

Transcript from "In Focus with EANC" webinar, titled *Russia's War Against Ukraine and the Implications for European Security and Beyond: The Perspective from Estonia*.

In Focus with EANC virtual forum series, March 6, 2025

IN FOCUS WITH EANC: Russia's War Against Ukraine and the Implications for European Security and Beyond – The Perspective from Estonia

EANC President Mai-Liis Bartling (MLB):

Welcome everyone to tonight's In Focus with EANC session, titled *"Russia's War Against Ukraine and the Implications for European Security and Beyond – The Perspective from Estonia."* I am Mai-Liis Bartling, President of the Estonian American National Council, EANC.

A word about EANC (ERKÜ): Particularly when so much is happening on the world stage, it's crucial that Estonians in the U.S. have an advocate for their interests. For over 70 years, EANC has been the central organization for Estonian Americans. It has a nationally elected council, and its dual mission is to ensure that the collective voice of Estonian Americans is heard and to support local Estonian communities and cultural projects. You can find us at www.estosite.org or on Facebook.

These are perilous and unsettling times. We are deeply concerned for Ukraine in its fight for freedom and sovereignty in the face of Russian aggression. We are concerned for broader Baltic and European security, and we are concerned for the rapidly shifting U.S. foreign policy. We may not all be of one mind on every matter. We might want to turn inward, but instead, let's reach out to support Ukraine and stand together for a secure Europe.

Our goals this evening are to share accurate, up-to-date information; to share the Estonian government's and European perspective; to encourage Estonian Americans to make their voices heard; and to provide the tools and resources to do so. We also want to provide an opportunity for questions.

We're pleased to have two knowledgeable, capable speakers with us this evening. First, Estonian Ambassador to the U.S., Kristjan Prikk, who has served in this role since May 2021, his third diplomatic posting to Washington, D.C. Prior to this, he served as Permanent Secretary of the Estonian Ministry of Defense, Undersecretary for Defense Policy, Director of National Security and Defense Coordination, and on NATO issues at the Foreign Ministry. He holds a Master's from the U.S. Army War College and a Bachelor's in Political Science and Economics from the University of Tartu. He remains a reserve officer in the Estonian Defense Forces.

Our second speaker is Karl Altu, Managing Director of the Joint Baltic American National Committee (JBANC), which has represented the Baltic community in Washington, D.C. since 1961. Karl has worked for JBANC since 1997, conducting advocacy on behalf of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian American communities—especially during NATO accession and the Magnitsky campaign. He holds a journalism degree from Radford University and has lived and studied in Sweden, Finland, and Estonia.

Our moderator this evening is Maia Linask, Vice President of the EANC and U.S. delegate to the Estonian World Council, where she chairs the Foreign Policy Committee.

[00:14:00] Ambassador Kristjan Prikk:

Thank you very much, Mai-Liis, and thank you to everyone who has joined us today. My apologies for my voice—clearly I was a bit too enthusiastic about the spring weather.

I was asked to speak about Estonia's perspective on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the current situation, and what lies ahead.

To begin, while the full-scale war started in February 2022, Russia's aggression began over 11 years ago with the annexation of Crimea and the fomenting of conflict in the Donbas region.

The invasion of 2022 did not happen overnight. It was not the result of temporary friction or misunderstanding. It was a well-prepared and deliberately executed military and political campaign. In the months leading up to the invasion, Russia amassed its forces and issued ultimatums to NATO and the United States.

These demands made it clear that the war is not only about Ukraine—it is about redrawing the post-Cold War security architecture of Europe. Russia sought to force NATO to pull back to its 1997 posture, which would effectively remove the alliance's presence from much of Central and Eastern Europe—including Estonia. They also wanted to reduce the U.S. role in European security.

This war will determine the future of European—and global—security. Over the past few months, much has been said about the need for peace. And of course, we all want peace. But for it to be just and lasting, it must be based on the principles of international law—especially territorial integrity and sovereignty, as enshrined in the UN Charter.

