

Russian Nuclear Rhetoric 2014-2023: Transatlantic Differences in Threat Perception

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After decades of discourse on disarmament and non-proliferation, the war in Ukraine has effectively marked the return of nuclear weapons to both mainstream public rhetoric and military-policy planning, and highlighted the growing importance of strategic deterrence. Russia's progressively more intense nuclear saber-rattling over the past decade is partly due to an updated NATO posture and gradual commitments by Western nuclear powers to update their arsenals. While Western analysts have consistently reported seeing few substantive changes on the ground to accompany Russian verbiage, the escalatory pattern is frequently compared to the Cuban missile crisis at the height of the Cold War. In contrast, the Eastern European Baltic states, typically at the forefront of Russia's containment agenda, consider Russia's nuclear rhetoric with seemingly little concern, discounting the threats as empty. A regularly under-appreciated product of differing Cold War experiences, the gap between these divergent transatlantic perspectives has barely changed despite substantial changes to the geopolitical situation against which the nuclear rhetoric has sounded.

This paper traces and compares the transatlantic perceptions of Russia's nuclear rhetoric from the start of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 to the latest round of escalatory threats issued in early 2023. It is based on a review of open-source literature, public opinion polls, and interviews with security experts previously conducted by the author. The paper starts with an outline of transatlantic positions based on previous research and proceeds to present a detailed narrative comparison in the context of Russia's conventional war in Ukraine that started in February 2022.

Russia's Nuclear Rhetoric and Gray Zone War in Ukraine

Over the past two decades, international conflict has increasingly moved away from state-vs-state warfare towards confrontations below the threshold of war. While Russia's incursion into Crimea in 2014 could still fit the latter pattern, the conflict turned decidedly conventional in 2022, breaking the pattern. More importantly, since 2014, Russia's increasingly blatant nuclear saber-rattling² has brought these weapons back from conceptual, doctrinal considerations into active battlefield context.

In response, in 2014 and 2015, the United States raised international concerns about Russia's violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty,³ in addition to the invasion of Crimea breaching the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. NATO as a whole seemed to integrate and adapt to these growing nuclear concerns, with the 2016 Warsaw communiqué bringing nuclear deterrence posture to the fore. In addition, the UK and France initiated the modernization of their nuclear programs, while the U.S. scrapped previous considerations of pulling American nuclear weapons from Germany. Indeed, Germany's particular historical public and political sensitivity to Russia's nuclear threats had been widely noted – and successfully leveraged by Russia as a deterrent and delay tactic vis-a-vis assistance to Ukraine.⁴

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² See, e.g., (16 December 2015). *Russian nuclear weapons have arrived in Crimea*. USA Today. <http://uatoday.tv/politics/russian-nuclear-weapons-have-arrived-in-crimea-dzhemilev-says-555248.html>; Sonne, P. (5 April 2015). *As tensions with West rise, Russia increasingly rattles nuclear saber*. The Wall Street Journal. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/as-tensions-with-west-rise-russia-increasingly-rattles-nuclear-saber-1428249620>

³ U.S. Department of State. (July 2014). *Adherence to and compliance with arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament agreements and commitments*; U.S. Department of State. (June 5, 2015). *Report on adherence to and compliance with arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament agreements and commitments*.

⁴ See, e.g., Lough, J. (2023). *The re-calibration of Germany's Russia policy*. The Conference on Russia Papers 2023. Tartu University Press. https://www.rusconf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Rus-conf_2023_web.pdf; Kutelia, B., Šliwa, Z., Gvineria, S. (2023). *The changing geopolitical tides of the Black Sea*. The Conference on Russia Papers 2023. Tartu University Press. https://www.rusconf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Rus-conf_2023_web.pdf; Platukyte, D. (Feb 20, 2023). *Praejus beveik metams nuo karo pradžios, puse Lietuvos gyventoju jauciasi saugus: pasitiki institucijomis ir*

In contrast, in the Baltic states, the nuclear aspect of the war in Ukraine did not substantively enter the narrative and has largely been discounted by local experts.⁵ For instance, in 2015, Russia's warnings to consider a nuclear response to any NATO deployments in the Baltics elicited less of a reaction than statements by Russian officials questioning the 1991 recognition of Baltic independence.⁶ Similarly, the deployment of nuclear-capable *Iskander* missiles to Kaliningrad in 2016 was met with less concern⁷ than Russian incursions into Baltic airspace⁸ or announcements of Russian conventional military exercises close to the Baltic borders.

