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**Understanding the increase in the size of annual military parades
in democratic states: The example of Poland and Estonia**

Master's thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This master's thesis examines military parades, with the aim of identifying factors that explain the increase in size of annual military parades in democratic countries, a phenomenon that has not been previously studied. Guided by the research question "What explains the increase in size of military parades in democratic states?", this study tests two key hypotheses: *if democratic backsliding, then increase in size of the annual military parade in democratic states*; and *if increase in aggressiveness of neighbour, then increase in size of the parade in democratic states*. Using process-tracing, the suitability of these hypotheses are analysed by examining Estonia's Independence Day military parade and Poland's Armed Forces Day military parade in the period of 2007-2024, focusing on the key moments when the increase in size of the annual parade occurs.

The findings of the conducted study indicate that although some fluctuations in the size of military parades in democratic states are natural, the most significant increases are often deliberate and can be explained through the interests of the political leadership, especially in the context of democratic backsliding. Additionally, the study highlights that for democratic countries, the main target audience remains the domestic electorate. Even in the case of an increasingly aggressive neighbour, the increase in size is aimed at providing a sense of security for citizens, rather than being a credible deterrence against a potential adversary.

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Introduction

Throughout history, countries with different cultural backgrounds have conducted military parades. Even today, annual military parades are considered to be political rituals that are independent from any particular form of government (Azaryahu, 1999: 90-91). This means that military parades are used universally in many states, irrespective of whether democracies, autocracies or totalitarian, even though the particular occasion for which a parade is organised, or the nature of the parade, might vary.

Military parades vary in many respects. Among other things, they vary in size, which nowadays mainly reflects to the number of participating units as well as vehicles. For example, in the most recent military parade in Russia's capital Moscow, around 11 500 soldiers and 180 military vehicles took part according to the official figures (AP News, 2025), whereas the last Independence Day parade in Estonia in the same year only saw 1075 participants and 47 vehicles (Eesti Kaitsevägi, 2025a).

While in the comparison between military parades in Estonia and Russia, it can be assumed that the size of the country and the army both play a major role in the size of the parade, the size of the parades is not fixed even within one country, but changes over time, and sometimes quite notably. Moreover, there are also cases where the nationwide military parade has traditionally not been a part of the most important national celebrations, but only recently there has been an increased political will to start organising parades on such occasions. The most recent example being the idea promoted by the President of the United States Donald Trump to organise a parade in June 2025 (Wolf, 2025).

Although annual military parades are organised universally in dozens of states irrespectively of their regime type across the world, there has been little academic interest in them. The existing studies have mainly been interested in parades in non-democratic countries like China (Sørensen, 2017; Liu & Zhou, 2019), North Korea (Bandow, 2021; Waldman, 2020), or Russia (Alkatiri & De Archellie, 2021; Pörzgen, 2021), and have mostly focused on parades as such, not changes in parades, leaving similar traditions in democratic states, as well as transformations within already existing traditions, largely unnoticed.

Nevertheless, it is very important to address the increase in size, as such practices are not trivial, and in fact only happen sometimes, not all the times. For example, the existing literature fails to explain why there was a substantial increase in size for the Polish Armed

Day Parade in 2023 which was described as the biggest military parade in Poland after the Cold War (Alandi, 2023).

Moreover, increased size of the annual military parade could entail significant additional public costs - ranging from financial expenses to cutting soldiers' training time for marching drills and other parade preparations. As parades are costly, they must serve certain functions useful for the government or state more in general, if they are organised and even increased in size. This means that the changes in size of military parades likely do not occur randomly, and neither do the decisions to increase size of parades. However, as so far no academic explanation of this phenomenon exists, this study aims to contribute to understanding the motivations behind expanding the size of the existing military parades by first developing and then testing at least some of the possible explanations, relying on the existing accounts of why states even organise parades and what are their main functions.

The existing literature states that, military parades are often used as instruments for transmitting different political signals (Aben, 2017: 26) - simultaneously to internal and external audiences (Sørensen, 2017: 121). Therefore, one possible explanation might be that the increase in size of the annual military parade occurs due to change in external geopolitical environment and threat perception. Although there is no academic explanation for change in size of military parades, similar shifts in size have been studied within military exercises in the Eastern Flank of NATO, which have followed this logic. In case of military exercises the increase in size has recently been triggered by growing perception of external threat and the wish to deter possible further aggression from Russia (Banka & Bussmann, 2023: 16), and this might also seem to be the intuitive reason here. And since both perform similar functions with regard to signalling, also size of exercises could be explained by the external threat.

However, if this logic would be completely transferable to parades, then the parades organised elsewhere in the region, for example in the Baltic states, should also have increased after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, but parades there have not triggered such headlines. Neither does parading create similar defence readiness as military exercises (ibid: 9) which would be the expected objective in the event of a real threat.

Alternatively, the explanation might be then hidden in the functions of parades aimed at the domestic audiences. The simplified theoretical explanation here is that as annual military parades help to legitimise the leaders in power (Alkatiri & De Archellie, 2021: 11) by among other things promoting national pride (ibid: 7) and sometimes even the government-

constructed historical narratives (Sørensen, 2017: 121), increasing the size of the parade could be a useful tool to instil confidence in people and involve the majority of society.

In the case of Polish Armed Forces Day parade in 2023, the ruling Law and Justice Party was accused of using the military parade as a campaign event for the upcoming parliamentary elections (Alandi, 2023). Nevertheless, it would have been elections triggering the substantial increase, the next year's parade which took place already long after elections (and with an already new ruling coalition), should have again decreased in size. However, such decrease did not happen, rather the size of the parade slightly even continued its increase (Karwowski, 2024).

The aim of the planned thesis is to fill the research gap and find out what causes the increase of size for the military parades in democratic states. By doing this, the study will also hopefully supplement the wider academic knowledge of military parades, especially in democratic states. Thus, the main research question of the planned work will be: „What explains the increase of size of military parades in democratic states?“

To answer the research question the author develops and tests two hypotheses based on the existing literature on why states organise parades. The first hypothesis to be tested is *if democratic backsliding, then increase in size of the annual military parade in democratic states*. and the second one *if increase in aggressiveness of neighbour, then increase in size of the parade in democratic states*.

In order to test the developed hypotheses, the author will examine two similar cases in detail, following the approach of Most Similar Systems Design in the case selection. Based on that, the chosen cases are the annual Independence Day parade in Estonia and the annual Armed Forces Day parade in Poland in the period of 2007-2024. Both of these cases have a similar security situation yet differ significantly in the quality of democracy over time, as after the year 2015, Poland experienced a severe democratic backsliding (V-Dem, 2025), making them suitable for the chosen approach.

As the aim is to thoroughly understand the explanations of increase in size of the annual military parades, mainly the qualitative research method of process-tracing is used to examine the fluctuations in size for the studied parades based on the developed hypotheses as well as possible other alternative explanations derived from these cases. The size of the parades will be measured through the number of participating soldiers and vehicles, supplemented with the

number of allied states present at these parades with their troops. This data is gathered through publicly accessible sources, preferring the data provided in the official press releases if available. The validity of possible explanations is analysed through critical junctures juxtaposing the actual size of the parades with the periods when increase in size is expected to take place according to the hypotheses.

The structure of the thesis is divided in four main parts. First the author will set up a detailed theoretical framework on the existing literature on military parades and why they are organised in order to ensure a sufficient academic basis for developing the hypotheses which is done in the end of theoretical part. The theoretical framework is followed by methodology, where the choice of studied cases as well as used methodology are explained in detail to justify the overall research approach as well as the methods used. After methodology comes the empirical part where the author first examines the background and peculiarities of both studied parades followed by the presentation of the gathered data on the size of these parades in the studied period on which the hypotheses will be tested in order to assess and analyse, how well the developed hypotheses explain the increases in size occurred in the studied parades. Finally, in discussion the author presents the findings as well as analyses the suitability of other possible explanations for the increase in size of the parades derived from the studied cases in order to draw overall conclusions on the validity of the tested hypotheses.

1. Theoretical framework: Military parades and determinants of change in their size

The theoretical part is divided into three sections. First, the author engages in a conceptualisation of military parades and examines the existing literature on military parades in general, focusing on their history and significance, including within democracies. The second segment engages with the motivations behind states' usage of military parades with the specific focus on what drives decisions to change and, in particular, to increase the size of military parade. As there is no ready-made theory to explain the increase in size for annual military parades, the aim of the following theoretical part of this study is to develop a conceptual framework with possible explanations for this phenomenon. In this context, furthermore distinguishes the function and therefore also logic of military parades in democracies across regime-type, taking into account the peculiarities of democratic states compared to other regimes, given that the majority of existing studies are based on the logic of authoritarian regimes. Finally, the author will propose two hypotheses to explain the increase in size of the military parades based on prior findings, which will later be tested in the analytical part of the study.

1.1. Military parades

By a conventional understanding, military parades are defined as ceremonial reviews of troops organised on state holidays or other significant occasions, culminating with a march past the parade host (Ernits, 1998: 151). The most common reasons for the annual military parades include celebrations of independence days, the commemoration of other historically significant events such as decisive victories in battles or wars, days dedicated to the military, or even the birthdays of contemporary or former leaders of the country.

While some military parades are organised at the state level, others are organised at local level. For example, the small town of Antsla in Estonia has annually organised its own Independence Day military parade, featuring the local Defence League and, more recently, members of the Estonian Defence Forces, despite a much larger military parade taking place on the same day in the capital, Tallinn (Braidaks, 2022). In any case, military parades are public events that everyone can follow either on site or via broadcast.

This study focuses strictly on parades organised annually at the state level – usually either by the government or military, rather than those organised by local communities. Similar political rituals, such as arms fairs, civilian marches, or community parades like the Orange

Parade in Northern Ireland's Protestant community (Bryan, 2000), may also relate to the military or historical memory. However, since these are not state-organised events and do not feature the contemporary army as a central element, they are not seen as military parades in this study. In addition, military parades are also distinguished from other commemorative military ceremonies such as official lineups, wreath layings and changings of honorary guards, which might also be public, but lack the key element of a march-past and are usually conducted on a significantly smaller scale in terms of participants.

The exact origins of military parades are unknown, but the tradition likely dates back to early civilisations, where victorious commanders would march through cities with their armies and spoils of war after battles or war. Today, such traditions are most closely associated with Ancient Rome, where victory parades - known as triumphs - served as a means to showcase military victories and the success of the empire with the public (Versnel, 1970: 1-2).

Over time, in addition to the aforementioned victory parades, which took place irregularly, certain elements of military parading became incorporated into annual celebrations of religious holidays and other ceremonial occasions. For example, during Easter celebrations in the Republic of Venice, local soldiers participated in the Sea parade to see their Doge cast a golden ring into the Sea - a symbolic act representing the union between Venice and Adriatic Sea (Bekes, 2023; Visit Venezia, 2022). This ceremony was once again public, glorifying the influence and strength of Venice and its Doge. However, unlike in earlier centuries victory parades, it was already independent from actual success on the battlefield. Instead, it served as a display of the state's wealth and military strength even in times when there were no remarkable military successes. Another example can be brought from Byzantine Empire, where the local emperors organised military parades to demonstrate their country's military power to foreign ambassadors (Tammisto, 2013: 27).

The contemporary marching steps originate from the 18th century Prussia, where the precise formation and movement of the infantry troops was crucial for battlefield success (ibid). With the evolution of firearms, the need for the coordinated movement in this form dissipated from the battlefields, yet marching steps continued to be used in ceremonial events and parades (ibid). A good example is the oldest regular military parade still held today, the Bastille Day parade in France, first conducted in 1880 to promote French nationalism (Corum, 2011). Over the years, it has served as a model for many other countries that have established their own tradition of organising military parades.

