence on authoritarian states (Estonia). Latvia also cites the hybrid threat.

Regarding the pre-eminence of threats, the four security strategies agree on the predominance of conventional threats over hybrid ones, although with some nuances. While hybrid threats are acknowledged in the Bulgarian strategy, it prioritizes military preparedness, collective defense within NATO, and the development of national armed forces. The Czech strategy highlights the danger of armed conflict while also emphasizing the persistent threat of cyber warfare, requiring a multifaceted and comprehensive approach to security. In the Estonian case, military and hybrid threats are considered equally important, although the document acknowledges both the immediate danger of military aggression and the persistent disruptions caused by hybrid tactics. For Latvia, military threats are prioritized over hybrid ones even though they are viewed as part of Russian tactic. That being said, the Latvian strategy mentions the threat of a sudden military attack by Russia aimed at seizing territories, which could be followed by nuclear threats to deter NATO for responding. As mentioned in the Latvian document: „sudden military attack by Russia to seize a certain territory that may be followed by threats to use nuclear weapons, aiming to deter involvement of NATO reinforcements“.¹²

Roles of US, NATO and EU

While all four strategies emphasize the importance of NATO and the EU for their security, NATO is prioritized as the main source of deterrence. The EU's role is considered largely secondary, with only the Czech¹³ and Bulgarian¹⁴ strategies mentioning the EU's Strategic Compass for security and defense.

All four national strategies consider the partnership with the United States to be particularly important for their security. This importance is primarily manifested through their membership in NATO and the significance of the transatlantic bond. Latvia's strategy particularly emphasizes its bilateral strategic partnership with the United States, including the need for a continued American military presence. Bulgaria and Estonia also highlight the crucial role of the United States within NATO and in ally cooperation. The Czech Republic emphasizes broader transatlantic unity within NATO and the EU as vital to its security interests.

As far as deterrence is concerned, each of the four strategies emphasized the deterrence provide by NATO over the one provided by the EU. In relation

¹² The State Defense Concept, para 19.

¹³ Security Strategy of the Czech Republic (2023), para 2.

¹⁴ National Defense Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2025), para 3.

to that, the presence of NATO troops on their territory, all four national security strategies agree on their importance. Only the Latvian strategy further emphasizes the importance of the presence of American troops on its territory.

All four strategies insist on the need to increase military spending, with some stating specific targets (Czech Republic¹⁵: 2% in 2024 and higher afterwards, Estonia: at least 3% of GDP¹⁶, Latvia¹⁷: 2,5% by 2025 and 3% by 2027). These figures were further reviewed in some cases. Czechia announced that it will increase its spending to 3% by 2030, Estonia announced in March 2025 that its defense spending will reach to 5% in terms of GDP by 2026¹⁸, and Latvia 4% by next year.¹⁹

Only Bulgaria was first reluctant to provide specific figures. The challenge for the country is to reconcile its public deficit objectives that would allow it to join the Eurozone, and any ambitions in terms of significant increase in its defense spending. In this context, the new government headed by Rossen Jeliazkov mentioned the figure of 2,5% as an objective to be fulfilled by 2028.²⁰

Strategic Autonomy and Dependence

Although strategic autonomy has been a central theme in the EU's discourse on defense and security since 2020²¹, none of the four countries fully embrace this concept in their national strategies.

The Czech Republic and Estonia instead emphasize reducing their dependence on authoritarian states, particularly in the economic and energy sectors. Bulgaria focuses on energy diversification and independence, while Latvia highlights economic resilience and the development of its defense industry.

When it comes to military procurement, Bulgaria and Latvia show a stronger preference for U.S.-made weapons over those produced in Europe, due to their strategic partnerships and financial assistance programs. In 2024, for instance, Latvia received a total of 80 million U.S. dollars for the purchase of military equipment, including HIMARS systems and Black Hawk heli-

¹⁵ Security Strategy of the Czech Republic (2023), para 88.