A survey of threat perceptions among 22 Baltic security professionals conducted in March 2015 showed that most of them dismissed Russia's nuclear posturing as irrelevant and opposed any step-up in NATO's nuclear rhetoric as needlessly provocative.⁹ Estonian respondents viewed Russian nuclear posturing as mostly empty public rhetoric, attempting to reinforce Russia's superpower status and compensate for conventional force inferiority.¹⁰ Lithuanian respondents were uncomfortable with the very discussion of strategic and tactical utility of nuclear weapons, emphasizing their non-nuclear weapon state status and challenging the Cold War mentality as unhelpful.¹¹ Polish experts were generally an exception to these views, sharing an inclination for NATO to demonstrate its nuclear capabilities more visibly,¹² with hawkish marginal voices regularly cropping up to suggest Poland might like to host nuclear weapons in its territory.¹³

A follow-up round of interviews from May through July 2021 found the Baltic security experts more familiar with the nuclear discourse (e.g., referencing the INF treaty violations and strategic vs. tactical nuclear weapons) while still primarily focusing on NATO's conventional response to Russia in the search for an "appropriate mix" of nuclear and conventional capabilities.¹⁴ While Lithuanians found all types of Russian nuclear and conventional armaments equally threatening and were looking for a comprehensive allied response, Latvians expressed particular unease about the tactical nuclear weapons seen in Russia's exercises and the new dual-capable technologies in development.¹⁵

Retrospectively, the West assessed Russia's use of nuclear rhetoric from the start of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 as successful in deterring larger Western involvement,¹⁶ while in Eastern states, it remained seemingly irrelevant.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is important to note that the rhetoric was not matched by substantive

sajungininkais. LRT. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1914717/praejus-beveik-metams-nuo-karo-pradzios-puse-lietuvos-gyventoju-jauciasi-saugus-pasitikti-institucijomis-ir-sajungininkais>

⁵ Murauskaite, E. and Pomper, M. (Sep 2015). *NATO and the Baltics: Regional views on deterrence needs*. Danish Institute for International Studies. http://www.diiis.dk/files/media/documents/publications/nato_and_the_baltics_final_single.pdf

⁶ Hall, J. (April 2, 2015). *Putin threatens nuclear war*. The Daily Mail.

⁷ Agence France-Presse. (Oct 8, 2016). *Russia is deploying nuclear-capable missiles on NATO's doorstep, Lithuania says*. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-10-08/russia-deploying-nuclear-capable-missiles-natos-doorstep>

⁸ Milne, R., Jones, S., and Hille, K. (Sep 24, 2014). *Russian air incursions rattle Baltic states*. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/9d016276-43c3-11e4-baa7-00144feabdc0>

⁹ Murauskaite, E. and Pomper, M. (Sep 2015). *NATO and the Baltics: Regional views on deterrence needs*. Danish Institute for International Studies. http://www.diiis.dk/files/media/documents/publications/nato_and_the_baltics_final_single.pdf; Pomper, M., Murauskaite, E., Sokov, N.S., and Varnum J.C. (Dec 2015). *Ensuring deterrence against Russia: The view from NATO's front-line states*. Occasional Paper, Heinrich Boell Foundation U.S.

¹⁰ Pomper, M., Murauskaite, E., Sokov, N. S., and Varnum J. C. (Dec 2015). *Ensuring deterrence against Russia: The view from NATO's front-line states*. Occasional Paper, Heinrich Boell Foundation U.S. <https://us.boell.org/sites/default/files/ensuring-deterrence-against-russia.pdf>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See, e.g., (Dec 6, 2015). *Poland considering asking for access to nuclear weapons under Nato program*. Guardian. <http://tinyurl.com/pqojqzr>

¹⁴ Murauskaite, E. E. (Oct 15, 2021). *Baltic perspectives on U.S. and transatlantic nuclear negotiations with Russia*. Foreign Policy Research Initiative. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/10/baltic-perspectives-on-u-s-and-transatlantic-nuclear-negotiations-with-russia/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Schlosser, E. (Jan 18, 2023). *The greatest nuclear threat we face is a Russian victory*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/russias-invasion-ukraine-war-nuclear-weapon-nato/672727/>; (Feb 20, 2023). *Seven ways Russia's war on Ukraine has changed the world*. Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/02/seven-ways-russias-war-ukraine-has-changed-world#nuclear-weapons--risks-return>

¹⁷ Pomper, M., Murauskaite, E., Sokov, N. S., and Varnum J. C. (Dec 2015). *Ensuring deterrence against Russia: The view from NATO's front-line states*. Occasional Paper, Heinrich Boell Foundation U.S. <https://us.boell.org/sites/default/files/ensuring-deterrence-against-russia.pdf>

changes in Russia's nuclear posture (e.g., the rate of production, deployment plans, the number of tests, etc.), with only a step-up in air patrols by strategic bombers.¹⁸