If those principles are disregarded, no country with an aggressive neighbor can feel secure.

Unfortunately, we believe that Vladimir Putin has not changed his strategic objectives. His goals remain the same as before the full-scale invasion—subjugating Ukraine, undermining NATO, and diminishing U.S. influence in Europe.

Even today, he continues to restate those demands. Russia creates an illusion of strength, but in reality, we believe it is much weaker than it wants the world to believe.

Militarily, Russia is struggling with manpower and lacks key equipment. Economically, its national reserves are depleted, interest rates are soaring, and they've had to raise taxes and cut social spending—except for benefits to war veterans.

Ambassador Prikk discusses Estonia's role and Western policy recommendations:

Ambassador Kristjan Prikk (continued):

For peace to be lasting, we—meaning the Western alliance—must do three key things:

First, we must continue to pressure Russia both economically and politically. That means stronger sanctions, especially targeting the energy and banking sectors, and implementing secondary sanctions on entities that do business with Russia.

Second, we must sustain and expand military support to Ukraine. Not just promises, but timely and sufficient assistance based on Ukraine's current needs.

Third, we must agree on credible security guarantees for Ukraine. These must be in place the moment the fighting stops. Ukraine needs to believe that this time is different—that it won't be left vulnerable again.

Between 2014 and 2022, there were more than 25 ceasefire agreements. None held. So whatever guarantees are offered now must have real substance and real backing—from both Europe and the United States.

Some have asked whether Europe is serious about defense. I can tell you that Estonia is. While NATO sets a 2% of GDP defense spending benchmark, Estonia currently spends 3.4%, second only to Poland, and even ahead of the United States. Estonia's goal is to reach 4–5% of GDP in the coming years.

We are also among the top contributors to Ukraine. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, Estonia has provided over \$550 million in aid—about 2.03% of our GDP, the highest in the world proportionally. The Estonian government has committed to contributing at least 0.25% of GDP annually in continued support.

Europe as a whole is also stepping up. According to the Kiel Institute's tracking, European countries—both individually and through the EU—have committed and delivered around \$140 billion in aid. The U.S. has delivered just under \$120 billion.

Another important aspect of European support has been the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees. Estonia has received over 62,000 asylum applications—about 4.6% of our population. Countries like Portugal, far from the conflict zone, have also provided significant help, particularly to women, children, and the elderly.

I'll pause here so we have time for questions later. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak.

Karl Altai, Managing Director of JBANC (Joint Baltic American National Committee):

Hi, good evening. Thank you, Mai-Liis, and thank you to EANC for putting together and hosting this webinar. It's a valuable way to connect with our community and discuss these incredibly important issues.

A warm hello as well to Ambassador Prikk—it's great to be here with you. And I sympathize—we're both battling sore throats this week!

I'd like to break my comments into two parts:

First, a bit of background on JBANC—what we do and the networks we're a part of. This context is important to understanding the power and influence our community can have—especially here in Washington, D.C.

Second, I'll discuss key advocacy issues, concerns, and opportunities. As Mai-Liis said in her introduction, we want to give people tools to get involved—if you feel compelled to do something, we're here to help.

About JBANC:

The Joint Baltic American National Committee—JBANC—was formed in April 1961, so we're celebrating 64 years of advocacy next month. JBANC was created by three national organizations: the Estonian American National Council (EANC), the American Latvian Association (ALA), and the Lithuanian American Council (LAC).

Over the years, we've also worked closely with the Lithuanian American Community and the Baltic American Freedom League. Our job is to coordinate activities in Washington with Congress, the Administration, federal agencies, and the media. We also maintain strong ties with think tanks and the embassies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

We represent the **Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian American communities**, not the governments of those nations. Our focus has always been on **security, security, security**—especially now, with Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine.

When I first joined JBANC in 1997, our biggest effort was supporting NATO enlargement. From 1994 to 2004, the push for the Baltic states to join NATO was our primary advocacy goal. It took years of effort and coordination, but Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became full members in 2004. That historic achievement didn't happen overnight—it was built on the dedication of our communities.