However, military parades in the past have not only been held after a war or simply as a commemorative event, but also just before going into battle. A notable example in recent history is the Soviet Union's October Parade, held in Moscow on November 7 in 1941, to boost the morale of the city's defenders as they prepared to face advancing Nazi German troops (Vseviiov, 2024). Moreover, this particular parade also served a propaganda purpose, as foreign correspondents in the city were also invited to cover the event taking place in these critical circumstances (ibid).

With advancements in technology, the potential to reach audiences beyond those physically present at military parades increased - from the nation's own citizens in other cities to potential adversaries abroad. During the Cold War, military parades became a platform to showcase technological advancements, where among the ballistic missiles armored vehicles, tanks and infantry, certain countries were even displaying weaponry related to nuclear warfare (New York Times, 1970). Thanks to the advent of film, photography and fast global communication, military parades were quickly documented and disseminated, ensuring that opposing countries could closely monitor each other's display of power through parades.

Today, military parades have become an integral part of national celebrations in many countries worldwide, although they may vary significantly according to the traditions of each country. Not only do such public displays of countries' military strength show soldiers marching in synchronised steps, but it also allows armies to showcase their latest equipment, including weaponry, armored vehicles and other machinery. In addition to highlighting a country's own military power, contemporary parades often display allied solidarity, as representatives from allied nations are also frequently present.

Primarily the research of contemporary military parades has focused on parades in autocracies which are usually much larger in size than the parades in democracies. Among others, studies have been conducted about the military parades in China (Sørensen, 2017; Liu & Zhou, 2019), North Korea (Bandow, 2021; Waldman, 2020), Russia (Alkatiri & De Archellie, 2021; Pörzgen, 2021) and Mali (Sow, 2021).

Nevertheless, as military parades are political rituals that are independent from any particular form of government (Azaryahu, 1999: 90-91), many democratic states who are widely seen to prefer dialogue over military force in settling disputes and conflicts (Doyle, 2024), also have the tradition of organising military parades to this day. For example, military parades are

organised in Australia (Returned and Services League of Australia New South Wales Branch, 2025), Estonia (Eesti Kaitsevägi, 2025), France (Aben, 2017), Greece (Antonopoulos, 2024), India (Brimelow, 2018), Poland (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2024) and Spain (La Moncloa, 2024).

Although military parades take place in both democracies and autocracies, they differ across regime type insofar as not all the principles that apply to parades studied in autocracies may be that relevant for parades in democratic states, especially what concerns the scale as well as reasoning of the necessity of holding the parade to public. A telling example of relevant differences can be brought from the first term of Donald Trump's presidency in the United States when his idea to organise a military parade was widely opposed and eventually reduced to a military display in a significantly smaller scale.

In 2017, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, proposed organising a military parade in the U.S. similar to the Bastille Day parade in France (Opt, 2019: 17). Although calling for a military parade is within the President's legal authority, many stakeholders opposed the idea, emphasising that such parades have historically been seen as demonstrations of a country's military might, which is more commonly associated with authoritarian regimes (ibid). Moreover, stakeholders challenged Trump's proposal by claiming that the President was primarily organising the parade for his own self-promotion (ibid). Initially the opposing stakeholders were successful, as the parade was indeed cancelled in 2018 due to concerns over high costs (Cillizza, 2018).

However, in 2019, a military display with tanks, armored vehicles and military aircraft flyover was still organised by President Trump, though it was promoted as a show of gratitude to the U.S. military and its achievements rather than a demonstration of its military might (Deutsche Welle, 2019). A similar event was also held a year later, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and many critics accused Trump of using the event as a campaign ahead of the upcoming Presidential election (Reston, 2020).

Although these events did not reach the scale of a proper military parade, this example still highlights two key elements distinguishing demonstrations of country's military might in democracies from other regime types. Firstly, as one of the main characteristics separating democracies from other regime types highlights the importance of a free and fair electoral process and pluralism (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024), the elections in democratic

countries carry a completely different weight and character compared to those in non-democracies. This means that the leaders in power in democracies truly need to worry about re-election and mobilisation of their voters, as election fraud and vote falsification are not a part of the democratic ideal.

Thus, in democracies, for the leaders to remain in power, a visual demonstration of nation's military might be used as a tool to increase chances of electoral success. No matter, if it is in a form of a proper military parade, or just a highlighted weapon display commemorating a special holiday for the country. In autocracies, the role of parades as well as displays of country's military might is, however, more connected with legitimising the leader in general (Alkatiri & De Archellie, 2021: 11), rather than the process of elections, as there are more straightforward ways to influence elections there.

Secondly, as the opposition to President Trump's parade idea indicates, the public in democratic countries is more demanding when it comes to justifying public costs. Therefore, even though the governments in democratic states could use state-funded military parades as a tool for their political campaigns, they have to do it in a significantly more hidden and neutral way, so that it doesn't receive a negative reaction from the public. For parades, this means that if there is no clear benefit from a state perspective to the increases in size in annual military parades, this might instead be hiddenly related to the popularity of the government itself.

Considering the above-mentioned, it is important to further examine the tradition of military parades in democratic countries, and assess the peculiarities of military parades and their functions more thoroughly, particularly when it comes to the significant increases in the size of these parades.

1.2. Why states parade?

A single parade can simultaneously fulfil different goals, which explains why this state organises such parades. In certain cases, these functions may also seem mutually exclusive (Sørensen, 2017: 124). To begin with, parades are often seen as effective instruments for transmitting different political signals (Aben, 2017: 26). Roughly, the motivations for organizing military parades that have been described in academic literature can be divided into two categories: internally and externally driven. The following section will focus on identifying the key elements and characteristics within both functions – external and internal –

and examining how they would apply to military parades in democratic countries, especially in the case of increase in size.

Beginning with internal functions, one of the main arguments in the literature is that annual military parades help to legitimize current leaders (Alkatiri & De Archellie, 2021: 11) and reinforce the existing power hierarchy (Opt, 2019: 21), by, among other things promoting national pride and values (Alkatiri & De Archellie, 2021: 7), and sometimes even the government-constructed historical narratives, shaping the collective identity of the nation (Sørensen, 2017: 121). Here, both speeches delivered by the current political leadership as well as displayed visuals, rituals and symbols play an important role (Alkatiri & De Archellie, 2021: 6). Especially nowadays, when the contemporary broadcasting opportunities are enabling the leaders to deliver their messages and thereby legitimise their power across different societal groups, as well as geographically throughout various parts of the country (Sørensen, 2017: 122).

For example, in Russia, the described identity-building is used to unite people from different backgrounds into one community (Alkatiri & De Archellie, 2021: 7) which is easier to control and, if needed, mobilise (ibid: 13). In the case of democratic states, this logic might be translated into portraying the current government as effective contributors to national defence, keeping the people safe and ensuring stability for the country.

Among other things, annual parades provide an opportunity to showcase to the public what new assets the defence forces have acquired over the past year, i.e. how taxpayer money is being spent. Such a display could bring political popularity, and more importantly, votes during the elections to the ruling parties. However, as the case of the U.S. in the previous section illustrated, it comes with the cost of using public funds, which is especially notable if such a parade has not been organised before or if its size is significantly increased.

Additionally, parades are used to bring the military closer to the public, helping to improve its image (Aben, 2017: 21). In some cases, veterans march together with the active military personnel (Returned and Services League of Australia New South Wales Branch, 2025) as well as rescue, police and paramilitary youth groups (Kasearu et al., 2024: 6). While this serves as a national expression of gratitude to the defenders of the country (Opt, 2019: 27), the good reputation of the army and other vital institutions might also make people more inclined to join the military or simply contribute more to the broad national defence efforts. In

the case of Independence Day parades in Mali, the parades were even used to emphasise the important role of its army during the state's post-colonial past, to improve the fragile military and civil relations (Sow, 2021: 226).

Democratic countries without a tradition of organising annual military parades also have reasons to avoid such nation-wide military displays. One of the main arguments against has been related to the high cost, with there being more productive ways to spend taxpayers' money. For example, when Donald Trump proposed a nation-wide parade in the United States in 2017, as described in the previous chapter, stakeholders challenged its benefits for both the nation and the military, advocating for updating soldiers' equipment or supporting homeless veterans instead (Opt, 2019: 24). However, the cost of a parade should not be measured solely in financial terms, but also in the time required for preparations. Military units would have to dedicate time to parade rehearsals and spend holidays traveling for days for ceremonial purposes, instead of military exercises and spending the holidays celebrating with their family at home (ibid).

Therefore, based solely on the internal motivations, a substantial increase in the size of an annual military parade would primarily profit the leader or government in power. However, since such an increase entails significant additional public costs, an openly democratic system would likely see opposition to it, as maintaining the tradition in an existing scale should still enable other functions such as respecting and popularising the military, as well as staying loyal to the symbolic rituals and values. As demonstrated by the case of the United States in 2018, such opposition can be powerful enough to overturn the increase or at least mitigate its extent.

From the perspective of the external audience, it is evident that as military parades display military might, one aim of parades can be deterring potential adversaries from taking actions against the interests of the organising country (Sørensen, 2017: 124). Typically the scholars of international relations have used two major distinctions to define deterrence (Lupovici, 2023: 626). First is isolating the direct and extended deterrence, where the direct deterrence refers to the ability of a state itself to prevent its adversary from taking a particular action, whereas extended deterrence is seen as a strategy for a state to dissuade the attack against its ally (ibid). In the second approach, the scholars are distinguishing deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial, where the first refers to a threat of retaliation, and the latter emphasizes a certain failure (ibid: 627).

The latest military machinery and weapons, soldiers marching together with well trained synchronised steps sends a strong signal of the country's defence posture and readiness to deploy lethal capabilities if necessary. For more powerful countries, it is also a great platform to showcase their own defence industry's latest models and technological advancements, potentially boosting arms exports (Aben, 2017: 23).

Much can be inferred from which weapons systems are currently being displayed at the particular parade. For example, demonstrating ballistic missiles and military hardware might send a more hostile signal than just armored vehicles and soldiers in good-looking uniforms. This was evident in China's parade in 2015, where one of the officially stated goals was to convey peaceful intentions to external audiences in order to distinguish China's rise as a great power from other, more aggressive regimes in the past, portraying China's rise as a win-win situation for the world (Sørensen, 2017: 112). However, the sheer scale of the military display, which included weapon systems like missiles DF-21D, also known as "carrier killers", led media outlets in the United Kingdom, as well as in the United States to interpret it as a clear demonstration of force and a warning to other states not to challenge China's interests (ibid).

Another important element, particularly for external audiences, is the allied presence. Depending on the country's geopolitical position and size, this can serve somewhat different purposes. Primarily, the presence of allied troops is a signal of the country's membership in an alliance (Kasearu et al., 2024: 11). Troops on the ground convey a deeper commitment, which sends a message that is stronger than merely rhetorically confirming that the alliance works. The same purpose can also be achieved by having high-ranking guests attend the parade – such as leaders of other countries and heads of armed forces.

However, for larger and more powerful countries, the desired signal can be also the opposite, as inviting allies to their parade allows them to honour their partnerships and friendships (Aben, 2017: 23-24). Moreover, it is possible for them to signal commitment to ensuring the security and stability of certain other regions by having soldiers, who have served in operations within these regions also participate in the parade. (ibid).