Nuclear Weapons in Baltic Security Culture

These transatlantic differences in nuclear threat perceptions seem to baffle Western experts continuously. They can largely be explained by the lack of historical experience and involvement with nuclear strategy during the Cold War. Russia did not include the Baltic Soviet republics in nuclear decision-making, and since joining NATO, they have typically chosen to follow the positions of the alliance's nuclear-weapon states.¹⁹ Contextually, it is important to appreciate that public discourse on any defense and security matters was virtually non-existent until 2014, with only technocratic discussions on defense acquisitions or related corruption occasionally surfacing in domestic news cycles.²⁰ In the nuclear realm, risks related to nuclear power plants have been seen as a much more dire threat. Namely, Russia's construction of a nuclear power plant in Ostrovets, Belarus was met with considerable political and public opposition built around fears of a Chernobyl disaster repeat.²¹

Russia's Nuclear Rhetoric and Conventional War in Ukraine

1. February 2022

February 2022 marked a new stage of escalatory Russian nuclear posturing in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. On Feb 19, Russia conducted an exercise of its strategic nuclear forces, presided over by President Putin,²² and deployed *Kinzhal* missiles in Kaliningrad – a hypersonic conventional weapon theoretically capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.²³ Shortly thereafter, in a speech justifying Russia's incursion into Ukraine on Feb 24, Putin did not issue an explicit nuclear threat but was widely interpreted in the West as doing so between the lines: “No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.”²⁴ Furthermore, on Feb 27, Russia's nuclear forces were moved to a ‘special mode of combat duty.’²⁵

The reactions in the West were firm but calm, trying to allay the Cold War fears that the Russian rhetoric was aimed at rekindling. U.S. President Joe Biden said Americans should not worry about a nuclear war.²⁶ Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called this “a critical moment in history, [...] When a nuclear power like Russia massively invades a neighbouring country and at the same

¹⁸ Sokov, N. (2016). *Russian perspective on nuclear disarmament and the post-nuclear world*. In Hynek, N. and Smetana, M. (eds.) *Global nuclear disarmament: Strategic, political, and regional perspectives*. Routledge.

¹⁹ Murauskaite, E. E. (2018). *Nuclear matters: Lithuanian security culture in the context of NATO trends*. Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review 2017-2018, Vol. 16, pp. 35-58.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Milne, R. and Foy, H. (Sep 19, 2017). *Russian-built nuclear plant revives Chernobyl fears*. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/a98322de-96f7-11e7-b83c-9588e51488a0>; Naprys, E. (Sep 6, 2017). *Du trecdaliai lietuviu izvelgia gresme del Astravo atomines elektrines*. <https://www.15min.lt/verslas/naujiena/energetika/du-trecdaliai-lietuviu-izvelgia-gresme-del-astravo-atomines-elektrines-664-849598>; BNS. (March 9, 2016). *Astravo statyba: svarbiausios datos*. Delfi. <https://www.delfi.lt/verslas/energetika/astravo-ae-statyba-salia-lietuvos-svarbiausios-datos.d?id=70650520>

²² Reuters. (Feb 19, 2022). *Russia launches hypersonic missiles as part of nuclear drills*.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-launches-hypersonic-missiles-part-nuclear-drills-2022-02-19/>

²³ Roblin, S. (Feb 8, 2022). *Russia deploys hypersonic missile to Baltic in range of NATO capitals*. Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastienroblin/2022/02/08/russia-deploys-hypersonic-missile-to-baltic-in-range-of-nato-capitals/>

²⁴ Fisher, M. (Feb 24, 2022). *Putin's case for war, annotated*. New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/putin-ukraine-speech.html>

²⁵ Luxmoore, M. (Feb 27, 2022). *Putin puts nuclear forces in a 'special mode of combat duty'*. Wall Street Journal.

<https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-02-26/card/putin-puts-nuclear-forces-in-a-special-mode-of-combat-duty--WKMRkTauWFNnWy26hZar>

²⁶ Bose, N. (March 1, 2022). *Biden says Americans should not worry about nuclear war after Russian actions*. Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-hosts-calls-with-allies-after-putin-put-nuclear-deterrent-alert-2022-02-28/>

time threatens anyone who wants to intervene to use its nuclear weapons against them.”²⁷ France’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, reminded that “NATO, too, is a nuclear alliance” but ruled out any direct NATO military involvement in Ukraine.²⁸ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called this rhetoric dangerous and irresponsible.²⁹ The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Linda Thomas-Greenfield, criticized Russia for “another escalatory and unnecessary step that threatens us all,” with many in the U.S. administration reportedly concerned “how quickly the Ukraine crisis could spin into a direct superpower confrontation.”³⁰ Nina Tannenwald, a U.S. scholar prominent on the nuclear use taboo, noted that Putin was fond of regularly brandishing nuclear threats – thus diminishing their weight – and was using it as a means to appeal to great power status.³¹

