

The EU should learn from the Baltic states in its dealings with Russia

European leaders are divided over whether Ukraine should make territorial concessions to Russia to secure a peace deal. Drawing on the history of the Baltic states, Inese Zepa argues that ceding territory would enable future conflict and atrocities to take place in Ukraine and beyond.

With the war in Ukraine entering a protracted phase, opinions are divided over what kind of peace to fight for and how to achieve it. Such prominent thinkers as Henry Kissinger have advocated for peace at any cost, calling on Ukraine to surrender territory. According to this view, antagonising Moscow could have disastrous consequences for political stability in Europe. This narrative has been echoed by several of Europe's leading politicians, including French President Emmanuel Macron, who strives to mediate between Zelensky and Putin on these terms.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the Baltic states have fiercely resisted this idea, arguing there must be a clear outcome to this war: Ukraine repelling the invasion and Putin's army taking a walk of shame home. The new 'iron lady' in this matter, Estonian President Kaja Kallas, has been a particularly avid and influential figure in unequivocally supporting Ukrainian resistance against the Russian occupation. It might be tempting for some to dismiss the contributions of small states like Estonia as being too radical or naïve. However, the Baltic states should be heard on this topic, for they have the expertise and first-hand experience of dealing with Russia's foreign policy strategies and tools.

Russia's tactics in the occupied Ukrainian territories have not fundamentally changed from those used in Soviet times. Russia is aiming to destroy Ukrainian national identity and silence dissent. During the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states, my grandfather was tortured by the KGB for supporting the local resistance in Latvia. His sister was deported to Siberia in the 1940s for ten long years.

Following the restoration of independence in 1990, the Soviet Union attempted to regain control of the Baltic states by force. My father helped film the barricades in Riga in 1991, sending material to western European countries to inform them about Russian tanks on Dome Square. His colleague was shot in the process by 'Omon' forces (a special police branch of Russian National Guard). Many families in the Baltic states share similar memories of terror (even though Russian history books tell a different story). Sadly, we see parallels with the events in Ukraine today: the eradication of the Ukrainian language, culture, and, above all, people.

A dangerous narrative

Given this context, there are at least three reasons why the narrative that Ukraine should give up territory for peace is dangerous. First, ceding territory gives Russia a platform for future military and non-military interference in Ukraine's statehood. This war started as a 'special military operation to liberate Russian-speaking minorities in Donbas'. Days later, Russia tried to take Kyiv, oust President Zelensky, and launch a brutal war across the country. Russia's motives are imperialist, and history shows that appeasing dictators is futile. The Baltic states were 'traded for peace' by the Secret Protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939, resulting in five decades of devastating Soviet occupation. The lesson is that the absence of war does not equal peace.

Second, Russia is waging a war on Ukrainian identity, and territorial concessions might enable crimes against humanity to take place in Europe. Wrapped in the vague concept of *Russkiy mir* (Russian world), the Kremlin is seeking to suppress Ukrainian culture and language, while deporting Ukrainian citizens to Russia. Putin's speech on the eve of the war made this clear by effectively stating that Ukraine has no right to exist. This sounds terribly familiar to those of us in the Baltic states, where many families share broken generations from deportations and displacement during the Soviet occupation. The Soviet Union aimed to eliminate opposition, isolate the Baltic states from the West, and eradicate local culture. European leaders must not let the same thing happen in Ukraine by ceding land to Russia and erasing the human rights they claim to protect.

Third, giving up territory would justify the Russian invasion and raise the potential for conflict to take place beyond Ukraine in countries like Moldova. Every territorial concession to Russia aids the country's next military intervention, underpinned by relentless Russian state propaganda. Tolerating the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia encouraged the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas, stirred by Russia's standard narrative of 'protecting its citizens abroad'. That, in turn, led to the destruction we see in Ukrainian cities today. Russia's perpetual territorial ambitions have no place in a democratic Europe.

This raises the question of whether European leaders are unable or simply unwilling to halt Russia's aggression. The Baltic states are not only leading the way in their opposition to territorial concessions, they are also setting an example in their support for Ukraine. Lithuania alone raised five million euros in a fundraiser in just three days with a population of three million to purchase military equipment for Ukraine. In the words of Latvian Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, speaking shortly after Russia's tanks entered Ukraine, 'if we do not stand up to that, what is it that we stand for'.

Good intentions and words will mean little if we encourage Ukraine to give up territory and the rights of its citizens as the price for ending Russia's aggression. The only viable strategy is to support Ukraine until its sovereignty is no longer under threat.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