Regarding the externally driven motivators, a major concern for the critics in the U.S. who opposed a military parade was that such events are usually associated more with authoritarian states. Therefore, staging such events in the United States might potentially give foreign

audiences the impression that the U.S. is striving toward authoritarianism and militarism (Opt, 2019: 25). The need for a "superpower" to demonstrate its might was also questioned, as the critics argued that this would not project strength, but rather signal insecurity, as the power of the United States should be taken for granted (ibid: 24-25).

A similar argument attributing the organisation of military parades to an autocratic regime has also been used by other democratic countries that do not have the tradition to hold annual military parades. For example, the Prime Minister of Norway Jonas Gahr Støre recently emphasised that his country is celebrating its freedom and democracy on the Constitution Day with parades of children, not through portraying its military might (Gahr Støre, 2025), making a clear reference to the military parade in Moscow held only a week earlier. Therefore, the military parade with a significant increase in size that triggers the headlines also in the international media, could also sabotage country's reputation of being loyal to democratic values in the eyes of other democracies.

Nevertheless, in the case of a more tense geopolitical environment with a increasingly aggressive potential adversary nearby, increasing the size of the parade might indeed be justified by its general benefits. Even if it incurs additional public costs, it is still considerably cheaper to theatrically showcase one's military might and the latest defence industry products than to engage in an actual military conflict. However, for its deterrence posture to be credible, the country needs to support the parades with other activities that demonstrate defence readiness and the ability to respond swiftly, such as military exercises (Banka & Bussmann, 2023: 16).

In conclusion, military parades organised across the world serve several different functions, both internal and external. Internally, the parades can help to legitimise the current leadership, portray them as effective contributors to national defence to boost their electoral support, demonstrate to taxpayers how their money is spent, and enhance the military's public image. Externally, military parades are used to signal country's defence capabilities and alliances, primarily as a deterrent against potential adversaries. However, organising military parades also comes with different costs that are especially carefully calculated among the democratic countries, starting from financial expenses and requiring soldiers' time for rehearsals at the expense of military training as well as potential damage to country's image of staying loyal to democratic values in the eyes of other democracies.

1.3. Explanations for increase in size of military parades in democracies

The increasing size of annual military parades in democratic countries remains an underexplored topic in current literature. While some studies have described instances where a larger-than-usual parade is either planned or even organised, there is no clear explanation why such increases occur.

Based on the main functions identified in the previous section for organising state-level military parades, the author will offer two hypotheses that serve as the potential explanations for the increase in size of military parades in democratic states to be tested in this study. The main assumption in doing this is that the size of the parade is changed with the motivation to leverage the function which the organising country or its leadership more precisely the most desires. As the current literature does not present a hierarchy between internally and externally driven motivators to organise annual military parades, the first explanation of increase in size for the parades will be internally driven and the second one externally driven.

The first explanation focuses on the internal function of military parades, to potentially boost support for incumbents, and in the context of democratic state, doing so mostly through increasing electoral support in elections. With a bigger and mightier parade than the previous ones, the government can signal that under their leadership, national defence is in safe hands and great progress has been made in this area. The assumption here is that the leadership of a country holding annual military parades acts rationally, and, if possible, attempts to increase the functionality of the parades. In case of democratic countries, this means that the size of the annual military parade is likely to increase ahead of elections, especially when the annual military parade takes place not too much before the elections, ensuring that the voters still remember the emotions from the parade at the voting ballot.

However, in a strong democratic system, different checks and balances to the executive power branch are expected to disrupt the leadership to do so. As the increase in size for the military parade includes different types of additional costs, such as the taxpayers themselves covering the expenses of organising a bigger parade, it would meet a serious resistance. Moreover, the opposition is also expected from the military itself, as from their point of view, this time and money that would be spent on an increased parade could be more effectively used in trainings and on equipment to enhance the real defence capabilities for the country. The latter

is particularly important because in a well-functioning democratic system, the government cannot directly interfere in military decision making, which also includes the organisational questions regarding the size of the parade.

Therefore, based on internal function of parades, and balance of constraining factors for increase in size, the increase in size of parades in democratic states can only be expected in the context of democratic backsliding when the constraining factors are significantly reduced. With weakened democratic institutions and opposition, there are no forces that would publicly question the feasibility of the costs and have enough influence to prevent such an activity. In this case, it is also likely that the army itself has become politicised, and instead of questioning the wisdom of a grand parade, it simply follows the orders of politicians. Thus, when there is democratic backsliding, the usual checks and balances of the democratic system are not able to prevent the government from using the parade in favour of their elections campaign. Hence, the first hypothesis is *if democratic backsliding, then increase in size of the annual military parade in democratic states.*



Figure 1, Hypothesis 1: Increased democratic backsliding in a democratic country will lead to the increase in size of the annual military parade in democratic states.

Here the democratic backsliding is defined as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo, 2016: 5). This process, which has recently increasingly affected democracies across the world (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025: 8), does not usually take place overnight, but is a rather slow decline of liberal democratic institutions and norms such as the rule of law (Bermeo, 2016: 14), making this form of transition more difficult to notice for the ordinary people. In Europe, the democratic backsliding has been especially increasing in some central European countries which only a few decades earlier were the regional leaders and example states of democratisation (Meyerrose, 2024: 317).

Elections still take place in such countries, but they are usually no longer fully free and fair, as the government at least partially controls the media, the courts, and many other institutions

that are independent in a fully liberal democracy (Bermeo, 2016: 11-13). This allows the elite in power to get rid of, or at least silence the opposition, and politicise state institutions and the military, undermining the checks and balances of the system in their favour, making it more difficult to criticise and question or interfere in their actions.

The alternative explanation to the increase in size for military parades is derived from the external function of displaying its military capabilities to potential adversaries. The key assumption here is that the functionality of the parade is again increased rationally which in this case means a country needs to strengthen its deterrence posture in the context of a real external threat, to prevent any escalation.

In this case the government would not only be delivering certainty through a military parade for its own citizens, but even more importantly send a discouraging signal to the enemy about its nation's capabilities and possible alliances, to prove that aggression against this country is not even worth trying. This also means that deterrence more broadly is employed through the framework of deterrence by denial, as presenting one's modern weapon systems and soldiers might be seen as a strategy of a state to prevent its adversary from taking a particular action. More specifically, showing the enemy that there is no possibility to conduct a successful invasion, causing the adversary to reconsider their plans concerning the potential invasion, and therefore also preventing the war.

At the same time, the additional costs that the increase the size of military parade entails still remain. This means that the increase of threat has to be also understandable for the population in general in order to diminish their opposition to increased size of the military parade, or perhaps even create a public demand for it. An extreme scenario here would already be the concentration of foreign troops on the border, marking a possible upcoming invasion. However, in this case the country already likely needs to implement more drastic measures such as mobilising the army. Moreover, in this case a gathering of a significant number of soldiers and military vehicles to one place for the parade with the country's political elite also in place, would likely become a tempting target to the adversary who is in either case soon planning to launch its invasion.

As an alternative, the increased threat could be well understood also by the people in the case when a neighbouring country decides to attack someone else from the region. For example, in 2014 when Russia decided to forcefully annex Crimea and launch the war in Donbas the

perception of a real external threat increased across the region following a reassessment of Russia's ambitions and how far their leadership is willing to go to achieve its imperialistic goals (Banka & Bussmann, 2023: 16). As such events clearly cross the threshold of news, the public is also well aware of the changed security situation and presumably more susceptible to countermeasures for deterring such events repeating in their homeland, resulting in reduced constraints to the increase of size of its military parades, despite their cost. Thus, the second hypothesis is *if increase in aggressiveness of neighbour, then increase in size of the parade in democratic states.*

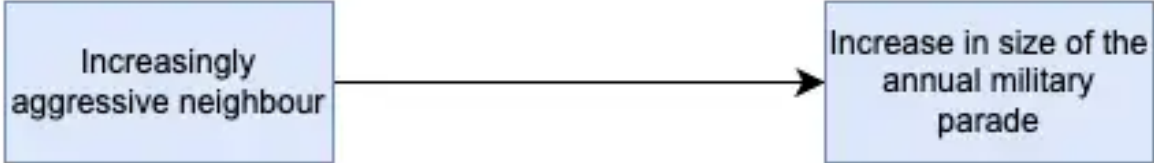


Figure 2, Hypothesis 2: Increasingly aggressive neighbour will lead to the increase in size of the annual military parade in democratic states.

In case of tense geopolitical situation or certain aggressive neighbour, the country sensing an external threat is usually also increasing their own defence spending to boost its defence readiness by renewing, expanding and replacing the already existing military capabilities (Floştoiu, 2024: 228). Depending on the exact country and circumstances, this could include increasing the number of active military personnel, increased arms and munition procurements, developing new weapon systems, and much more, which can also be demonstrated at the annual military parades. In terms of deterrence, demonstrating new weapon systems and increasing capabilities amplifies the signal of real actions, making the deterrence policy more credible (Balestrieri, 2023: 2), especially as the increased military spending has a real cost for the state (Banka & Bussmann, 2023: 3).

However, as developing new weapon systems and organising capacious arms and ammunition procurements, as well as recruiting new military personnel usually takes years, the expectation is that already more immediate measures such as increasing the size of military parades will follow. Nevertheless, in the case of longer confrontation the increased capabilities could also have some influence on the size of parades, as countries often use the parades to show their most modern weapons systems and new units beside the already existing ones (Aben, 2017: 23). Still, as modernising the military also takes place in normal circumstances,

and significantly smaller number of soldiers participate in parades than there are in total, the qualitative content of the parade is not further measured in this study.

In summary, the aim of this chapter was to develop two different explanations for the increase in size of the annual military parades in democratic countries based on the main internal and external functions the parades could employ. The first hypothesis to be tested later in the analytical part of this thesis is *if democratic backsliding, then increase in size of the annual military parade in democratic states*, and the second hypothesis which offers an alternative explanation is *if increase in aggressiveness of neighbour, then increase in size of the parade in democratic states*.

2. Methodology

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research methodology, explaining the overall research design and case selection, as well as by describing in detail the methods of data collection and how the data is analyzed. The author also explains why this approach was chosen and what limitations it entails in answering the research question “Why do democratic states increase the size of military parades?”

2.1. Research design and case selection

To test the two hypotheses developed above in the theoretical section, which offer alternative explanations to the increase in size of military parades, this study will follow the logic of a small-N comparative study using the Most Similar System Design (MSSD) that focuses on otherwise similar cases with variation in outcome. This means that one of the chosen cases is expected to show a significant increase in size for the annual military parade, while the other is not. Moreover, although similar in all possible respects, the cases have to differ in at least one of the explaining factors to test the hypotheses.

In this study, the cases are chosen from a similar geopolitical situation, where one of them has experienced a significant democratic backsliding in the studied period while the other has not. In a reasonably long time frame, the overall deductive approach allows to assess the impact of both possible explanations - democratic backsliding as well as increasingly aggressive neighbour - to the size of annual military parades, if the security situation within cases also varies over time. For this purpose, the increase of size of the parades is measured individually for every year, not as a general trend. Furthermore, focusing only on two cases enables going more in depth with the analysis and the contexts of particular parades which helps to better understand specific causal mechanisms and avoid oversimplifications.

For in-depth case-by-case analysis the author employs the theory-testing type of process-tracing, which allows the author to explore the causal mechanisms in greater depth and examine precisely what factors have contributed to the increase in parade size and how they have done so. Using process-tracing allows to trace the causal mechanisms within cases (Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 11), to better understand the exact factors affecting certain decisions (Collier, 2011: 823). In the context of this study, this enables to focus on critical junctures, to assess if either of the expected factors indeed explain the eventual outcome (i.e. the increase in size of the military parade).