Meanwhile, in Lithuania, Russia’s nuclear rhetoric mainly was reported as a measure to scare the West,³² hardly attracting any special attention (with the focus on the outbreak of conventional war). Lithuania’s Minister of Defense, Arvydas Anusauskas, was the only one to comment on the matter, saying the increased readiness of Russia’s nuclear forces might be part of the ongoing exercise and “the last trump card to intimidate the West.”³³ The Lithuanian armed forces issued an unofficial comment that “Russia’s increase of nuclear force readiness might have no tangible meaning,” noting the regrettably rattling effect this rhetoric managed to have in the world.³⁴ In May 2022, a Lithuanian military expert, Darius Antanaitis, noted that Putin had started brandishing nuclear weapons as a measure of last resort, with their use highly unlikely.³⁵

In Poland, a volunteer interviewed in a city close to the border where nuclear-capable missiles are stationed noted, “of course people are afraid,” while at the same time cognizant that the same rhetoric has been used during Russia’s 2014 operation in Ukraine.³⁶

2. April 2022

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has stirred the debate about Finland and Sweden joining NATO in mid-April 2022. Russia reacted with another round of aggressive nuclear rhetoric, threatening to deploy nuclear weapons to the Baltics. It is worth recalling that similar nuclear saber-rattling occurred ahead of NATO’s expansion to include the Baltic states two decades ago.³⁷

Lithuania’s Minister of Defense, Arvydas Anusauskas, considered this threat as nothing new, with nuclear weapons already stationed in Kaliningrad.³⁸ Interestingly, the Lithuanian public did not seem to share this

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- ²⁷ Reuters. (Feb 24, 2022). *EU says Putin's ominous threat to those who hinder him marks 'critical moment'*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-says-putins-ominous-threat-those-who-hinder-him-marks-critical-moment-2022-02-24/>
- ²⁸ Reuters. (Feb 24, 2022). *France says Putin needs to understand NATO has nuclear weapons*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-says-putin-needs-understand-nato-has-nuclear-weapons-2022-02-24/>
- ²⁹ Bugos, S. (March 2022). *Putin orders Russian nuclear weapons on higher alert*. Arms Control Association. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-03/news/putin-orders-russian-nuclear-weapons-higher-alert>
- ³⁰ Sanger, D. E., and Broad, W. J. (Feb 27, 2022). *Putin declares a nuclear alert, and Biden seeks de-escalation*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/27/us/politics/putin-nuclear-alert-biden-deescalation.html>
- ³¹ Tannenwald, N. (March 10, 2022). *'Limited' tactical nuclear weapons would be catastrophic*. Scientific American. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/limited-tactical-nuclear-weapons-would-be-catastrophic/>
- ³² See, e.g., (Feb 25, 2022). *Putinas grasina Vakarams branduoliniu ginklu*. Delfi. <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/world/putinas-grasina-vakarams-branduoliniu-ginklu.d?id=89557449>; (Feb 28, 2022). *Kijevo link artinasi 64 km ilgio okupantu kolona, Ukrainos prezidentas praso neskraidymo zonos*. Verslo zinios. <https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2022/02/28/v-zelenskis-artimiausios-24-val--lemiamos#ixzz82ize5vwd>
- ³³ (Feb 27, 2022). *Lietuvoje Ukrainai surinkta kalnai paramos, G.Landsbergis kalba apie naujas sankcijas rusu laivams*. 15min. https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/g-landsbergis-su-es-kolegomis-aptars-tolesne-parama-ukrainai-56-1647344?utm_medium=copied
- ³⁴ (March 28, 2022). *Lietuvos kariuomene: siandien reaguojame viesu atsakymu i klausima „ar mums bijoti branduolinio ginklo?“* Jonavos Zinios. <https://www.jonavoszinios.lt/naujiena/lietuvos-kariuomene-siandien-reaguojame-viesu-atsakymu-i-klausima-ar-mums-bijoti-branduolinio-ginklo>
- ³⁵ Rutkauskas, A. (Feb 28, 2022). *Ginkluotes ir karybos ekspertas D. Antanaitis: yra keturi atvejai, kai Rusija gali panaudoti branduolini ginkla*. Lrytas. <https://www.lrytas.lt/it/ismanyk/2023/05/25/news/rusu-propagandistai-vel-apsikvailino-tiek-klaidu-kad-net-patys-rusai-suabejojo-paskleista-zinia-27154837>
- ³⁶ Geiger, K. and Kalus, D. (Feb 28, 2022). *Kaliningrad revisited: Where Putin's nuclear threat is most chilling*. Worldcrunch. <https://worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/russia-nuclear-weapons>
- ³⁷ Knudsen, O. F. (ed). (1999). *Stability and security in the Baltic Sea region: Russian, Nordic and European aspects*. Routledge.
- ³⁸ Seldin, J. (April 14, 2022). *US spy chief warns of Russia's nuclear threats, 'Potential Desperation'*. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-spy-chief-warns-of-russia-s-nuclear-threats-potential-desperation-/6529922.html>

nonchalant view at the time. A public opinion poll conducted in March 2022 showed that 73% of respondents were concerned about Russia's use of a nuclear weapon in Ukraine.³⁹

