

# Interview with the Honorable Ināra Mūrniece

## Minister of Defence of Latvia



### **PRISM: What are the most important outcomes from the recent NATO summit in Vilnius?**

Mūrniece: As the Minister of Defense of Latvia, I am very happy with the outcomes regarding trans-Atlantic defense and deterrence on the eastern flank of NATO. We are also very happy with defense planning for the Baltic states, scaling up the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) battle group to brigade level, thus fulfilling the commitments made at the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid. The endorsement of the rotational model of air defense which will be incrementally implemented for the Baltic countries situated on the eastern flank of NATO means more security and deterrence against Russia. Lessons learned from Ukraine show very clearly the necessity for air defense and how crucial it is to safeguarding our communities, our critical infrastructure, and most importantly human lives in our part of the world. We are also very pleased with the defense investment pledge. Latvia has committed to reaching 3 percent of GDP for defense by 2027, but with new defense capability projects and new procurements we will likely reach 3 percent next year. This shows how quickly we are developing our national armed forces. It is also great news that Finland has joined and very soon Sweden will join NATO—a decision I applaud as crucial for the security of the Baltic sea region and for the whole NATO alliance.

There was of course also a focus on Ukraine, with heads of state and government committing to further step up political and practical support. It is important that leaders decided to establish a NATO-Ukraine Council, in the inaugural meeting at which I was honored to participate and at which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was present. This was one of the significant outcomes of the Vilnius Summit in addition to a comprehensive assistance package for Ukraine. Latvia has already contributed 2 million euros to this assistance package and has decided to provide 6 million euros over the next 3 years.

Additionally, for the first time in NATO history there are concrete, complicated, and grounded defense plans for the eastern flank of NATO. This is important for us because we are situated in quite a vulnerable territory. These defense plans show a completely revised NATO military thinking that is now committed to defending all NATO territory from the very first centimeters and the very first seconds of a potential conflict. This is a significant change for the NATO mind-set and incorporates new military thinking. From the

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beginning of the year Latvia has been working on a new Military Defense Concept, which will be sent to our Parliament this autumn and reflects this new military thinking.

We need a more robust military presence on the eastern flank of NATO; in Madrid NATO leaders agreed to scale up the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence battle groups to combat-capable brigades. This endeavor is going very well with Canada—our framework nation. We have signed a concrete and precise roadmap of how we will scale up our battle group to a combat-capable brigade. A day before the Vilnius summit, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Canadian Minister of Defense Ms. Anita Anand, visited the Adazi military base. Canada will send fifteen Leopard 2 tanks to Latvia and they plan to double the number of troops in Latvia by 2026. We must do a lot to ensure the best host nation support for our Allies.

**PRISM: Why is Ukraine—nearly a thousand miles from Latvia—so important to Latvia?**

Mūrniece: Partly because of our history. Latvia was occupied for more than 50 years and Soviet troops occupied Latvia with incredible brutality. We have had our own Bucha. We know what Ukrainians are going through today and we have a lot of empathy for Ukrainians. In addition, we have a common border with Russia—an aggressor country—and Belarus. We would like to have good neighbors and partners, but must adapt to the situation as it is, with the help of NATO.

It is clear to us that Russia poses a great danger to the civilized world by undermining the rules-based world order. The war crimes committed by Russians in Ukraine threaten sovereignty of neighboring countries. For this and many other reasons it is clear to us that Ukraine must win this war with Russia, and that Russia must suffer strategic defeat. Without those two conditions there will be no long-lasting peace in our part of the world.

**PRISM: When would it be best for Ukraine to become a member of NATO?**

Mūrniece: It is clear that Latvia will support Ukraine until victory and after; our commitment in this regard is ironclad. NATO leaders decided that there is no need currently for a Membership Action Plan for Ukraine. This is a wise and timely decision because Ukraine already complies with NATO standards. The Latvian military trains Ukrainian soldiers; our commitment was to train 2,000 Ukrainian soldiers this year, but it is clear that we will train over 3,000—a comparatively big number. Ukrainians already comply with inter-operability criteria. Ukraine’s accession to NATO will be a decision of all NATO countries but Latvia together with our Baltic neighbors and Poland will support Ukraine’s accession to NATO as soon as it is possible: better sooner than later.

**PRISM: What are the main pillars of Latvia’s national security strategy? Sweden has “Total Defense” and Finland has “Comprehensive Defense:” what is Latvia’s strategic paradigm?**

Mūrniece: I mentioned the new Latvian Defense Concept and the new military thinking to defend our territory from the very first moment of potential conflict and the very first centimeters of our border. In addition we are developing Latvia’s Comprehensive Defence System which is very similar to the Total Defense concept, meaning that all of society, hand-in-hand, together with state institutions, local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individuals—all are responsible for Latvia’s defense. Everyone should know their place and their role; what to do in the first moments of crisis, how to help their communities, and how to ensure the military is successful at the front lines. We have learned a lot from Ukraine and shaped our state defense concept with lessons learned in Ukraine. It is clear that the military can be successful only when civil society supports it.