¹⁶ National Security Strategy Concept of Estonia (2023), p. 10.

¹⁷ The State Defense Concept (2023), p. 5.

¹⁸ Savage, O. (2025, April 3). Estonia boosts defence spending to 5% of GDP. DSEI 2025. <https://www.dsei.co.uk/news/estonia-boost-defence-spending-5-gdp>

¹⁹ Defence Industry Europe. (2025, February 22). Latvia to increase defence budget to 4% of GDP in response to NATO requirements. Defence Industry Europe. <https://defence-industry.eu/latvia-to-increase-defence-budget-to-4-of-gdp-in-response-to-nato-requirements/>

²⁰ Nikolov, K., & Mandilara, S. (2025, February 4). Bulgaria rejects Trump's call for sharp increase in military spending. *Euractiv.com* <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgaria-rejects-trumps-call-for-sharp-increase-in-military-spending/>

²¹ European Parliament (2022) EU strategic autonomy 2013-2023: From concept to capacity. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733589](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589)

copters²², in addition to acquiring coastal defense missile systems worth 105 million dollars.²³ Bulgaria is not far behind. In 2019, it acquired eight F-16 Block 70 fighter jets for its air force. More recently, in March, the Bulgarian parliament approved the purchase of Javelin anti-tank missiles worth 82 million U.S. dollars.²⁴

For Estonia and the Czech Republic, no single option is explicitly prioritized. In Estonia's case, the country has stood out for its greater diversification of military purchases. In 2024, Germany was the top arms supplier to the country, far ahead of the United States and France.²⁵ In the Czech Republic's case, the national security strategy emphasizes domestic defense production while recognizing the importance of interoperability of acquired equipment.

Implications of a Shift in the American Approach to Security in Europe

The statements and positions adopted by the Trump administration regarding the future of NATO, the American presence in Europe, and the resolution of the war in Ukraine have created a major shock in the countries on NATO's eastern flank²⁶. The consequences must be examined at two levels: the strategic level and the level of domestic policy.

At the strategic level, the importance given to NATO and, secondarily, to the United States as the cornerstone of their security places small countries on the eastern flank in front of a considerable challenge. Trump's positions not only cast doubt on NATO's nuclear deterrence but also the potential concessions made within the framework of the resolution of the war in Ukraine could lead to a withdrawal of American and NATO presence in these countries. The need to maintain good relations with the United States, especially in the case of Estonia and Latvia²⁷, could place them in a position of having to choose their allegiance in the event of diametrically opposed policy and strategic choices.

²² English, L. (2025). USA to continue military funding in Baltic states. LSM.LV. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/12.03.2025-usa-to-continue-military-funding-in-baltic-states.a591204/>

²³ Vadim, K. (2023, December 10). Latvia, U.S. finalize \$105M deal for NSM coastal defense systems. Militarnyi. <https://militarnyi.com/en/news/latvia-u-s-finalize-105m-deal-for-nsm-coastal-defense-systems/>

²⁴ Reuters (2025, March 26). Bulgarian lawmakers approve purchase of U.S. Javelin missiles. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/bulgarian-lawmakers-approve-purchase-us-javelin-missiles-2025-03-26/>

²⁵ Err. (2024, March 19). Germany replaces USA as Estonia's biggest arms supplier. ERR. <https://news.err.ee/1609286886/germany-replaces-usa-as-estonia-s-biggest-arms-supplier>

²⁶ Stezycki, K., Laizans, J. and Charlish, A. (2025, February 19) On NATO's eastern flank, US policy shift stokes security fears, Reuters. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/world/natos-eastern-flank-us-policy-shift-stokes-security-fears-2025-02-19/>

²⁷ Allik, H. (2025, March 10). Trump positioning leaves Baltics walking a tightrope. dw.com. <https://www.dw.com/en/trump-positioning-leaves-baltics-walking-a-tightrope/a-71869374>

Conversely, the deterrence provided by the European Union is not considered sufficient or able to replace that provided by NATO. The EU is recognized for its contribution to security, but its role is generally considered complementary to that of NATO. Its strengths lie in its ability to address a wide range of security threats through civilian and military means, promote regional stability, and encourage cooperation between member states.²⁸

However, Trump's policy influence is felt not only strategically but also domestically as national cohesion on security issues is far from solid.