One notable campaign was an old-school petition drive—actual paper petitions! We delivered them to the White House on September 10, 2001—just one day before 9/11. That timing underscored our message and left a lasting impression.

Since then, we've continued to focus on both **security and human rights**. We advocated for the **Magnitsky Act**, which imposed sanctions on Russian human rights violators and corrupt officials. That legislation still exists and is being enforced today.

Karl Altau's remarks, focus on **Baltic advocacy efforts and Congressional engagement**:

We've also supported efforts like the **Black Ribbon Day resolution**, which commemorates the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Baltic Way. Though the resolution only passed in the House of Representatives, we've managed to bring significant attention to August 23rd as a day of remembrance. We've held major events in Washington and across the U.S. and Canada to honor that history.

We also remember the **March and June deportations**—those tragic dates when thousands were forcibly removed from the Baltic States under Soviet rule.

But in the past dozen years, a major focus has been **Ukraine**—especially since Russia’s first invasion in 2014. We’ve worked closely with **Ukrainian American organizations** and broader coalitions like the **Central and East European Coalition (CEEC)**. CEEC brings together a range of heritage groups—including Polish, Ukrainian, Baltic, and others—to jointly advocate on Capitol Hill. It was formed in 1993, and both EANC and JBANC were founding members.

Congressional Outreach:

One of our most important areas of work is with Congress—especially through the **House Baltic Caucus** and the **Senate Baltic Freedom Caucus**.

These caucuses are **bipartisan**, and their numbers have grown substantially. In the last session of Congress, we had a record number of members in both caucuses. The House caucus had nearly 100 members—about one-fourth of the entire House! That’s a big deal for a community our size.

Current **House Baltic Caucus co-chairs** are:

- **Rep. Don Bacon** (R-NE), a former Air Force general
- **Rep. Salud Carbajal** (D-CA), who replaced previous co-chairs Ruben Gallego and Adam Schiff (both now U.S. Senators)

In the **Senate**, we have two longtime champions:

- **Sen. Dick Durbin** (D-IL), of Lithuanian heritage
- **Sen. Chuck Grassley** (R-IA), who has supported the Baltic nations since 1997

These leaders have helped advance legislation like the **Baltic Security Initiative** and the **Global Magnitsky Act**.

We also owe thanks to our JBANC board, which rotates leadership between the three national organizations. Right now, the **American Latvian Association** holds the presidency. And I want to give a big shout-out to my colleagues Lee, Hendrik, and Markus—our amazing office team and interns, many of whom came to us through programs like the **Baltic-American Freedom Foundation**.

We’re proud to bring rising talent from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to Washington. These interns play a critical role in helping us with research, outreach, and planning events like our **Baltic Advocacy Days**.

We’ve even partnered with a Korean-American internship program. Our Korean colleagues deeply understand what it’s like to live in a tough geopolitical neighborhood. They get us—and we get them.

Karl Altau presents the **Baltic Advocacy Days**—their goals, logistics, and how the public can get involved:

Let's now turn to the upcoming **Baltic Advocacy Days**, which will take place **March 31 through April 2**. This will be our **eighth** advocacy days event, and I'm pleased to report that **registration is already at a record high**. These will be fully **in-person events in Washington, D.C.**, and we're encouraging everyone to come join us on Capitol Hill.

This is a unique opportunity for **Baltic Americans—and all supporters—to meet directly with Members of Congress** and their staff. In the U.S., we're fortunate to have a system where constituents can walk into their representatives' offices, make appointments, and speak about the issues that matter most. That's a powerful tool, and we need to use it.

The structure of **Advocacy Days** looks like this:

- We help participants **schedule 2–3 meetings** with their senators and representatives.
- Meetings typically last **20–30 minutes**.
- We provide **briefing materials, one-pagers**, and training so participants feel prepared and confident.

For example, last summer we met with the staff of **Congressman Michael Turner**, chair of the House Intelligence Committee. Thanks in part to that relationship, he secured a major win: getting the **NATO Parliamentary Assembly** to hold its 2024 spring session in **Dayton, Ohio**—a first in over 20 years.