A suitable region for finding example cases is Europe where there are many democracies clustered together in more-or-less the same threat environment. Among European states that hold parades, the study selects Poland and Estonia for further study because both of them are situated on the so-called Eastern Flank, where perception of external threat has clearly increased over the past decades due to Russia's invasions to Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 (Banka & Buschmann, 2023: 16). Moreover, whereas Poland's Armed Forces Day parade in 2023 was described as the biggest since the Cold War (Alandi, 2023), the parades in Estonia have not triggered similar headlines in the news.

Additionally, when it comes to the level of democratic backsliding, in recent years among all European democracies, Hungary stands out as the country that has experienced the most significant democratic backsliding in the region over recent decades (V-Dem, 2025). However, since Hungary does not have a tradition of organizing annual military parades, Poland stands out as the most extreme case in this regard, having experienced almost as severe democratic backsliding in the last decade (ibid).

The second chosen case, Estonia is in a similar geopolitical position to Poland, as it is also neighbouring Russia, and due to its specific location and size. Moreover, unlike Poland, Estonia is one of the most stable democracies in the region (V-Dem, 2025), making the comparison suitable for a MSSD study (see Table 1). Additionally, both countries are members of NATO and have significantly increased their defence spending in response to Russia's growing aggression (NATO, 2023: 3).

The study will focus on an 18-year period, spanning from 2007 to 2024. This period includes three Russian aggressions and drastic democratic backsliding in Poland. Other important indicators have been the same in the countries, including that both were already members of NATO by 2007 and could rely on collective defence for their security. Additionally, 2007 was the first time when the Armed Forces Day in Poland was celebrated with a military parade in its current form, making previous years less comparable. Over time it captures the different security situation for both cases. As the study measures and seeks to explain the individual increases in size of military parades taking place in this time frame, not the overall increase, inside the Polish case also a comparison can be made between parades held before the onset of democratic backsliding and those held after it had already occurred.

Table 1. Comparison of cases.

Variables	Case	Poland	Estonia
Regime type		Democratic state	Democratic state
Holding annual military parades (just before elections)		Yes	Yes
Neighbouring Russia		Yes	Yes
NATO member state		Yes	Yes
Notable increase of military spending (by % of GDP)		Yes	Yes
Stable military structure		Yes	Yes
Democratic backsliding (IV 1)		Yes	No
Increasingly aggressive neighbour (IV 2)		Yes	Yes
Notable increase in size of the annual military parade (DV)		Yes	No

Estonia was specifically chosen among the Baltic states (all of which meet the aforementioned criteria) due to the most stable structure of its Defence Forces throughout the study period, as unlike Estonia, both Latvia and Lithuania stopped enforcing mandatory military service shortly after joining NATO but have since reintroduced it. Focusing on Estonia therefore excludes variations in parade size that could result from structural changes in the Defence Forces and obscure the impact of the factors under study. Although in Poland there is no

compulsory conscription, this was ended already long before the studied period, therefore also limiting the influence of possible structural changes in the military to the size of its annual military parade.

Moreover, both Estonia and Poland are particularly suitable cases for this study, as in both countries the annual military parade takes place only 1-2 months before the parliamentary elections held every 4 years. This enables a credible discussion on the parade's potential impact on election campaigns, which are presumably approaching their peak at that point.

The parades under study are the Polish Armed Day Parade, held annually on August 15 to commemorate the victory in the Battle of Warsaw in 1920, and the Independence Day Parade of Estonia, held annually on February 24. In Poland, the Armed Forces Day Parade is the only nationwide military parade held each year, but Estonia also celebrates its Victory Day on June 23 with a military parade. However, for the purposes of comparability, only the largest annual parade in each country is included in the study. In the case of Estonia, the Victory Day Parade is not organized by the national Defence Forces like the Independence Day Parade, but a volunteer-based Defence League (Link, 2012), which typically results in a smaller display of military equipment. Additionally, since election campaigns in Estonia do not peak during the summer months, the Victory Day Parade does not align with the electoral cycle in the same way the Independence Day Parade does.

Within the studied 18-year timeframe, the author will identify critical junctures based on the hypotheses stated at the end of the theoretical section, where the size of the parades is expected to increase. Moreover, if there are significant increases in size of the parades that do not match with the initial critical junctures developed from the hypotheses, the author will focus on specific moments where the change in size has taken place using the process-tracing to explain the outcome. The chosen timeframe is expected to provide a sufficient number of critical junctures, reducing the possibility for drawing arbitrary conclusions.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

As military parades are public events by nature, data concerning the details of their size is usually accessible through public sources, such as official press releases from the Defence Forces, Ministries of Defence, and the Chancellery of the President. For the years in which official press releases were not archived on official government websites, the author relied on secondary government sources (i.e. Estonian Defence Forces' brochure for the parade

commemorating 100th Anniversary of the Estonian Republic) or as a last resort, articles from reliable local media outlets (i.e. ERR) which had, at the time, gathered their data from the official information provided by the Ministry or the Defence Forces, and visual countings from the available recordings of the studied parades.

Based on these sources, the increase in size of the parade will be measured using three elements – two primary and one supplementary. The two primary elements are the number of soldiers and the number of military vehicles that took part in the parade. These were chosen as the main indicators because these numbers are central to every press release, reflecting the aspects most emphasised in public communication about the parade's scale. Moreover, from a spectator's perspective on the spot, the number of soldiers and vehicles participating plays an important role in how large and powerful the parade appears. It is important to note that the number of soldiers as shown in the official communication, also contains certain units who are actively participating in national defence, although they are not soldiers by the traditional classification – for example, the Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation (*Naiskodukaitse*) or cadets from Internal Security Academy, as in the Estonian case.

However, this study does not make qualitative distinctions beyond the total number of vehicles - for example, between logistical support and actual combat equipment over the years. There are two reasons for that. First, the most powerful equipment is not emphasized separately in official communications, and second, given the increased defence spending over time in both cases under study, some degree of qualitative technological development is natural.

The supplementary element measured in this study is the number of participating allied states. This aspect may be particularly significant from the perspective of extended deterrence, as it helps to assess whether the full extent of one's deterrence capabilities has been used in response to increasing aggression from the neighbouring country.

The focus here is solely on the number of participating countries, as press releases and other public sources on parades usually list all participating allied nations, but not the number of individual allied soldiers or vehicles. Additionally, the author also does not consider there to be a meaningful difference, either in terms of deterrence or a domestic campaign plan, between an allied nation being represented by a few soldiers and a flag versus a full platoon (i.e a few dozen soldiers). In addition, the study does not distinctively measure the participating aircrafts, and possible additional allied states present in air, as this data is usually

disclosed with fewer details about the numbers and participating additional states, making it seemingly less important in terms of signalling as well as reliably compared inside desired parameters.

Therefore, this means that for the increase in size of parades, either the number of participating soldiers or the number of participating vehicles needs to show a significant increase which does not match with the trend of previous years, without the other element showing a significant decrease. In this case, the increase could be even more amplified by an increase in the number of participating allies. In turn, when only the number of participating allied states increases and the number of soldiers and vehicles remains stable, this alone is not considered as the increase in size of the parade. As the increase in size of the parade is measured individually for each year, all years in which the criteria are met are considered to have increased size. In the discussion section, the author also shows special focus on explaining the increase of size in these years in which the increase in size was the most notable.

Turning to independent variables, the democratic backsliding is operationalised through a significant deterioration in the quality of democracy. This is measured using the Liberal Democracy Index dataset from Variety of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, which focuses on checks and balances on executive power, as well as free and fair elections and freedom of expression (V-Dem, 2023). Here, it is even not that important that the further decline in the quality of democracy continues, but rather that the executive branch has got ridden of the checks and balances that, in a proper democracy, would prevent the size of parades from being increased in the interests of an election campaign, as explained more thoroughly above in the end of theoretical chapter when the first hypothesis was developed.

As of critical junctures when the increase in size is expected to take place, this study will focus solely on the parliamentary elections (as shown in Figure 3), as the governments of the time, who also control the Ministries of Defence, have the most at stake there, compared to local or European Parliament elections. In Poland, citizens can also directly elect the President, but this is not the case in Estonia, which is why these elections would not be comparable, even if the President were to hold significant executive powers.

For both countries, parliamentary elections were held in 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 during the period under study (as shown in Figure 3). Estonia traditionally holds its

parliamentary elections in March and Independence Day parade in February, and Poland has elections October and Armed Forces Day parades in August, thus leaving the parade in the time of election campaign for both cases. Therefore, in case of democratic backsliding, this means an increase in size is expected for the parade held on the same year with the elections.

The increasingly aggressive neighbour is operationalised through a hostile country deciding to attack one of its other neighbours, that will also raise security related concerns among its other neighbours. As Russia is an increasingly aggressive neighbour to both Estonia and Poland, the critical junctures after which the increase is expected to take place are the already mentioned invasions to Georgia in 2008 and to Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 (as shown in the Figure 3). Therefore, if the increase in size for the military parade was in response to an increasingly aggressive neighbour, then the study should observe a notable increase in parade size taking place just after Russia’s invasions, with bearing in mind that if the first parade is held very close to the beginning of any of these invasions, the planning of the parade is likely already done and the effect will occur more visibly in the next year.



Figure 3. Timeline with critical junctures.

For each fluctuation, the author also describes the general context and key features of the parade, while using process-tracing to reason why the size of the parade increased significantly in a particular year, even if it is not directly related to either hypothesis or require alternative explanations. The advantage of process-tracing is that, even if the hypothesis is not proven to be true, it allows the author to also focus on the alternative aspects to explain why the outcome diverged from what was expected based on the theoretical framework. It is also possible to consider aspects that are extraneous to the theory, such as anniversaries occurring every 5 years or increased defence spending in both countries.

Naturally, this approach also has its limitations. Mainly, since the study is based on only two cases, even if carefully selected and justified, it limits the generalisability of the findings to other democratic states or geopolitical contexts. Additionally, there may be several important factors influencing the size of parades simultaneously, which are difficult to disentangle. There might also be significant aspects not accounted for by the theory that had a strong impact on decision-makers and, as a result, on the parades during certain periods.

To reduce the effect of at least some of the mentioned limitations and help the author identify the pathways of the causal effects affecting the size of the parades, the author conducted a limited number of semi-structured expert interviews with representatives from military forces of both countries. The author also used these interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the organizational aspects of the parades, thereby avoiding arbitrary and excessively simplified conclusions in the analysis.

From the Estonian Defence Forces, the author interviewed the Sergeant Major (*ülemveebel*) Enn Adoson, Command Sergeant Major of the Estonian Defence Forces, and from the Polish Armed Forces colonel (*pulkownik*) Jarosław Stawski, Head of the Military Ceremonies Department at the General Staff. Both interviews were conducted in person.

However, these were more background conversations for supplementary data, intended to allow the interview partners to speak as openly as possible. Neither of these interviews are directly quoted in the empirical section. In this way, the author ensured better trust with the interviewees, and aimed to rule out any possibility that what they said could negatively affect their careers later on. The author also attempted to interview officials from the Ministries of Defence, but in both countries, he was directed to military representatives instead.

3. Change in size in annual military parades of Estonia and Poland in 2007-2024

In the following chapter the author will present and analyse the gathered data from the Independence Day military parades in Estonia and Armed Forces Day military parades in Poland in the period of 2007-2024. To track changes in the size of the parade, three key elements are used: number of participating soldiers, vehicles and total number of allies present. In addition, important milestones, such as the inclusion of allies, are described, along with explanations for years in which parades did not take place. In both cases, the historical background and important organisational elements are also introduced before analysing the size of these parades. After indicating the increases in size, the study will analyse the explanations to these increases according to the hypotheses developed in the theoretical framework.

