



Letter for Mr Jens Stoltenberg, Mr Didier Reynders

A copy of the letter to: Politico, European journalists

13.05.2023 nr 1.1-1/29

We are appealing to you, the recognized leader, regarding a concerning, non-democratic decision-making process currently taking place in southeastern Estonia. This letter expresses the general viewpoint of the people of Võru in the Republic of Estonia.

Primarily, this great concern regards the development of the southeastern Estonian military training area in Nursipalu. It is our strong belief that these government actions are contrary to the rule of law, and also have the potential to seriously harm the general willingness to defend and ability to protect the southeastern border of Estonia, also a border of cultures and mentalities.

In their haste to triple the surface area of the Nursipalu military training area in southeastern Estonia, the Government of the Republic of Estonia intends to circumvent the standing lawful process of analyzing the socio-economic and cultural impacts of the development of national defense facilities. They plan to amend the existing law in order to limit the environmental impact alone.

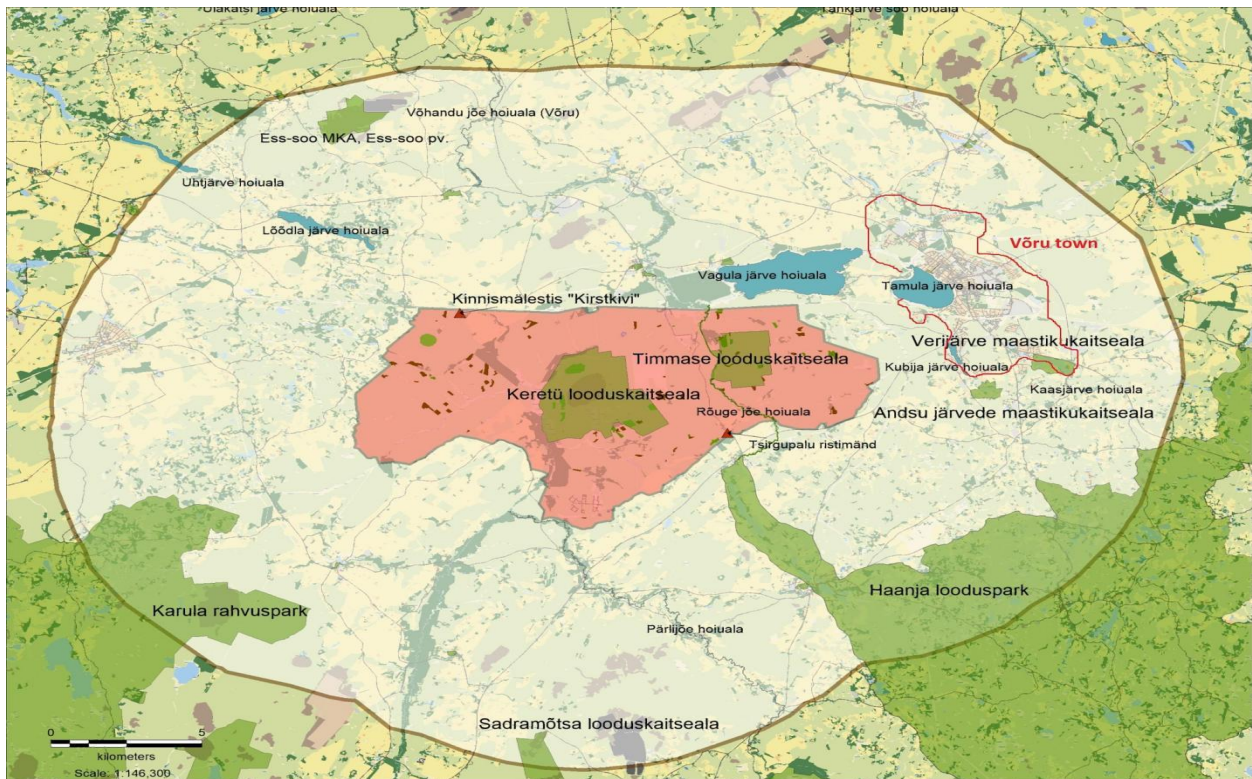
Until now, the population of southeastern Estonia has had the highest will to defend and has fully supported the defense forces and the border guard in guarding the eastern border of Europe. Now, ignoring the good practice of the rule of law and without assessing the potential impacts, the Estonian government could destroy a region with a unique culture – a small gem, where native Võro people with their own culture and language live. The uniqueness of the Võro people is also proven by genetic studies¹ (the genetic divergence from the rest of Estonia's population occurred approx. 1000 years ago).

The significant deterioration of the living standard of the county **capital Võru (ca 2,5 km from the military area, as a “part” of the city)** is causing the departure of residents from southeastern Estonia to accelerate. This local population drain would also be damaging to the country's defense capacity.

¹ “Differences in local population history at the finest level: the case of the Estonian population”, European Journal of Human Genetics, 25 July 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41431-020-0699-4>.



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Picture 1. Planned military area - pink, nature reserves - green, red-marked Võru town



Picture 2. Planned military area compared to capital Tallinn



Unfortunately, the Estonian government is not interested in analyzing these impacts, and is only considering the comfort of the defense forces, thereby risking significantly greater damage to the country's economy and defense capacity, as well as to the vitality of this region.