A senior European official summed up the sentiment as follows: "mention in a sentence the word 'nuclear' and [hope] everybody will pull back. [...] We have nukes as well. NATO has nukes," noting how this did have some impact at the start of the war in Ukraine.⁴⁰

The Scandinavians also seemed unimpressed. Sweden's former Prime Minister Carl Bildt called it a "fairly empty threat," and a prominent Danish-American nuclear scholar Hans Kristensen saw this as Russia's attempt to compensate for conventional inferiority.⁴¹

The U.S. took this round of threats the most seriously. Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns cited Putin's growing despair over battlefield failures in Ukraine as a potential factor to reach for a nuclear option: "We're obviously very concerned," but "so far we haven't seen a lot of practical evidence of the kind of deployments or military dispositions that would reinforce that concern."⁴² The former chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, and Senator Mitt Romney seemed convinced that Russia could use a tactical nuclear weapon first in an attempt to "escalate to de-escalate."⁴³

Notably, Dmitry Muratov, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and former head of Russia's *Novaya Gazeta*, commented on Russia's persistent efforts to gradually normalize the prospect of the use of nuclear weapons in the eyes of Russians, with nuclear threats being part of it⁴⁴ (information campaign about alleged Ukrainian and Western nuclear threats against Russia being the other part).

3. September 2022

With Ukraine's counter-offensive proceeding gainfully in late September 2022, Vladimir Putin has moved to more explicit nuclear threats. He threatened to use "all available means" to defend Russia's territorial integrity, including Ukrainian territories Russia was now recognizing as its own, and stressed that "This is not a bluff."⁴⁵ Furthermore, the Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, urged Putin to "consider using low-yield nuclear weapons in Ukraine,"⁴⁶ illustrating not only the dangerous brinkmanship but also the increasing normalization of nuclear threats within Russia.

In Lithuania, this did not elicit significant official commentary: a military analyst, Darius Antanaitis, noted in an interview that Russia's use of a tactical nuclear weapon was probable but "would not be a big deal."⁴⁷

The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, spoke at the UN Security Council in strict condemnation, urging all states to signal to Putin that "these reckless nuclear threats must stop immediately."⁴⁸ U.S. President Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, conveyed that the U.S. was communicating to

³⁹ (April 26, 2022). *Lietuvos nerimo indeksas: beveik kiekvienas lietuvis nuolat jaučia nerimą*. SB Draudimas.

<https://sbdraudimas.lt/lietuvos-nerimo-indeksas-beveik-kiekvienas-lietuvis-nuolat-jaucia-nerima/>

⁴⁰ Gehrke, J. (April 14, 2022). *Russia's latest nuclear threat rings hollow in Baltic states*. Washington Examiner.

<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/russias-latest-nuclear-threat-rings-hollow-in-baltic-states>

⁴¹ Haltiwanger, J. (April 14, 2022). *Russia tries to scare Finland and Sweden away from NATO by threatening to deploy nukes in the Baltics, which it's already done*. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/lithuania-shrugs-off-russias-threat-to-deploy-nukes-to-the-baltics-2022-4>

⁴² Seldin, J. (April 14, 2022). *US spy chief warns of Russia's nuclear threats, 'potential desperation'*. VOA.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-spy-chief-warns-of-russia-s-nuclear-threats-potential-desperation-6529922.html>

⁴³ Korb, L. and Cimbalá, S. (May 31, 2022). *Russia's nuclear threat inflation: Misguided and dangerous*. Just Security.

<https://www.justsecurity.org/81703/russias-nuclear-threat-inflation-misguided-and-dangerous/>

⁴⁴ (May 4, 2022). *Nobelio premijos laureatas: Rusijos propaganda kalba apie branduoliniu ginklu panaudojimą*. TV3.

<https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/uzsienis/nobelio-premijos-laureatas-rusijos-propaganda-kalba-apie-branduoliniu-ginklu-panaudojima-n1165521>

⁴⁵ (Sept. 22, 2022). *Russia-Ukraine war: Russia is denounced at U.N. over nuclear threat and alleged war crimes*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/22/world/russia-ukraine-putin-news>

⁴⁶ Sanger, D. E., Troianovski, A., and Barnes, J. E. (Oct 1, 2022). *In Washington, Putin's nuclear threats stir growing alarm*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/01/world/europe/washington-putin-nuclear-threats.html>

⁴⁷ (Sep 21, 2022). *Karybos ekspertas: „Branduolinio ginklo panaudojimas tikėtinas, tačiau tai nera didele drama.“* TV3.