3.1. The case of Estonia's Independence Day military parade in 2007-2024

The first case to be studied is the Independence Day military parade conducted annually in Estonia on February 24. The analysis begins with a brief exploration of the tradition's origins, followed by an examination of key organisational elements that clarify the parade's nature and essential components. This later helps to distinguish the functions served by the Estonia's Independence Day military parade, especially in the case of increase in size. Only after that will the analysis take a closer look to the size of the parade in the studied period to identify the increases in size of the parade in the studied period and test how the expected factors explain the increase in size.

3.1.1. Historical background and organisation of contemporary Independence Day military parades in Estonia

The tradition of Estonia's Independence Day military parades dates back more than a hundred years. The first parade was held on February 24th, 1919 (Salmann, 2018: 24), during the Estonian War of Independence. At that time, the initial offensives of Soviet Russia had been successfully repelled and the entire Estonian territory liberated, but the conflict itself was far from over - fierce battles continued in Latvia and Russia. Although parades were held in several locations across the country, the main event took place in the capital, Tallinn, at what was known until 1922 as Peetri Square, named after the statue of Peter I displayed there (Tammisto, 2013: 29). Today, the venue is known as Freedom Square, where parades in Tallinn continue to be held.

The first parade was attended by both soldiers - including cavalry, marines, and members of the Estonian Defence League - and civilian units, such as firefighters and schoolchildren (Salmann, 2018: 24). Orchestras played the national anthem and other patriotic pieces, and speeches were delivered by Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Konstantin Päts, Finnish statesman Oskari Wilho Louhivuori, and Commander-in-Chief of the Army Johan Laidoner (ibid).

Following the end of the War of Independence, the tradition of holding annual military parades continued until the Soviet occupation in 1940. The second parade, held in 1920, less than a month after the signing of the Treaty of Tartu, which formally ended the Estonian War of Independence, featured representations from all military units (ibid: 28). Unlike today, military parades or processions were held in nearly every major settlement and always included the local fire brigade. On occasion, the start of the parade even had to be postponed due to real-life duties that the marching firefighters had to attend to (Tammisto, 2013: 35).

Although there is little numerical data on the exact participation, it is clear that the largest and most significant parades were held in the capital Tallinn. Typically, in addition to marching units and various military vehicles, these parades also included military aircraft circling over the parade ground if the weather permitted (ibid: 33). Estimates suggest that during the jubilee years of 1928 and 1938, the Tallinn garrison and Estonian Defence League participated in full force, which could have amounted to as many as 4,500 soldiers, although the actual number was likely somewhat lower (ibid: 32).

Until 1939, weather conditions were the only reason for the parade to be canceled. Altogether the Independence Day parade in Tallinn was canceled three times during the interwar period due to cold weather: in 1929, 1932, and 1936 (Salmann, 2018: 24). In 1940, the parade in Tallinn was already held in a shortened form due to the enactment of the Soviet–Estonian Mutual Assistance Treaty, which had declared a state of emergency near the coast, along the borders, and in other areas where Soviet military bases had been established (Tammisto, 2013: 28). However, since cities like Tartu were far from these bases, the parade held there was even larger that year (ibid: 29). Nevertheless, the Independence Day military parade in 1940 was the last of its kind in free Estonia for more than half a century, due to the ensuing period of Soviet and Nazi occupation.

The tradition of Independence Day military parades in Estonia was officially reinstated in 1992, at a time when the Ministry of Defence had not yet been formally established and military units were just beginning to be formed (Salmann, 2018: 42). Nevertheless, on February 24 of that year, 1,540 uniformed personnel gathered at Freedom Square (ibid), making it one of the largest parades in Estonia since the Soviet occupation in terms of the participant numbers.

Since Estonia had been officially independent again for only half a year by that time, the units did not yet have standardized uniforms and were also missing many other basic pieces of equipment. Therefore, the parade officially took place without weapons, although some participants carried revolvers or automatic rifles (ibid). The parade was also televised by Estonian National Broadcasting, which, like the parade itself, has become an annual tradition ever since. The parade was welcomed by Arnold Rüütel, Chairman of the Supreme Council of Estonia, and Prime Minister Tiit Vähi, who delivered a speech (ibid: 45).

Nowadays, the Defence Forces parade remains an integral part of the Independence Day celebrations, alongside the morning ceremonies of flag-raising and wreath-laying, and the evening Presidential reception. The parade is received by the president, with the majority of other state officials also present - from the Prime Minister and ministers to the Speaker of the Riigikogu. However, it is no longer customary for the Prime Minister or President to deliver a speech at the parade. Instead, the main speech is delivered by the Commander of the Estonian Defence Forces.

Before the Soviet occupation, Independence Day was celebrated with parades across Estonia; today, however, it has become customary to hold a single central parade. The current president, Alar Karis, has wanted the parade to be held annually in the capital, Tallinn, on the same Freedom Square where the tradition originally began. However, under President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the central parade was also organised a few times outside Tallinn – twice in Pärnu (2008, 2014) and Narva (2009, 2015), and once in Tartu (2012).

Nevertheless, the Estonian Defence League organises various smaller commemorative events and military exhibitions across the country. Among other events, a small Defence League parade has been held for over thirty years in Antsla, on the other side of the country from Tallinn (Breidaks, 2022; Reporter, 2017). Apart from this, parades elsewhere are relatively

rare. To balance this, Victory Day parades organised by the Defence League usually take place outside Tallinn, in smaller cities (Link, 2012).

Many participants in today's Independence Day parades are either conscripts or active military personnel, including cadets from the Estonian Military Academy. Marching alongside them are also units from the Defence League, the Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation, the Prison Service, and the Internal Security Academy, often accompanied by a few service dogs. In recent years, reservists have also been included in the parade (Eesti Kaitsevägi, 2022), with a separate reserve training camp organised for them to prepare for the parade and line drills.

Alongside Estonian units there are also allied troops and vehicles present, but in recent years, only units from countries with a military presence in Estonia have been invited to the parade. The size of the participating units is determined by the Defence Forces, taking into account the amount of space available. Usually, there are more applicants than can be accommodated on the parade ground. The aim is to ensure that all regular units are represented.

Following the marching units are the vehicles - from logistics and support trucks to combat vehicles, self-propelled howitzers and allied tanks. The Defence Forces aim is to show the public something new and interesting at each parade so that the taxpayer can see how their money is being used. The parade is one of the only times a year when the public gets to view the latest technology up close, as exercises and training are usually not accessible to everyone. There is usually also an aircraft flyover, where the main focus has been on the allied aircraft, but since the weather conditions in February can be fickle with low visibility, it has occasionally been canceled at the last minute (Õhtuleht, 2019).

Each unit typically conducts its own parade drills – either at the expense of soldiers' free time or regular training hours, and the Command Sergeant Major of the Estonian Defence Forces visits the units a few weeks before the parade to review this process (Eesti Kaitsevägi, 2025). The day before the parade, on February 23, all participating units gather at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences to rehearse the marching portion of the parade (Sõdurileht, 2023). The same evening, a full parade rehearsal is held at Freedom Square, where the vehicles are already positioned. Accommodation is arranged in Tallinn for representatives of units from farther regions. Since the event takes place in the center of Tallinn, several streets must be closed to traffic, which, in addition to the logistics of the equipment, is one of the largest additional costs in organising the parade.

3.1.2. The change in size of Estonia’s Independence Day military parades in 2007-2024

In 2007, the for the first and only time after the Soviet occupation, the Independence Day parade was canceled due to severe weather conditions. A day before, the forecast of Estonian Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (EMHI) predicted frost from -17°C to -18°C which with the wind and humidity felt as -24°C (Postimees, 2007). According to the Estonian Defence Forces Garrison Regulations, the minimum temperature needed for holding a parade was significantly lower, only -12°C (ibid).

The final decision to cancel the parade was made on February 23 by the new Commander of the Defence Forces, Major General (*kindralmajor*) Ants Laaneots, for whom it would have been the first parade in his new role. Before making the decision, he consulted with President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Prime Minister Andrus Ansip and Defence Minister Jürgen Ligi (ibid).

Had the parade taken place, 683 soldiers and 14 vehicles would have participated (as shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5 for comparability with next years). As the tradition was already well-established and the units that had trained for the parade were disappointed by the last minute cancellation, it was later decided that in future, rather than canceling the parade, it would simply be shortened in similar weather conditions (Salmann, 2013: 76-78). Since then, the Independence Day parade has only been canceled once due to COVID-19 pandemic, but never again due to cold weather, although a shortened version has been held.

Number of soldiers participating at Estonia's Independence Day parade in 2007-2024

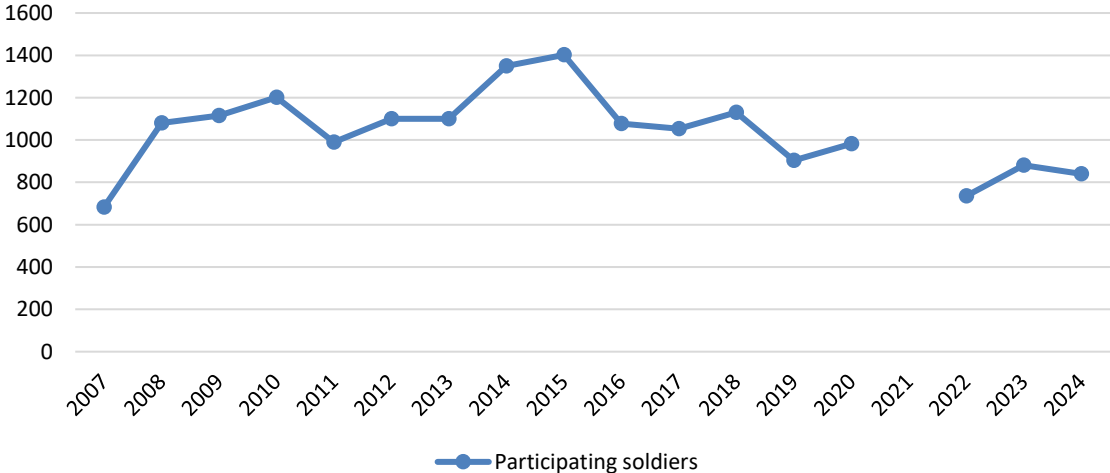


Figure 4. Number of soldiers participating in Estonia's Independence Day parade 2007-2024.

Sources: Listed in Appendix 1.

The first notable increase in size took place in 2008 where both the number of participating soldiers and the number of vehicles made one of the biggest rise in the studied period. Altogether 1081 soldiers and 47 vehicles participated at the parade in 2008. Let it be added for context that in the case of the last few parades before 2007, the size of the participants was comparable to the parade planned for 2007. In the previous couple of parades, an average of slightly more than 700 soldiers participated, and the number of vehicles circled around twenty vehicles (Salmann, 2018: 70,72,74).

The parade in 2008 also coincided with the 90th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia and was held for the first time outside Tallinn in Pärnu, where Estonia's independence was declared 90 years earlier. It is possible that the Defence Forces also responded with a more powerful parade than before to those who, after the parade in 2007 was canceled at the last minute due to the cold, had hoped that next year's anniversary parade would compensate the cancellation (Salmann, 2018: 78).