**PRISM: How is Latvia's private sector and civil society integrated into the national defense effort?**

Mürniece: We have organized a lot of training for the public sector as well as for our partners from local government to NGO's. And we are continuing our work on that. All the elements of the nation are integrated in national defense through exercises, workshops, providing information, etc.; we are working hard on this.

**PRISM: Is this the responsibility of the Ministry of Defense or is there a specialized agency in command?**

Mürniece: It is partially the Ministry of Defense which does its fair share. We consult with local government and state institutions about what to do in potential crisis situations. But the Ministry of Interior is responsible for civic defense. Therefore the job is divided by the Ministries of Defense and Interior hand-in-hand.

**PRISM: How does Latvia collaborate with its Baltic neighbors and what are the challenges?**

Mürniece: At the ministerial level, our cooperation is very collegial. We meet often; not only at NATO and EU ministerials, but we also organize additional meetings among the three Baltic ministers of defense. Our cooperation is very close with multiple cooperation projects between the armed forces of the three Baltic nations. For instance, together with Estonia we are jointly procuring a medium-range air defence system—the IRIS-T system—which will further secure the skies above Latvia and Estonia. With this system in place, we will build our own “LIVONIAN SHIELD.” Another example of our close cooperation is the air-policing mission. In 2024, during the renovation of Āmari Air Base in Estonia, NATO air-policing fighter jets and the whole support staff provided by Germany will be stationed in Lielvārde Air Base. We have signed a declaration on closer cooperation in regard to the

NATO Air Defence Rotational Model. More and more our cooperation is ongoing and practical. There is great value in cooperation between the three Baltic nations, and our cooperation is very practical. Regarding Enhanced Forward Presence we have three framework nations in the Baltic states. In our case we have Canada as our framework nation, while Estonia has the United Kingdom, and Lithuania has Germany. We have meetings of the three Baltic states and three framework nations plus NATO military commanders. So, it is not just cooperation between the Baltic states; it is more regional and much broader.

**PRISM: Has Latvia reinstated compulsory conscription.**

Mürniece: I have been in favor of conscription for many years, therefore I am very happy that under our political leadership it has become possible to re-introduce conscription in Latvia. The first call is voluntary and new conscripts started their service on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July this year. Conscription will become compulsory starting in 2024. It is a tough reform because it does not only involve the military but civil society as well. Initially there was some reluctance among Latvian civil society because compulsory conscription was associated with Soviet times and the Soviet occupation system which was harmful and quite ugly. But our neighbors Lithuania and Estonia took their decisions on compulsory conscription years ago, and it was Latvia that was lagging behind. When I became a minister, together with my team, we decided to draft a more focused and concrete law on conscription. It took two months to draft and send a new law to Parliament and for Parliament to adopt it in the last reading. When Latvia decides to do something we can do it very quickly!

The main aim of conscription is to strengthen our reserve capability, including reservists as well as equipment and weapons in storage. Thus, if we need to call on our reservists, each will have his or

her own uniform, equipment, and weapon. The second aim is to increase the number of troops in our armed forces. We see a reluctance around the world to join armed services voluntarily, therefore we have established the system of conscription to enlarge our armed forces.

**PRISM: What is the biggest military threat to Latvia?**

Mūrniece: It is was stated in the NATO Madrid summit communique very clearly—it is Russia and to a lesser extent Belarus.

**PRISM: Can Latvia defend its borders from invasion long enough for NATO reinforcements to arrive?**

Mūrniece: I would put it differently. There are 11 nations in our Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup in Latvia. We have U.S. troops in Latvia as well. This means not only Latvia but at least 12 nations together will defend our country—will defend NATO territory in case of potential military conflict.

**PRISM: Can you describe further the Baltic states agreement on air defense?**

Mūrniece: I mentioned the NATO Air Defence Rotational Model of joint air defense that was approved by NATO at the Vilnius summit. In addition the three Baltic states signed the declaration of cooperation in promoting availability of the Baltic states airspace for NATO air activities. This means even closer cooperation on organizing more NATO training as well as on deploying additional air defense to eastern flank of NATO. Therefore the skies above Latvia and above the Baltic states will become safer. However, how this model will be implemented is up to SACEUR and NATO military planners.

**PRISM: Please describe the Russian “gray zone” aggressions that Latvia suffers from?**

Mūrniece: I wouldn't say that Latvia suffers—we do everything we can to counter all threats from Russia. We do not suffer, we are vigilant and calm. We do everything to counter these gray zone measures. Yes, there is Russian sabre-rattling regarding nuclear weapons that is quite provocative. We must explain the situation to our society and have faith in our countermeasures. There has been an increased number of cyber attacks, continued propaganda, and disinformation campaigns. Russia and Belarus have found new and “innovative ways” to threaten Latvia with hybrid attacks, for example, by manipulating the flow illegal migrants.