We also had a fantastic intern, **Leanna Kraft**, who designed our Advocacy Days logo. It symbolizes the unity and strength of Baltic Americans.

Advocacy Focus Areas

We like to keep things simple and focused. The top priorities this year are:

1. **The Baltic Security Initiative (BSI):**
This is our flagship security effort. It ensures that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania receive funding for defense cooperation with the U.S. The goal is to increase U.S. support to at least **\$375 million**. We're advocating for more robust and permanent defense structures.
2. **Support for Ukraine:**
While many issues fall under this category, we are focusing on clear legislative priorities—like the **Ukraine Lend-Lease Act** and other bills that underscore continued U.S. support for Ukraine's sovereignty and victory.

We're working closely with our **Ukrainian American partners** to align on messaging and priorities.

Program Overview

Here's what to expect during the three-day event:

- **Monday, March 31:**
A policy discussion hosted by the **Hudson Institute**, featuring a two-part panel with policy experts and a deep-dive briefing on advocacy strategy. An informal evening gathering is also planned.
- **Tuesday, April 1:**
A full day of advocacy meetings on Capitol Hill. That evening, we'll host a **Baltic Caucus Reception** in the Senate, with food, music, and networking.
- **Wednesday, April 2:**
Follow-up meetings and a closing social event near **Dupont Circle**.

You can **register via the QR code** or visit jbanc.org. The deadline to register is **March 23rd**.

If you can't attend in person, we'll also have **virtual options** and tools you can use to **email or call your representatives**. And if you're interested in learning more, we'll hold a **briefing webinar** in the coming weeks to walk participants through everything.

Q&A session moderated by **Dr. Maia Linask**, featuring questions from the audience to **Ambassador Kristjan Prikk** and **Karl Altau**:

Maia Linask (Moderator):

Thank you to both the Ambassador and Mr. Altau for the valuable information you've shared. We have a long list of audience questions, so I'll combine a few that are thematically similar to help cover as many topics as possible.

(Answers have been summarized):

Q1: Does the Estonian government believe Vladimir Putin wants to re-establish Russian control over former Soviet territories, including the Baltics?

Ambassador Prikk:

Yes. As I mentioned earlier, Russia has consistently demanded that NATO "return" to its 1997 posture. This would strip away the collective defense guarantees for countries like Poland, the Czech Republic—and yes, Estonia. That would effectively create a buffer zone between NATO and Russia. Estonia refuses to become such a buffer zone. We take this threat seriously.

Q2: How can we work with Republican members of Congress, especially when former President Trump has expressed more accommodating views toward Russia?

Karl Altau:

It's a fair question. Fortunately, **support for the Baltics in Congress is bipartisan** and still very strong. We've met with many Republicans who are longtime allies. For example,

Congressman **Don Bacon**, a Republican and Air Force veteran, co-chairs the **House Baltic Caucus**. Yes, party politics are real, but when it comes to Baltic and NATO security, many members understand the stakes.

The key is **constituent outreach**—Republican, Democrat, or Independent. Members pay attention when **their own voters call, write, or visit**. If your representative is Republican, reach out. Your voice matters.

Q3: What are the most effective arguments to convince skeptical Americans—especially conservatives—about why supporting Ukraine is in our national interest?

Ambassador Prikk:

I'd suggest three key points:

1. **Preventing Future Wars is Cheaper Than Fighting Them**
It's less costly—in lives and resources—to help Ukraine now than to respond to a wider war later.
2. **U.S. Economic and Security Interests Are Tied to a Stable Europe**
American jobs, trade, and prosperity are connected to peace in Europe.
3. **Authoritarianism Spreads When It's Not Stopped**
A victory for Russia in Ukraine would embolden other dictators. This is not just about Ukraine; it's about preserving a **rules-based world order**.

Karl Altau (adds):

And don't forget to tell personal stories—stories about your family, heritage, why freedom matters. And always, always remind people: **helping Ukraine means helping ourselves**.