There was also a practical reason for moving the parade out of Tallinn – the renovation works at the Freedom Square in Tallinn had begun (Teeveere, 2012). As the renovations at the Freedom Square lasted until the summer of 2009, the parade also in 2009 was held away from Tallinn, and this time in Narva. Nevertheless, the parade in Narva was equivalent to the previous anniversary parade in terms of the number of soldiers, and there were even more vehicles. Altogether there were 1115 soldiers and 63 vehicles.

By 2010, the renovation of Freedom Square with the new Cross of Liberty and the Monument to the War of Independence, was finished, and the parade was back in Tallinn. The number of participating soldiers had grown to 1202, which up to this day is the biggest number of soldiers in Tallinn's parade in the studied period. The number of participating vehicles was 61 that year.

In next three years from 2011-2013, the number of participating soldiers at the parades slightly decreases, being the most evident in 2011 with less than 1000 participants. Still, the number of vehicles shows a stable increase in this period, reaching to 78 in 2013. In addition, 2013 was another anniversary year, as the Republic of Estonia turned 95. The 2011 parade was held in a shortened format due to the cold (Salmann, 2018: 84), which was the new agreed format for the parades in cold weather, after the parade in 2007 was canceled.

The biggest controversy during this period was caused by the 2012 parade being held in Tartu. Namely, it was announced in 2009 that all future parades would still take place in Tallinn, by a joint decision of the Office of the President, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Headquarters of the Estonian Defence Forces (Teeveere, 2012). Office of the President justified the decision to still take the parade to Tartu with the fact that all other important Independence Day events in 2012 were also taking place in Tartu (ibid), meaning the anniversary concert and the Presidential reception in the evening, which, despite the parade, also had rotated between different cities in the past. Media at that time speculated, that the reason for holding the parade in Tartu might indeed be that “distinguished guests would not have to travel between the two cities on the day of the celebration“ (ibid). Since then, no other Independence Day parade has been organised in Tartu.

In the studied period, the parade in Tartu was also the only one where the number of vehicles was not disclosed in the press release nor in the report of the Commander of the Defence Forces made at the parade to the President. Nevertheless, there was a press release from the Defence Forces about the vehicles moving to Tartu for the parade, which listed the number of vehicles by participating unit, with a total of 54 (Eesti Kaitsevägi, 2012). The author added this number to the Defence League’s vehicles visually counted from the Estonian Public Broadcasting’s recording of the parade, which was 21 in total, so altogether 75, which also matches the overall trend.

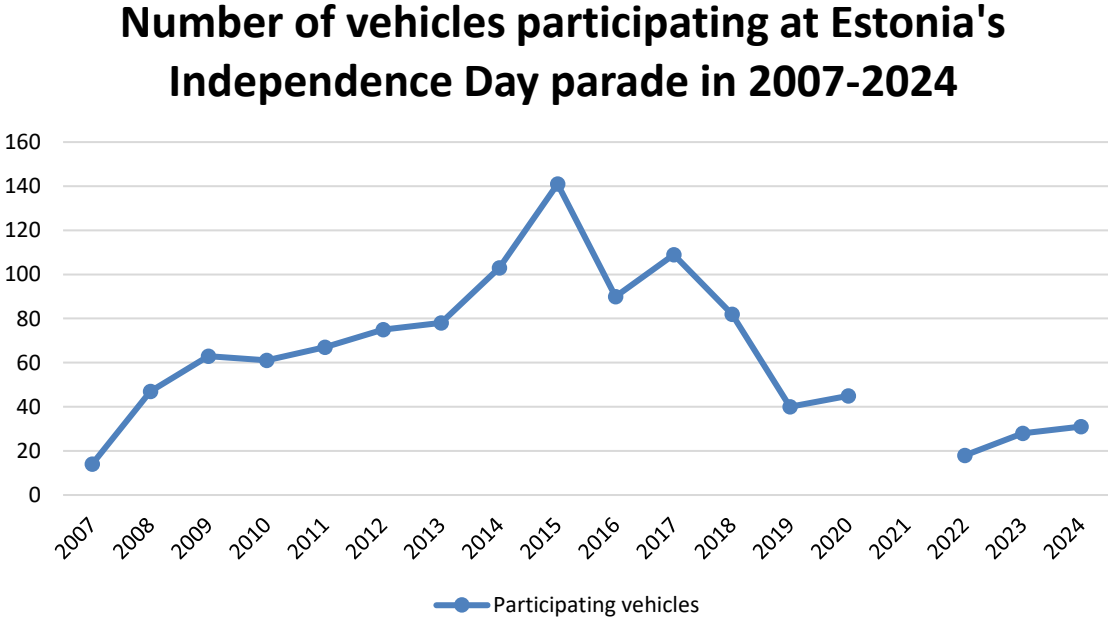


Figure 5. Number of vehicles participating in Estonia's Independence Day parade 2007-2024. **Sources:** Listed in Appendix 1.

The second notable increase in size for Independence Day parades in the studied period took place in the years of 2014 and 2015. First, in 2014 the parade was back in Pärnu, and this was also the first time when the allied troops participated at the parade. The United Kingdom was represented by a platoon and colour guards from USA, Latvia, Lithuania and Denmark also participated (Salmann, 2018: 92). The same year in March Estonia was also celebrating the passing of first 10 years after joining NATO. In terms of numbers, there were up to 1350 soldiers participating at the Independence Day parade in 2014, in addition to 103 vehicles. For the first time, the parade included the cadets from the Internal Security Academy (Miil, 2015).

However, the parade in Narva in 2015 was even bigger with 1402 soldiers and 141 vehicles, as reported by the Commander of the Defence Forces Lieutenant General (*kindralleitnant*) Riho Terras and written in the media a day before the parade (Delfi, 2015), although the initial press release only talked about 117 vehicles (Salmann, 2018: 96).

In any case, this was the biggest military parade in the studied period with both in terms of participating personnel and military vehicles as well as one of the biggest parades in Estonia after restoring the independence, second only to the 1992 and 1993 parades in terms of the number of personnel (*ibid*: 42, 46). At the same time, there were significantly fewer vehicles in these first parades. Moreover, it the parade in Narva in 2015 was also the last Independence Day parade up to this day, which took place outside of Tallinn.

This time the number of participating allies had already risen to 6 countries present with their troops, and for the first time, some of them came with their vehicles – the Dutch on CV90 infantry fighting vehicles and pioneer tank Leopard 1 (*ibid*: 96). The US troops came with Stryker armored personnel carriers (*ibid*). In addition to the allied vehicles, the increase of vehicles was also a result of a especially strong representation of Estonia's SISU armored personnel carriers with total number of 31 of those participating (*ibid*).

Number of allies participating at Estonia's Independence Day parade in 2007-2024

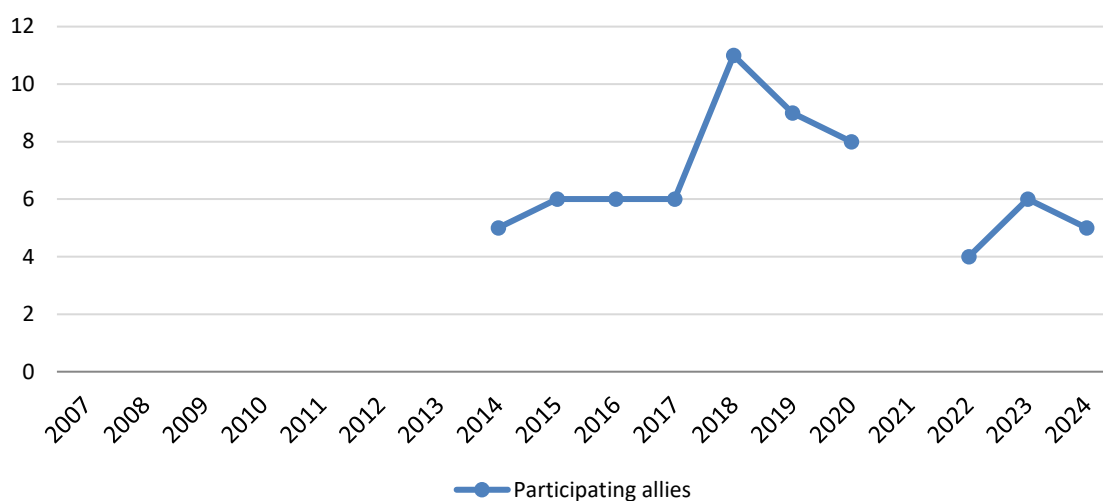


Figure 6. Number of allies participating in Estonia's Independence Day parade 2007-2024.
Sources: Listed in Appendix 1.

Subsequent parades no longer featured such a large number of participating units nor vehicles. In parades of 2016 and 2017, the number of participating soldiers was both under 1100, and the number of allied state's represented with troops remained stable with soldiers from 6 other countries participating. Nevertheless, number of vehicles did make a small increase in 2017, as while 90 vehicles participated at the parade in 2016, there were 109 in 2017. This was also the last time when more than hundred vehicles participated at the Independence Day parade.

However, the 2018 parade, which celebrated the 100. anniversary of the Republic of Estonia, set a significant record with a total of 11 allied countries attending. In addition to NATO allies, units from Ukraine and Georgia also participated in this parade with colour guards. This probably also explains the small jump in the number of soldiers participating, which was 1131 in the 2018 parade, but the number of vehicles, on the other hand, dropped to 82.

The parades in 2019 and 2020 stand out for their large decline in size. In both years the number of participating soldiers was under 1000, and the number vehicles even dropped to 40 in 2019 and remained in the same magnitude also in 2020 with 45 vehicles. Nevertheless, the number of participating allied countries remained higher compared to pre-2018 parades, as troops from 9 countries participated at the parade in 2019, and 8 states, including Ukraine, were present in 2020.

The Independence Day parade in 2021 was the only one that was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since this decision was already made in December by the Office of the President (Samost & Mäekivi, 2020), there is no information regarding the parade, such as how many units would have participated.

In 2022, the parade was again held, although this festive mood was clearly disturbed by the early morning news from Ukraine, where Russia had begun the full-scale invasion. Thus, many units, high-ranking military personnel and politicians wore ribbons on their chests indicating support for Ukraine. No additional special preparations were possible, as the news from Ukraine was very fresh. In terms of size, the number of soldiers had dropped to 736 and there only 18 vehicles participating. There were also fewer allied countries present, as only 4 states were represented.

The parade in 2023 was the last to take place on a jubilee, as it celebrated the 105. anniversary of the Republic of Estonia. This parade was made special by the presence of dignified guests - President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg. In terms of size, the parade showed a slight increase in all studied elements with 881 soldiers, 28 vehicles and 6 allied countries present, including troops from Ukraine with howitzers donated by Estonia.

The last Independence Day parade in the studied period took place in 2024, with a size that was quite comparable with the previous one, with 840 soldiers, 31 vehicles and 5 allied countries participating. Let it be added for context, that the last Independence Day parade so far took place in 2025, with 1075 participants and 47 vehicles (Eesti Kaitsevägi, 2025a).

To summarise, the most notable increases in size for the annual Independence Day parades in Estonia that clearly stand out from the overall pattern during the studied period took place in the years of 2008, 2014, 2015 and 2023. As the parade in 2021 was canceled due ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as a precaution measure to protect the people, the return of the parade in 2022 is not considered as an increase, especially as within the trend, the size of this parade even saw a decline. The biggest decreases in the size of the parade took place in 2011, 2016 and 2019.

3.1.3. Factors explaining the increase in size for Independence Day military parades in Estonia in 2007-2024

In this chapter, the author will test the factors assumed theoretically to explain the observed increases in size of the studied annual military parades in Estonia in 2007-2024. To do that, the analysis first focuses on examining the validity of the hypothesis excepting the increase in size of military parades taking place before the elections in case of democratic backsliding. This is followed by testing the second hypothesis where the increase in size is expected for the first parades taking place after Russia’s invasion to its neighbouring countries in 2008, 2014 and 2022.