In Latvia, support for Ukraine has exposed internal divisions between the Latvian majority and the Russian-speaking minority.²⁹ In Estonia, the new right-wing populist party EKRE has taken ambivalent positions on the war in Ukraine, adopting rhetoric inspired by Russia.³⁰ In the Czech Republic, research suggests that the dominant European and international orientation showed between 1990 and 2013 is no longer consensual and accepted.³¹ For example, the party ANO of the former prime Minister Andrej Babis, adopted the Trump rhetoric concerning the resolution of the war in Ukraine.³²

In Bulgaria, the situation is more complex. Although the country has shifted its policy toward Russia since 2021³³, this shift remains fragile and is not reflected in public opinion. Furthermore, recent statements and declarations by leading political figures indicate greater support for views defended by Trump than for those defended in Paris and Berlin.³⁴

In the Czech Republic, research shows that the previously dominant European and international orientation between 1990 and 2013 has been less consensual and widely accepted since 2014. For example, the ANO party of

²⁸ Braghiroli, S. (2025, February 16) The Baltic states in the era of Trump's insecurity. Opinion. Link: <https://news.err.ee/1609616342/stefano-braghiroli-the-baltic-states-in-the-era-of-trump-s-insecurity>

²⁹ Rostoks, T., & Kanasta, K. E. (2023). Foreign and Domestic Policy Implications of Latvia's Reaction to Russia's Aggression against Ukraine. *journalonbalticsecurity.com*. https://doi.org/10.57767/jobs_2023_005

³⁰ Jakobson, Mari-Liis & Kasekamp, Andres. (2023). „The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Estonia.“ In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0017>

³¹ Kaniok, P., & Hloušek, V. (2023). Czech political parties and the war in Ukraine: continuity of foreign policy stances. *East European Politics*, 40(3), 395-411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2023.2295888>

³² Sybera, A. (2025, March 12). The battle for Czech voters: Manipulation and propaganda at the gates. *Visegrad Insight*. <https://visegradinsight.eu/the-battle-for-czech-voters-manipulation-and-propaganda-at-the-gate>

³³ Crombois, J. F. (2025). Bulgarian foreign policy and the war in Ukraine: moving towards a more assertive pro-western foreign policy? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2025.2465889>

³⁴ Crombois, Jean F. (2025, April 2). Le fragile soutien bulgare à l'Ukraine - Euro Créative. Euro Créative. <https://eurocreative.fr/le-fragile-soutien-bulgare-a-lukraine/>

former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš has adopted rhetoric similar to Trump's regarding how to resolve the war in Ukraine.

Conclusion

The small countries of the Eastern flank of NATO are particularly exposed to the risk of a shift in the American approach to European security. All share a sense of a direct Russian military threat that could only benefit from an American disengagement and a weakening of the Atlantic Alliance. This shows the limits of their strategic choice of relying almost exclusively on both NATO and the US for their security. At the same time, and as reflected in their respective strategies, none of these countries, with perhaps the exception of Estonia, has yet contemplated the possibility of internal hedging within the US security network. Such internal hedging would, for example, take the form of a greater political investment in an EU based security system.

As reflected in their national strategies, none of these countries view the European Union as a viable option to ensure their security in place of NATO, but only as a complementary entity. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether these countries would be able to fully support plans to strengthen a European based defence system, especially if those plans were to diverge from the United States in terms of its main objectives. In other words, any alternative in the event of an American withdrawal from European security and a weakening of NATO is currently considered by these small Eastern flank countries as likely to place them in a position of increasing insecurity vis-a-vis Russia. This, very much, shows the perils of the logic of attractiveness that these countries have so far adopted for their security.

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