Q4: What's the plan for winning the war? If there's no clear strategy to force Russia out, is negotiation the only option?

Ambassador Prikk:

Wars do not end simply because people get tired of fighting. They end with a clear outcome and negotiation based on strength. Right now, Russia believes it can **outlast us**—that the West will grow weary and give in. We must prove that wrong.

Yes, there will be negotiations. But before that, we need:

- Stronger **military support** for Ukraine.
- **Harsher sanctions**, especially targeting Russia's energy and banking sectors.
- **Credible post-war security guarantees** for Ukraine.

Only then can negotiations lead to a **just and durable peace**.

Q5: How does Estonia feel about France's idea of expanding its nuclear umbrella to protect other European countries? And would Estonia consider leaving the Ottawa Treaty on landmines?

Ambassador Prikk:

On landmines: This is an **active discussion** in Estonia. No decision has been made yet. Our Defense Forces are studying whether modern technologies can provide the same defense effects without needing to withdraw from the treaty.

On France's nuclear offer: It's part of a **constructive conversation**. President Macron is keeping the defense dialogue alive in Europe. That's valuable. Still, we believe that **conventional defense capabilities** must also be strengthened. Nuclear deterrence and conventional strength must go hand in hand.

EANC "In Focus" event — the closing Q&A and final remarks:

Q6: If the United States weakens or withdraws from NATO, what would happen to the alliance? Is Europe planning for a future without U.S. support?

Ambassador Prikk:

The U.S. is the cornerstone of NATO—politically, economically, and militarily. Without it, NATO wouldn't be the same. That said, I've spoken with individuals close to former President Trump who believe that even he now sees NATO as more effective than it was during his first term.

Meanwhile, **Europe is not sitting idle**. You've seen increased defense spending, new coalitions forming, and contingency planning for collective defense. Estonia's position remains: **we support NATO's strength and unity**, not creating an alternative structure. But the European mindset today is much more focused and serious than in past decades.

Q7: How do you respond to the claim that Russia was "promised" NATO wouldn't expand to its borders?

Ambassador Prikk:

That's a common Russian talking point—but it's **false** on multiple levels.

1. **No such promise was made.**
These claims go back to 1989, when the **Soviet Union** still existed—not Russia. Russia wasn't even at the table.
2. **Even Gorbachev himself denied it.**
The supposed quote from U.S. Secretary of State James Baker has been **misrepresented**. Gorbachev later confirmed that no such promise was made.
3. **Every sovereign country has the right to choose its own security arrangements.**
That's enshrined in the **UN Charter** and the **OSCE's Helsinki Final Act**.

If Russia says it's afraid of NATO, look at this fact: some of Russia's **closest military bases to NATO territory are empty**. The soldiers have been sent to fight and die in Ukraine. That alone shows Russia doesn't actually fear a NATO invasion—it just wants to control its neighbors.

Closing Remarks

Maia Linask (Moderator):

Thank you to everyone who submitted questions. On behalf of EANC, I want to extend our deep gratitude to Ambassador Kristjan Prikk and Mr. Karl Altau for sharing their insights. And thank you to all who attended—your engagement and support truly matter.

Please visit:

- estosite.org — for advocacy tools, mythbusters, and future events
- jbanc.org — to register for **Baltic Advocacy Days**
- washington.mfa.ee — the Estonian Embassy's official page

We hope this program gave you not just information—but **motivation** to act. Your voice matters.

Ambassador Prikk (final words):

"I would like to really sincerely thank the EANC for this excellent event, for this excellent opportunity, and for working tirelessly day in and day out. The (statements) letters that have recently been sent out to (community members and elected representatives), and also the plea for being active that was included with the invitation to today's event—were incredibly helpful. The argumentation in the (EANC Statement on Ukraine) is very eloquent and to the point. Thank you very much for the work that you do and for this event today."

And thank you also to every individual contributor today. Whether it's writing, calling your representatives, or sharing on social media—**every voice counts**.