Democratic backsliding

In the studied period, Estonia can be described as a stable liberal democracy (as shown in Figure 7). According to the Liberal Democracy Index annually released by V-Dem, Estonia’s score has remained above 0.8 out of 1 throughout the studied period, making it one of the most stable liberal democracies in the region (V-Dem. 2025). In the beginning of the studied period, Estonia’s score in V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index was stable around 0.81 out of 1. In 2010, it started to increase first to 0.83 in 2010, and reached 0.86 in the period of 2016-2018. By 2020, it had declined to 0.84. Ever since, Estonia’s V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index has remained stable with the score of 0.85 out of 1. Thus, no democratic backsliding has taken place.

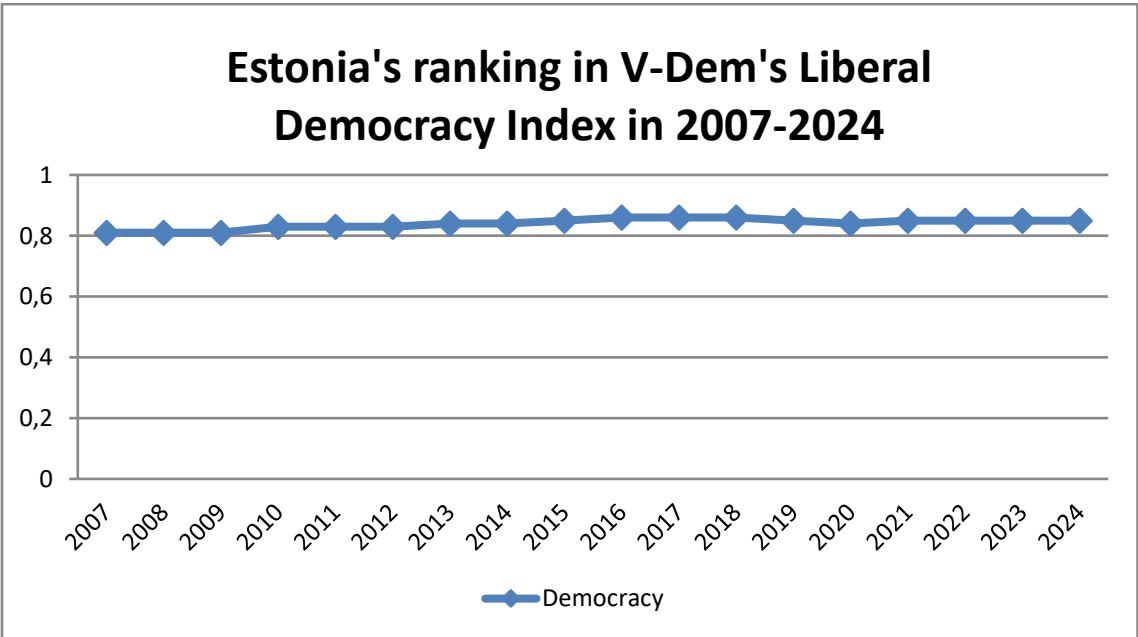


Figure 7. Democracy in Estonia in 2007-2024. **Source:** V-Dem. 2025.

As Estonia uses the proportional representation electoral system, it has been governed by coalition governments throughout the studied period, often with a Minister of Defence from a different party than the Prime Minister. Altogether, there have been 10 different Ministers of Defence from three different parties – Estonian Reform Party (*Eesti Reformierakond*), Social Democratic Party (*Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond*) and Isamaa, formerly Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (*Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit*). For most of time, the Prime Minister has been from Reformierakond, although in the period of late 2016 to early 2021, the Prime Minister was Jüri Ratas from the Center Party (*Keskerakond*).

According to the hypothesis, *if democratic backsliding, then increase in size of the annual military parade in democratic states*, the parades held on the years of parliamentary elections are not expected to increase in size, as with the high quality of democracy, the checks and balances to the executive power remain in place. Looking at the data (as provided in Figure 8 with the vertical lines indicating the years of parliamentary elections), this hypothesis largely proves to be correct.

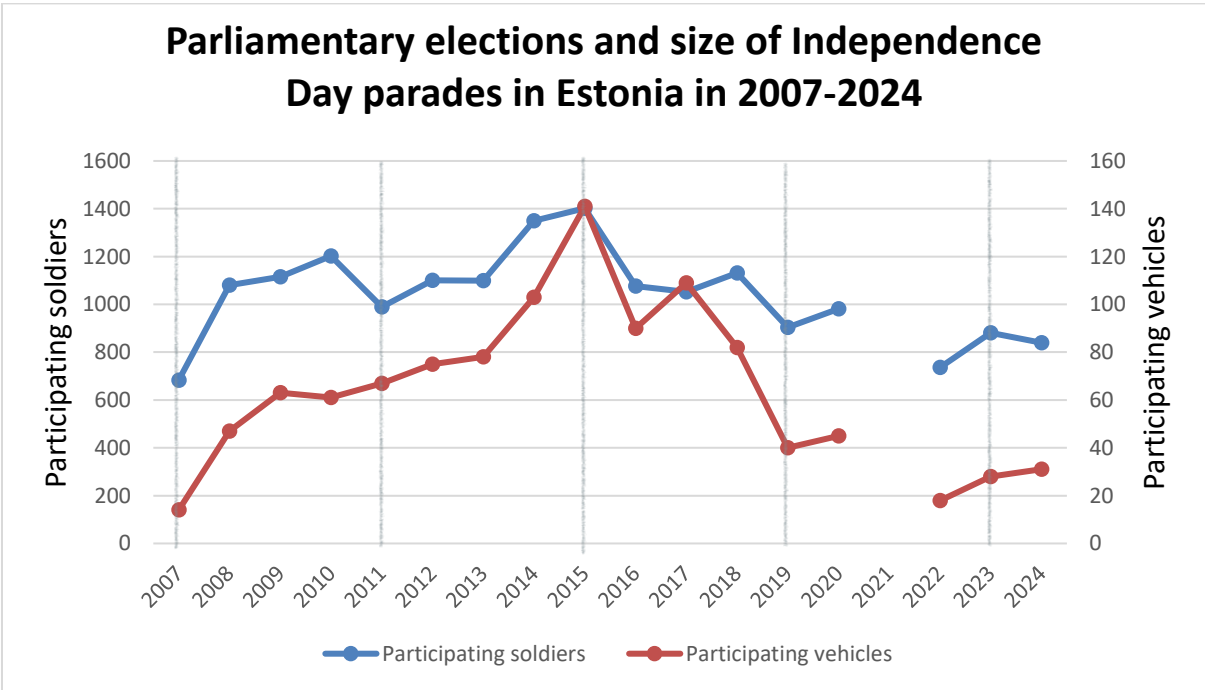


Figure 8. Parliamentary elections and size of Independence Day parades in Estonia in 2007-2024.

In 2007, the Independence Day parade was supposed to be the smallest in size in the studied period but was eventually cancelled due to cold weather. In the years of 2011 and 2019, the size of the parade decreased compared to the preceding year. However, in 2015 and 2023, the increases in size of annual military parades occurred. The following analysis aims to seek if and how the increases in size could have benefitted the elite in power, and whether there is reliable evidence that they had the power to influence the size of the parades in these years.

During both of identified increases before the elections, the government was led by the Prime Minister from Reform Party, and security issues were high in agenda during the election campaign. In 2015, the tone for the election campaign was set by the ongoing Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, which began in early 2014 (Hinsberg et al., 2015). The slogan for the elections of Reform Party was "Firmly forward" („*Kindlalt edasi*“) (Reformierakond, 2014), portraying the ruling party as a strong and forward-looking force.

One of the main campaign clips portrayed the Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas walking at the Ämari Air Base while allied fighter jets flew overhead, a scene that later caused some outrage in the media. According to the Defence Forces, no laws were violated, although the Minister of Defence, Sven Mikser from the Social Democratic Party later prohibited filming commercials on the territory of the Defence Forces or using Defence Forces equipment and infrastructure for self-promotion, so no one could accuse it of being biased (Veskioja, 2014).

In 2023, security and fear of Russia were again high in political agenda, as this time Russia's full-scale invasion to Ukraine had begun a year earlier (Mölder, 2024: 128). This time the Reform Party was led by the Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, whose image among the electorate was positive for her clear and firm stance in foreign politics, especially concerning the question of Ukraine (ibid). This time, the Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur was also from the Reform Party.

During the election campaign in 2023, the slogan of the Reform Party was "Estonia in firm hands" („*Kindlates kätes Eesti*“) (Reformierakond, 2023), again portraying the party as a strong protector of the country, with the emphasis also on maintaining good relations with Estonia's allies. Moreover, one of the main promises in the electoral campaign of the Reform Party was to raise the national defence spending to 3% of the GDP (ibid), which at the time would have been one of the highest percentages within NATO.

In other elections during the studied period, security was less of a priority for the voters, as well as for the party of the Prime Minister. In 2007, Reform Party led by Prime Minister Andrus Ansip promised to take Estonia among the five wealthiest countries in Europe, focusing on the economic growth, as well as on higher salaries and pensions (Reformierakond, 2006). During the campaign in 2011, the Reform Party, still led by Prime Minister Ansip, again focused on economic issues, promising, among other things, stable economic growth and sound public finances, which would bring welfare to everyone (Reformierakond, 2011).

In the 2019 elections, according to a poll conducted by Kantar Emor, the most important topics to the voters were taxes, value conflict between liberals and conservatives, and the increasing prices and excise duties (Jaagant, 2019). The Prime Minister at the time was Jüri Ratas from the Center Party, which focused on regional issues, healthcare, and social security (ibid).

Therefore, in both times when the Independence Day parade increased in size in the year of elections, the ruling party at that time might indeed have profited from a bigger parade, as it went together with its main messages during the election campaign, making their promises and slogans more credible. In the case of the 2023 parade, this was also facilitated by the joint visit to Estonia by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, where they attended both the parade and other Independence Day celebrations. At the same time, in these years when security topic was not that high in election campaign's agenda, the parades did not increase in size.

However, in the case of Independence Day parades in Estonia, the composition of the parade is dictated by the Defence Forces by being agreed upon by the Deputy Commander and the Command Sergeant Major of the Estonian Defence Forces. Considering the good quality of Estonia's democracy with clear checks and balances to the executive power, these positions are not politicised nor easily influenced by politicians.

Nor is there any credible evidence that the ruling party indeed influenced the size of the parade in favour of political campaigns seems. Moreover, since in 2015 the Minister of Defence and the Prime Minister were both from different political parties, and if there had been suspicious political influence, it would certainly have come to light and also caused discussion in the media.

Increasingly aggressive neighbour

That leads to the second hypothesis *if increase in aggressiveness of neighbour, then increase in size of the parade in democratic states*. The expectation here is that there is increase in size for the annual Independence Day military parade following the aggressions conducted by the hostile neighbour – with critical junctures of Russia’s invasion to Georgia in 2008, annexation of Crimea and Donbas war in 2014, and Russia’s full-scale invasion to Ukraine in 2022 (as portrayed with vertical lines in Figure 9). Considering the timing of the military parades in Estonia, this means that the increase in size of the annual Independence Day parade is expected in the years of 2009, 2015 and 2023, as all aforementioned invasions took place after, or in the most recent case in the same day when the Independence Day parade was held on that year.