Replacing 30,000 permanent residents with 1000 allied troops is not enough to prevent let alone resist a Russian attack.

The Estonian Centre for Defense Investment (ECDI) has presented our NGO, Our Nursipalu (MTÜ *Meie Nursipalu*) with a brief summary of the selection process of alternative southeastern Estonia practice field locations and a comparison of five different locations within it. Unfortunately, when comparing the locations, the population density around the identified possible locations was not taken into account at all.

One alternative, however, was eliminated because a gas line was close to the corner of this area. According to the ECDI, there is no plan to define the group of people who will be negatively affected by the impacts of the military training area, and the negative impact and mitigating measures will only be determined after the military training area is already fully developed.

Although the decision of the Estonian government to build the Nursipalu military training area has not officially been made, the ECDI is already spending funds provided for the reception of NATO allies, and deforestation for the construction of the facilities is already taking place.

The existing Nursipalu military training area (3134 ha) is located in the middle of the area with the highest population density in southeastern Estonia, approx. **2,5 km from the county capital Võru and the county hospital**. It is planned to hold drills and practice shootings 250 days a year, including very high-noise shooting exercises with anti-aircraft, anti-tank, and other weapons. According to representatives of the defense forces², it is planned to start bombing from airplanes, and indirect fire weapons will also be fired at Nursipalu's UXO areas from random places outside the training area, over residential buildings (with the promise that people will be taken to a spa during these bombings).

21 families will be forced to leave their homes (app 1), 217 landowners will have to give up their agricultural and forest land, and approx. 450 residential houses remain directly on the border of the military training area.

The representatives of the defense forces justify the necessity of expanding the Nursipalu military training area because of overcrowding in the existing training areas, as it is difficult to plan shooting exercises at the same time as tactical exercises due to the danger zones. Despite building a small number of huge training areas, it will not create more training opportunities, as

² <https://lounapostimees.postimees.ee/7692311/kouemursud-hakkavad-lendama-ule-vorumaa>.



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these danger zones still eliminate the opportunity to carry out more training activities at the same time.

Considering the small territory of Estonia and the small number of active defense forces (4000), it would be more reasonable to build a number of small and less disruptive training areas scattered throughout the territory.

In Estonia, the three-fold enlargement of two training fields (Nursipalu³ and Sirgala⁴) and the merging of two training fields (Central polygon and Soodla⁵) are currently underway, the latter resulting in the creation of one training area of approx. 30,000 ha. The area of all training fields (including the military airfield) with extensions would make up about 1.2% of Estonia's territory. It is quite clear that the Estonian Defence Forces (4000 active personnel) do not have the human or the financial resources to carry out large-scale exercises on all of the training fields all year round.

Therefore, the accelerated development of military training areas fueled by the Estonian Defense Forces without any impact assessment seems excessive, considering the resources of the Estonian state. This may also be the reason why the Ministry of Defence was not interested in initiating the planning process in due time last summer, when the need for developing new training areas had already been formulated.

With the creation of scattered and smaller training fields with better planning and logistics that would not disturb the environment and the residents of the surrounding area, it would be possible to sufficiently organize all tactical shooting exercises. And as tactical exercises can be relocated, all shooting exercises requiring a large danger zone (planned to take place 4–5 days a year) can take place either at the Central polygon (220 km from Võru) or in Sirgala (240 km from Võru).

We are appealing to you to remind the Government of the Republic of Estonia that in times of peace, even under conditions of increased danger, laws must be followed and people's basic rights guaranteed. We would like the Government of the Republic of Estonia to follow the current planning law, according to which planning must start with the pre-selection of the location of the facility, considering alternatives (incl. taking into account the number of people remaining in the disturbance zone of the military training area) and evaluating socio-economic and cultural impacts before making a final decision and starting construction activities.

Without any assessment of such impacts, the habitat of the native people and their will to defend it may be destroyed forever. The unique culture and nature with many protected species will be irreversibly damaged. Restoring the Hjerkin military training area to its natural state and creating a national park after abandoning the use of the training area is a significant achievement

³ <https://estmilgeo.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=e1f9ced4d22f40e790215c2a262fec31>.

⁴ <https://ttja.ee/media/386/download>.

⁵ <https://estmilgeo.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=9954b0d7c9a24c33beb1246f96d09929>.



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for Norway. By giving up the unnecessary expansion of the Southern Estonian military training area, it would still be possible to prevent the destruction of Võrumaa's unique nature, communities and culture.

The government has recently sent a cluster of draft laws to Parliament that excludes a parliamentary discussion. **One of these⁶ proposed laws would grant the Minister of Defense the exclusive right to create military training fields without the requirement of carrying out environmental and social assessments, or taking into consideration the concerns or opinions of local residents.**

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⁶ <https://www.vabaeestisona.com/et/pevkur-allkirjastas-elnou-mis-voimaldab-kaitseael-rajada-harjutusvaljakuid-inimestest-ja-loodusest-ule-soites/>