<https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/video/karybos-ekspertas-branduolinio-ginklo-panaudojimas-tiketinas-taciau-tai-nera-didele-drama-n1190638>

⁴⁸ (Sept. 22, 2022). *Russia-Ukraine war Russia is denounced at U.N. over nuclear threat and alleged war crimes*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/22/world/russia-ukraine-putin-news>

Moscow through private channels the “catastrophic consequences” of such actions, but many senior American officials viewed the prospect of Russia’s nuclear use as increasing.⁴⁹

Following an apparently strict exchange between Russian and Western leadership, the escalatory nuclear rhetoric was perceived as defused. In December 2022, Germany’s Chancellor Olaf Scholz claimed that “Russia has ceased its nuclear threats in response to the red line drawn by the international community.”⁵⁰ Similarly, in March 2023, a senior European official noted that the threats have gone quiet, referring to them as another scare tactic.⁵¹

4. March 2023

On March 25, 2023, Putin announced Russia’s plans to place non-strategic nuclear weapons in Belarus (allegedly at Belarus’ request) while retaining command and control over them.⁵² The statement contradicted the joint announcement Putin made with China’s leader Xi Jinping on March 22, 2023: “All nuclear powers must not deploy nuclear weapons outside their national territories.”⁵³ While this latest nuclear threat has received by far the most public attention in Lithuania, compared to previous rhetoric, the reactions were mostly calm and dismissive across the Atlantic.

Lithuania’s Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte dismissed the threat as “nothing new,” while the Minister of Defense Arvydas Anusauskas called the threat “quite strange [...] Nuclear weapons have always been kept in Kaliningrad [...] the international community, the countries in the region, are perfectly aware of this.”⁵⁴ Anusauskas further elaborated that “since Putin is no longer viewed as a rational actor, his threats no longer intimidate or surprise anyone,” calling this an escalatory message for the West to stop supporting Ukraine⁵⁵ and suggesting economic sanctions as a proportionate Western response.⁵⁶ Lithuania’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gabrielius Landsbergis, pointed to Russia’s nuclear threats as empty rhetoric betraying the regime’s weakness and pointed out that the suggested deployment date would coincide with NATO’s 2023 Summit in Vilnius.⁵⁷ Yet, rather than dismissing it, he called for a NATO response in the form of “Serious sanctions, troop deployments in the Baltics and more air + sea defence systems” to “send a message of solidarity and determination.”⁵⁸ Linas Linkevičius, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and of Defence, called this a scare tactic and Putin’s information campaign but also pointed out to this rhetoric as an attempt to maintain U.S. attention on the European theater, rather than the confrontation with China.⁵⁹

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ (Dec 8, 2022). *Scholzas: tarptautinis spaudimas sumazino Rusijos keliama branduoline gresme.*

<https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/uzsienis/scholzas-tarptautinis-spaudimas-sumazino-rusijos-keliama-branduoline-gresme-n1205566>

⁵¹ Banco, E. (March 27, 2023). *Putin is trying to distract with fresh nuclear threat, Western officials say.* Politico.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2023/03/27/putin-nuclear-threat-belarus-00089065>

⁵² TASS. (March 26, 2023). *Russia to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus at request of Minsk, says Putin.*

<https://tass.com/russia/1594483>

⁵³ TASS. (March 22, 2023). *Russia, China convinced that nuclear war must never be unleashed — joint statement.*

<https://tass.com/russia/1592589>

⁵⁴ Reuters (April 14, 2023). *Russia already has nuclear weapons in the Baltic region, says Lithuania.*

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-already-has-nuclear-weapons-baltic-region-says-lithuania-2022-04-14/>

⁵⁵ (March 28, 2023). *Anusauskas apie branduolinio ginklo dislokavima Baltarusijoje: „Matyt, maza sankciju“.* TV3.

<https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/video/anusauskas-apie-branduolinio-ginklo-dislokavima-baltarusijoje-matyt-maza-sankciju-n1226606>; (March 26, 2023). *Ukraina ragina Vakarų imtis veiksmų prieš Rusijos branduolinią santazą.* Verslo Zinios.

<https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2023/03/26/a-anusauskas-zinia-apie-branduolinio-ginklo-dislokavima-baltarusijoje-siekiamas-ibauginti#ixzz81rKNNHs1>

⁵⁶ (March 28, 2023). *Budrys: Baltarusijoje dislokuodama branduolini ginkla Rusija pazeistu tarptautine teise.* BNS.

<https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/uzsienis/budrys-baltarusijoje-dislokuodama-branduolini-ginkla-rusija-pazeistu-tarptautine-teise-n1226695>

⁵⁷ Tirone, J. (March 28, 2023). *Putin’s Belarus nuclear move is at odds with China pledge.* Japan Times.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/28/world/putin-nuclear-china-pledge/>; (April 4, 2023). *Landsbergis ragina NATO atsakyti i Maskvos planus del branduolinio ginklo Baltarusijoje.* BNS.

