

PRISM INTERVIEW: KAJA KALLAS, PRIME MINISTER OF ESTONIA
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PRISM: A Russian analyst recently said, “Washington’s decision-making centers are in our sights. France will be eliminated, and Britain will go underwater.” Does this imply that we are at war with Russia?

Kallas: Russia is conducting a shadow war against us that has multiple elements. For example, migration pressure on Finland’s borders, the bombing in Syria, and Wagner soldiers in Africa are all pushing migration pressure towards Europe, knowing that migration is a vulnerability for Europe and European leaders.

Then we have the misinformation and disinformation campaigns that Russia is very good at, pouring fuel into the fires that already exist in our societies.

Attacking Russian dissidents in Europe; sowing fear within our societies; saying that “you are not safe anywhere;” setting a fire in a warehouse in one part of Europe; attacking somebody physically in another part of Europe... Not to mention cyber-attacks. In 2007 we suffered a major cyber-attack in Estonia; it was a big event. Now, we have even bigger cyber-attacks every day. We make a mistake if we treat each of these hybrid attacks as isolated events, because they are connected.

Russia is using these tools and committing these attacks in the shadows. Meanwhile, there are leaders who keep saying, “We don’t want another Cold War.” “We are not at war.” I think it is fair to say we are at war, because the Russians are acting as though there is a war going on.

The issue is that only Ukrainians are fighting on the battlefield. If you compare this to 1938 and 1939, it was the Poles fighting on the battle front; but when Poland fell Hitler went on, because the response was not strong enough. Today, Ukrainians have been holding the line for three years.

In hindsight, everything is very clear. Today we know when the Second World War started, but at that time people did not understand that the most destructive war in human history was beginning. Looking backwards, it is all very clear. Being in the moment things are not that clear; but this is a luxury of hindsight that we do not have today.

World War One and World War Two decided the contest between fascism, Nazism, and democracy. What are the stakes today? The stakes are just as high: it is democracies versus autocracies. With democracy already in decline the democratic powers and liberal democracies are in an existential struggle: that is what is at stake.

There are a lot of differences, of course, between then and today, but then as now democracies don't settle their disagreements by force. Autocracies do. That is why it is dangerous for the whole world if we permit these autocratic powers to win.

PRISM: What would be the consequences if Russia were to win the war in Ukraine?

Kallas: We will likely see the same sequence as we did in the 1940s. If territorial aggression pays off somewhere, it serves as an invitation to use it elsewhere. In the 1930s it was a mistake to consider all these events—the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the Italian invasion in Abyssinia, Germany's annexation of Sudetenland—as separate and unrelated events when in hindsight they were each part of a bigger picture.

We face a similar challenge today. The aggressors or would-be aggressors are carefully taking notes on how the world reacts to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is so blunt, it is so open, and it is very black and white. There is no disputing that Russia attacked a sovereign country. If that is allowed, then we are going to see similar attacks elsewhere.

PRISM: Then this is a war about who gets to set the rules of international behavior. If Russia gets away with this, it basically shows that aggression and the seizure of territory by force are acceptable; colonizing another country is acceptable. It is not only acceptable; if they succeed, it is effective statecraft. So, if the stakes are so high, why aren't there already Western troops on the ground defending Ukraine?

Kallas: Because not everybody sees this in a similar way, which is understandable. Every prime minister's first obligation is to their own country and their own people. If we could see things from the perspective of 2028 or 2030 it might be very clear what we should have done in 2024 or 2025. But at this moment, we don't know.

If we knew that sending troops to Ukraine or bombing Russian air bases on Russia's territory to the ground would end the war, then that would be one decision. But if doing that would mean Russian retaliation by bombing our own territory and our own people, then it is another decision. Rather, the decision is the same, but the outcome is totally different. And the instinct of all the prime ministers around the table is to protect their own country and their own people.

PRISM: About two months ago French President Macron suggested that we may need to have NATO boots on the ground in Ukraine. He took a great deal of heat from Germany, from the United States. What did you think of that comment?

KALLAS: In that meeting there was never any specific discussion of NATO ground troops, but rather a general discussion of troops on the ground. These are two different things. What I suggested in that meeting is that, understanding our current decision not to deploy NATO troops to Ukraine now, how do we communicate this? Because it would be a bad outcome to say, “this is definitely something that we are not going to do.” Russia also reads the media and if we rule out deploying troops, the Kremlin is making a mental note that, and concluding, “OK, we can continue because NATO is not sending anybody; we might even go further.”

I argue that we need strategic ambiguity. Training soldiers on the ground in Ukraine is making certain processes shorter and faster; there is nothing wrong with that. We have an opposition party in Estonia that claims that even talking about this brings the war to Estonia. But Russia does not need an excuse; they attacked Ukraine without any excuse. If they want to attack Estonia, they will attack us regardless of whether we are sending troops to train the soldiers in Ukraine.

PRISM: Isn't it true, though, that with Russia preoccupied right now with Ukraine, they don't have sufficient troops to initiate any kind of aggression in the north?

Kallas: No, this is not entirely true. Russia has built up a massive military; they will soon have 1.3 million people in arms. That will be the biggest military force in the world. And the war against Ukraine, you could argue, is just one front in their—in Putin's—broader war against the rules-based world system, which, as we discussed, is being fought with cyber warfare, electronic warfare, information warfare, election interference, even sabotage and assassinations.

PRISM: How can we, the West, defend against that kind of aggression?

Kallas: That is a very good question. What we have done is to be public about these things, sharing information with our allies, but also with our own people. When petty criminals commit such crimes in our country it is well-known that there will be consequences. But we need a serious discussion about how to respond when Russia is the perpetrator, and how far we should let Russia go. That means understanding the situation in a similar way, and unfortunately, we are not there yet.

PRISM: Can you imagine circumstances in which we would take proactive measures such as information campaigns or influence operations against Russia to show them that there is a cost they must pay for such aggressions?

Kallas: Yes, I think we have to do that, but it has to start from a thorough understanding of what is going on, and then we need a serious discussion amongst ourselves on how to respond.

PRISM: What can you tell us about comprehensive defense or total defense? Is total or comprehensive defense a sufficient response?

Kallas: NATO has moved to this defense posture, and I think that is a good development. My military advisors tell me that NATO is working the way we thought it was before we were members, but commitments still have to be fulfilled with the budgets as well as equipment. We have very good plans on paper, but we must also discuss the execution of those plans; exercises, command structure, communication lines, interoperability of equipment, but also prepositioned equipment in accordance with those plans, because we are not there yet.

PRISM: What can the United States learn from Estonia about the contemporary threat environment? You warned us before we understood that Russia is a real threat. We often talk about lessons learned, but just as often don't learn the lessons. You have been here at the front line for a long time. What can you tell us?

Kallas: What we Estonians have learned from history is that you cannot give in to dictators. If America chooses to isolate itself, it will end up paying a very high price for isolation. In the 1930s and 1940s America also thought what was taking place in Europe was of no concern to America.

Today our economies are for more connected. 48 out of 50 American states have Europe as their main investment and trading partner. European companies earn 2.7 times more profit in Europe than in the whole of Asia, including China. And over

61 percent of U.S. investments are in Europe, and vice versa as well. What that means is that what happens in Europe actually has a very direct effect on the U.S. economy and American security as well.