**PRISM: Does Russia try to influence the 25 percent of the Latvian population that is ethnically Russian or Russian-speaking?**

Mūrniece: We must be very careful distinguishing between Russian and Latvian speakers. I was taught Russian in school and can still read, write, and speak Russian; does that make me a Russian speaker? It is neither ethnic nor language lines that divide our society; it is something very different. Political indoctrination is what actually divides our society. There is a portion of our population that is pro-Kremlin; and another, much larger part, which is in favor of democratic values, of Latvia as a NATO and EU member, and all the values of the democratic world. Some within the population are vulnerable to Russia's or Putin's propaganda, while the rest of the population is doing everything to safeguard our democracy. But it is neither ethnicity nor language which divides us. It is something coming from the past; during the Soviet occupation times there were Russification campaigns. We can compare it to the weaponization of migration as it was forced migration from Russia and other Soviet regions to the Baltic states. This was done to make us more compliant with the Soviet system. The Russian and other Soviet peoples that Moscow sent lost their own ethnical roots. The notion of a

Soviet people was people without ethnicity. Yes, we have seen some attempts to influence the situation in this regard. But the Baltic people were always resistant during the Soviet occupation period; resistant to Russian propaganda, resistant to the KGB, resistant to the Communist Party's attempts to rule our society. This resistance came from our sense of national pride, including our language and our culture, which safeguarded us from all Soviet attempts to destroy our nation.

**PRISM: What specific measures has Latvia taken to counter Russian efforts to drive a wedge between the pro-Kremlin and pro-western populations?**

Mürniece: We have done a lot, including special programs of media literacy through our schools, other parts of society, and non-governmental organizations. Media literacy is one answer to Russian propaganda. Another is media regulation in compliance with EU regulations. Our media regulation body has placed a complete prohibition on direct Russian propaganda, as well as fact-checking all Russian media, providing explanations and statements indicating if any information is false.

**PRISM: How can Russia be deterred from engaging in gray zone activity, such as propaganda, the weaponization of migration, economic warfare, etc?**

Mürniece: We cannot prevent it; it is very clear Russia will continue doing it. But we must be ready to explain the situation to our population. We must also continue to prohibit direct Russian propaganda in Latvia. We cannot stop those autocratic activities until Russia is strategically defeated in the war against Ukraine. We hope that as the International Criminal Court begins proceedings on war crimes committed by Russia in this very brutal and terrible war, it might be possible to change the attitudes of Russian society and in Russia itself.

**PRISM: Can the Suwalki Gap be a strategic asset as opposed to a vulnerability? Can we exploit the Suwalki Gap to isolate Kaliningrad and put pressure on Moscow that way?**

Mürniece: The accession of Finland and soon Sweden will be critical. Suwalki will always be a vulnerability of NATO and of the Baltic region. But with the accession of Finland and Sweden our region becomes much stronger, and we can organize direct supply chains throughout the Baltic Sea. In the land domain we must remain highly vigilant.

**PRISM: Is there a way to take the initiative by taking advantage of Russia's vulnerabilities, such as the geographical vulnerability of Kaliningrad?**

Mürniece: I am not ready to speak specifically about operations involving Kaliningrad. Our answer today to Russia's aggression is that we are strengthening our defense with 3 percent of our GDP going to defense next year. Our neighbor Poland is strengthening its defense with really impressive new capabilities and procurements. We are envious as they are procuring tanks, ammunition, vehicles, and weapons with their defense percentage of GDP that reaches 5 percent. This is the responsibility of all the NATO allies.

**PRISM: Is Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling credible? Should we take their implicit threats of nuclear retaliation seriously and be deterred?**

Mürniece: Russia's behavior and nuclear rhetoric is provocative; they use it to compensate for Russia's weakness in conventional military capabilities. The Ukrainians have a good understanding of Russian thinking and good information, and they doubt that Putin will press the nuclear button.

**PRISM: is the movement of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus concerning to Latvia?**

Mürniece: There is no clear information regarding the deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus. Belarusian President Lukashenko has been very

explicit about receiving nuclear weapons from Russia, but there is no convincing confirmation yet that he has received them. There is no obvious reason for Putin to send nuclear weapons to Belarus because the difference between the distance from Belarus to Latvia, or any point in NATO, and the distance from Russia to those points is negligible. There is no military logic for the decision.

**PRISM: What future does Russia have with Europe?**

Mürniece: It is up to Russia. There is one scenario in which Russia moves its troops from Ukraine back to Russia, but I doubt this is credible. In another scenario Russia continues its attack but suffers a strategic defeat. That would be followed by prosecution for war crimes by the International Criminal Court, the rebuilding of Ukraine, and hopefully a change in the mentality and political thinking of the Russian population. This will not be possible without the foundation of the International Criminal Court prosecutions. Ultimately, it is up to Russian society and Russian leaders which scenario they will choose.