<https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/uzsienis/landsbergis-ragina-nato-atsakyti-i-maskvos-planus-del-branduolinio-ginklo-baltarusijoje-n1228439>

⁵⁸ Tirone, J. (March 28, 2023). *Putin’s Belarus nuclear move is at odds with China pledge.* Japan Times.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/28/world/putin-nuclear-china-pledge/>

⁵⁹ (March 31, 2023) *Teorija apie branduolini smugi Lietuvai Linkevičius vadina blefu: „Gasdinama tol, kol bijo“.* TV3.

<https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/video/teorija-apie-branduolini-smugi-lietuvai-linkevicius-vadina-blefu-gasdinama-tol-kol-bijo-n1227387>

Interestingly, the Lithuanian President's office was taking the Russian threats perhaps the most seriously. The President's chief adviser, Asta Skaisgiryte, said, "this rhetoric should be taken seriously," and the move, if implemented, "would constitute escalation," also noting that the prospect of Russia's use of a nuclear weapon "cannot be ruled out."⁶⁰ Similarly, the President's chief adviser on national security issues, Kestutis Budrys, said these threats "shouldn't be ignored as mere propaganda" and saw it as "a message to us [Lithuania]" even though he thought the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus "wouldn't fundamentally change things" and found NATO's rhetorical response proportionate.⁶¹

Latvia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkevics saw no need to "over-dramatize" this move, saying Russia uses "this as some kind of bargaining chip. Something to blackmail our societies," and called for additional sanctions in response.⁶² Similarly, Poland's European Union Affairs Minister Szymon Szykowski vel Sek called for "calm and firm" reactions, "We cannot let them frighten us. We should continue our efforts to support Ukraine."⁶³

U.S. and European officials also dismissed this as a scare tactic to distract from Russia's failure to advance on the battlefield in Ukraine, with intelligence and satellite imagery showing no signs of the threatened moves.⁶⁴ Accordingly, John Kirby, the spokesman for the U.S. National Security Council, said there was "no indication he [Putin] has any intention to use nuclear weapons."⁶⁵ NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu noted that "we have not seen any changes in Russia's nuclear posture that would lead us to adjust our own," while condemning the rhetoric as "dangerous and irresponsible."⁶⁶ The EU was ready to "respond with further sanctions," according to Josep Borrell, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.⁶⁷

Interestingly, Western officials saw such rhetoric as an attempt to intimidate the Ukrainians,⁶⁸ while Western analysts saw U.S. and NATO governments as the primary audience for this message—with Russia intending to pressure Ukraine's Western partners to stop providing military assistance.⁶⁹ On the other hand, the former nuclear nonproliferation director of the IAEA, Tariq Rauf, assessed Putin's statements as "signaling to a domestic audience, trying to reassure his own public that Russia is doing OK, that the war in Ukraine is going all right."⁷⁰

It may also be worth noting that the suggested deployment of Russia's nuclear weapons remained unpopular in Belarus. According to a Chatham House public opinion survey conducted in March 2023, 75 percent of respondents opposed such a move.⁷¹ However, this was down from 80 percent last year, with support levels higher among respondents consuming state media.⁷²

⁶⁰ Masiokaite-Liubiniene, A. (April 4, 2023). *A. Skaisgiryte: i grasinimus del branduolinio ginklo Baltarusijoje reikia ziureti rimtai*. Etaplus. <https://etaplus.lt/naujiena/a-skaisgiryte-i-grasinimus-del-branduolinio-ginklo-baltarusijoje-reikia-ziureti-rimtai>

⁶¹ (March 28, 2023). *Budrys apie branduolinio ginklo dislokavima Baltarusijoje: „Tai musu situacija blogina“*. TV3. <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/video/budrys-apie-branduolinio-ginklo-dislokavima-baltarusijoje-tai-musu-situacija-blogina-n1226600>

⁶² Smolinski, P. (April 2, 2023). *Latvian foreign minister urges NATO not to "overreact" to Russia's plans for tactical nukes in Belarus*. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/latvia-on-russias-tactical-nuclear-weapons-belarus/>

⁶³ Tirone, J. (March 28, 2023). *Putin's Belarus nuclear move is at odds with China pledge*. Japan Times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/28/world/putin-nuclear-china-pledge/>

⁶⁴ Banco, E. (March 27, 2023). *Putin is trying to distract with fresh nuclear threat, Western officials say*. Politico. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/03/27/putin-nuclear-threat-belarus-00089065>

⁶⁵ (March 26, 2023). *John Kirby on "Face the Nation"*. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-kirby-face-the-nation-transcript-03-26-2023/>

⁶⁶ Troianovski, A., Shankar, V., and Higgins, A. (March 26, 2023). *Putin says he could put tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus by Summer*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/26/world/europe/russia-ukraine-putin-belarus.html>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Banco, E. (March 27, 2023). *Putin is trying to distract with fresh nuclear threat, Western officials say*. Politico. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/03/27/putin-nuclear-threat-belarus-00089065>

⁶⁹ Shraibman, A. (March 28, 2023). *Hosting Russian nuclear weapons will have far-reaching consequences for Belarus*. Carnegie Politika. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89394>

⁷⁰ Tirone, J. (March 28, 2023). *Putin's Belarus nuclear move is at odds with China pledge*. Japan Times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/28/world/putin-nuclear-china-pledge/>

⁷¹ (April 14, 2023). *More supporters of nuclear weapons in Belarus – survey*. EURadio. <https://euroradio.fm/en/more-supporters-nuclear-weapons-belarus-survey>

⁷² Ibid.

On a somber final note, one would be remiss not to mention the emerging normalization of the prospect of nuclear weapons use in the Russian public psyche, achieved through media narrative shaping throughout 2022. For instance, a Levada public poll conducted in April 2023 revealed that nearly a third of Russian respondents expect their government to launch a nuclear strike against Ukraine, and also a third of all respondents would justify such course of action.⁷³ Indeed, Russia's state-controlled media has been touting and celebrating such a prospect since the war in Ukraine had turned conventional, with the level of public enthusiasm for nuclear weapons' use reportedly surpassing Cold War realities.⁷⁴ In contrast, a survey conducted by the European Council of Foreign Relations in March 2023 revealed that the perceived level of threat posed by Russia's nuclear weapons has declined across Europe,⁷⁵ suggesting growing fatigue and emerging inoculation to the increasingly repeated threats.

Conclusions

This paper has reviewed and compared the transatlantic perceptions of Russia's nuclear rhetoric issued in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, as it turned from a gray zone into a conventional war. The Baltic states that historically lack familiarity with nuclear escalation discourse continue to perceive the nuclear threat as minimal, while in the West, the situation has brought back Cold War fears. Russia's nuclear saber-rattling has only recently started to attract more substantive public (dismissive) commentary from Baltic policymakers, while public opinion surveys suggest Russia's messaging did have an impact. Western leaders have maintained a position that Russia's nuclear rhetoric has so far not been translated to military activities to merit concern or reciprocation, even though their commentary conveyed considerably more concern.

In the Baltics, the repeated Russian threats of a similar nature seem to be having an inoculating effect and were still largely perceived as signals meant for the West. Contrary to common Western media propensity to profile places relatively close to the locations of Russian nuclear-capable weapons, people and policymakers in these places do not perceive themselves as the most likely targets of those weapons and do not display a particular concern over their use. In addition, while both Baltic and Western experts seem to agree that Russia's nuclear saber-rattling is used in part to balance out its conventional inferiority, it is important to appreciate the different implications this understanding seems to elicit. In the Baltics, this is seen as a positive sign confirming Russia's military decline, to be capitalized on, while in the West the take-away seems to be that of an increased (yet still relatively low) probability of nuclear use due to the lack of conventional options and thus cause for major concern.

In the U.S. and Western Europe, the prevalent view was that Russia's escalating nuclear rhetoric was successful in preventing more rapid and extensive Western support to Ukraine (e.g., providing longer range weapons in 2022). These threats were also perceived as tightly linked to Russia's battlefield performance in Ukraine – as attempts to reverse the humiliation of losses, or avoid seeming weak in the face of NATO's expansion. Interestingly, the messaging was increasingly perceived as being directed towards Russia's domestic audience – rather than Western capitals. Overall, the scale of Western audiences (both, among the general public and political leadership) seemingly receptive to Russia's nuclear weapons parlance seems to be declining. In certain countries arguably hyper-sensitized to the matter during the Cold War (such as the U.S. or Germany), Russia's messaging has arguably been successful in limiting the scope of (re)actions vis a vis Ukraine, but even there, the escalating threats seem to be gradually losing their bite.

As of this writing, there does not appear to be a convergence of views on, and threat perceptions of, Russia's nuclear rhetoric across the Atlantic. However, both sides of the alliance do seem to appreciate the dangers posed by the increasing normalization and even glorification of these threats in the eyes of the Russian public.

⁷³ (May 15, 2023). *Apklausa: beveik trečdalis Rusijos gyventojų tikisi Putino branduolinio smūgio Ukrainai*. ELTA. <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/world/apklausa-beveik-trecdalis-rusijos-gyventoju-tikisi-putino-branduolinio-smugio-ukrainai.d?id=93358815>

⁷⁴ See, e.g., Schlosser, E. (Jan 18, 2023). *The greatest nuclear threat we face is a Russian victory*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/russias-invasion-ukraine-war-nuclear-weapon-nato/672727/>

⁷⁵ Krastev, I., and Leonard, M. (March 16, 2023). *Fragile unity: Why Europeans are coming together on Ukraine (and what might drive them apart)*. European Council of Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/fragile-unity-why-europeans-are-coming-together-on-ukraine/>