The findings show that this explanation indeed seems to have an effect to these parades, as there was a clear increase in 2015 and 2023, and even in 2009 a slight increase occurred, although considering the overall trend this remained still relatively moderate.

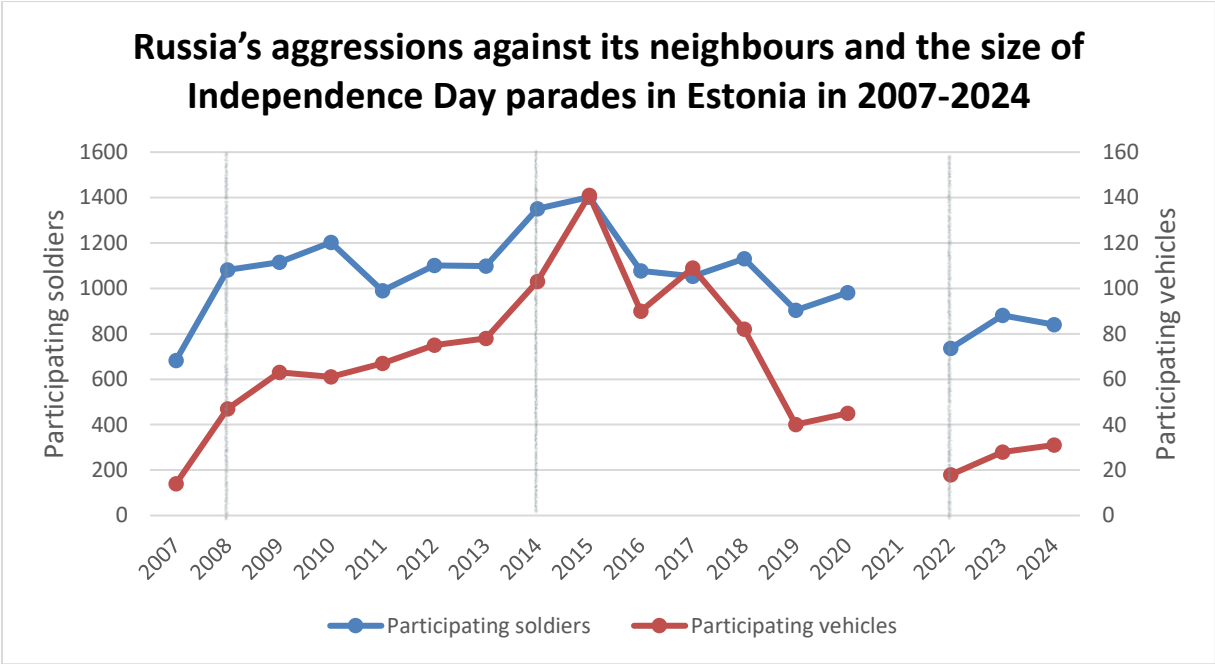


Figure 9. Russia’s aggressions against its neighbours and the size of Independence Day parades in Estonia in 2007-2024

The increase in the size of the Independence Parade in 2015, which is also the largest parade in the studied period – both in terms of participating soldiers and vehicles – does fit the hypothesis well. This particular parade was also organised in Narva, which is the biggest city in Estonia with Russian majority to whom the state signalled its presence with that parade.

As Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 began on the early morning of the Independence Day of Estonia that year, the parade in 2022 again could not have reacted to the war. In fact, the parade in 2022 was even smaller than the last parade being held in 2020. Nevertheless, as the 2021 parade was canceled due to the real threat of the pandemic and only for one year, the resumption of parades from 2022 cannot be interpreted as an increase in size, although the gathering of Russia's troops to the border with Ukraine had already started in the end of 2021.

Therefore, the first Independence Day parade where planning took place already during Russia's full-scale invasion to Ukraine, was the one in 2023, and this indeed showed a considerable increase in size, with also having NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen as guests in Tallinn, signalling their commitment to Estonia. In 2024, there was again a slight decrease, likely following the similar logic of the parades after 2015 that the people got used to it, even though it is still ongoing.

In addition to identified critical junctures of Russia's invasions to its neighbouring countries, Estonians's perception of Russia as increasingly aggressive neighbour could also serve as the explanation for the increase in size for the Independence Day military parade in 2008. The logic behind that remains increased need for deterrence and ensuring security to its own citizens after the so-called Bronze Night attacks in spring 2007, when Russia instigated a destabilisation attempt in Estonia, with massive street riots in Tallinn and Ida-Viru County and subsequent cyberattacks (KAPO, 2007: 2). According to the Director of Estonia's Internal Security Service back then Aldis Alus, these attacks were the biggest threat to Estonia's security since regaining its independence (ibid).

The Bronze Night attacks and their aftermath were also widely discussed in the Estonian media at that time, matching with the logic of reduced restraints to the increase in size of the parade in case of an external threat understandable to the ordinary people. After such events, it the logic of benefitting functions of the parade also seems quite straightforward, as a country would want to demonstrate its presence and strength to both its own people for reassurance and

hostile forces abroad for deterrence against repetition of similar attempts. For the parade in 2008, the military also decided to start showing people the weapon systems displayed at parades by batteries and companies, not merely individual weapons systems of its kind, as in previous years (Eesti Kaitsevägi, 2008).

The only significant increase in size of Estonia's annual Independence Day parades, which is not that clearly explained by the increasingly aggressive neighbour, is the parade in 2014 which took place right before Russia illegally annexed the peninsula of Crimea, followed by the war in Donbas. In his speech at the Independence Day parade in 2014, the Commander of Defence Forces Riho Terras, marked the developments in Ukraine as "continuously concerning" (Taimre, 2014), but considering that the planning of the parade is done months ahead, it is unlikely to still have triggered that increase.

Nevertheless, the increasingly aggressive neighbour also provides some explanation for the decline in the size of the parades in the second half of the studied period, because as the evidence indicates, its effect on the size of the parades is rather temporary, and as the urgency of the threat reduces and the parade will also stabilize or even decrease over time.

In summary, based on the findings from the case of annual Independence Day military parades in Estonia, the increases in size are primarily explained by the factor of increasingly aggressive neighbour. Although the 2015 and 2023 were also the years of parliamentary elections, there is no evidence of the election campaign primarily explaining the increase in size of the annual military parade, as there was no democratic backsliding. Instead, this gap in explanation was filled by the increasingly aggressive neighbour, as the parades in 2015 and 2023 were the first being held after Russia's invasions to Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Due to Estonia's own direct exposure to Russia's malicious activity through Bronze Night attacks in 2007, the same factor also explains the increase in size of the parade in 2008. The only notable increase in size in the studied period that was not explained by increasingly aggressive neighbour is the Independence Day parade in 2014.

3.2. The case of Poland's Armed Forces Day military parade in 2007-2024

The second case to be examined is the Armed Forces Day military parade organised annually on August 15. Similarly to the case of Estonia's Independence Day military parades, before identifying the increase in size for the Poland's Armed Forces Day military parades and testing the hypotheses, first the background as well as the key organisational elements of parades in Poland are examined, to better understand the peculiarities of this case as well as possible functions the increase in size of the parade could serve.

3.2.1 Historical background and organisation of contemporary Armed Forces Day military parades in Poland

The origins of Polish Armed Forces Day date back to the Battle of Warsaw in August 1920 - the turning point of the Polish–Soviet War, which took place from 1919 to 1921. In August 1920, the Red Army had already reached the outskirts of Warsaw when a decisive counteroffensive by the Poles, who had been retreating all summer, completely changed the course of the war (Wysocki, 2013: 11), securing Poland's independence and sovereignty after the war.

To honor the bravery and memory of the fallen soldiers, the Minister of Military Affairs Stanisław Szeptycki issued an order on August 4, 1923, establishing Soldiers' Day (*Święta Żołnierza*) to take place annually on August 15 (Duch, 2013). The exact date was chosen to mark the day when the frontal attack of the Red Army on Warsaw was stopped (Wysocki, 2013: 12). In addition to remembering the fallen, one of the main aims of the holiday was to bring the army closer to society (ibid).

Similar to Estonia's Independence Day, various parades and celebrations were organised across Poland on Soldiers' Day, with the presence of local military garrisons. However, larger military parades were held on Constitution Day, May 3 (Wiadomości Trójmiasto, 2022), and on Independence Day, November 11 (Krzykowska, 2022). According to the Minister's orders, the Soldiers Day celebrations had to include military bands playing in the streets of the garrison town the evening before, a review of troops with a service and blessing in the morning of the holiday, nationwide celebrations in the afternoon, and a ceremonial role call in the evening to commemorate the fallen (Duch, 2013).

After World War II, Poland remained within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, formally independent but *de facto* a satellite state. Given the circumstances, it was no longer

appropriate to associate the special day for the soldiers with the decisive victory over the Red Army. Therefore, in 1947, it was decided that the holiday would henceforth be celebrated on May 9, marking the end of the Second World War according to Moscow time. In 1950, the date was changed to October 12, commemorating the first battle at Lenino in 1943, where the Polish national unit under the Red Army was named after Tadeusz Kościuszko (Opole News, 2021).

After the end of Communist leadership, the celebration was briefly, in the years of 1990-1992, combined with the anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution on May the 3rd (ibid). On July 30, 1992, Polish Sejm made an official decision to restore August 15 celebrations (Wysocki, 2013: 13) under the name of Armed Forces Day (*Święto Wojska Polskiego*). Due to an important church holiday of the Assumption Day celebrated annually on the same day, August 15 is a public holiday in Poland, giving people an additional day off from work.

However, these celebrations initially did not include a large nationwide parade, but rather smaller ceremonies such as services and masses, weapon displays and the awarding of medals and new military promotions (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, 2013: 109). Various concerts were also organised, often with military musicians, and food, such as pea soup, was offered to the public (TVN24, 2012). In Warsaw, a central element of the celebration was the ceremonial changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Marshal Józef Piłsudski Square (TVN24, 2012), where the President usually delivered his holiday speech (Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2000; Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego, 2002).

The first major nation-wide military parade in modern-day Poland took place on Aleje Ujazdowskie on August 15, 2007, and was organised by President Lech Kaczyński (Opole News, 2021). The parade featured over one hundred military vehicles and more than a thousand soldiers, including a visiting French contingent, while helicopters and planes flew over the parade route (ibid). The last parade of a similar size was held in Poland in 1974, on 22 July, when the Polish People's Republic celebrated its 30th anniversary (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2007a).

However, the tradition has not remained consistent since then. Compared to Estonia, the Armed Forces Day parades in Poland have been canceled significantly more often, altogether seven times, making their organisation and traditions more dynamic. In addition, parades have

rarely been held outside of the capital, as only once has the nationwide Armed Forces Day parade been organised outside of Warsaw, when it was held in Katowice in 2019 (Chancellery of the President, 2019). Nevertheless, many smaller parades and other military-related celebrations like military displays, picnics and masses are held annually across the country (TVP World, 2024). In Gdynia, the Polish Navy has even held grand displays of their ships and equipment (ibid). These events often place significant emphasis on recruitment, with special buses and tents present to promote career opportunities in the Polish Armed Forces.

At the time, the venue for the parades in Warsaw changed: while the first parade took place on Aleje Ujazdowskie, since 2018 the Warsaw parades have been organised on Wisłostrada (Radio ZET, 2019), a major highway in the center of Warsaw just beside the Wisła river. Compared to Estonia, the speeches at the parade in Poland are more political, as for the last parade, which took place in 2024, the speeches were delivered by Minister of Defence Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, Prime Minister Donald Tusk and the President Andrzej Duda country (TVP World, 2024).

Unlike in Estonia, there is no mandatory military service in Poland, meaning that the marching units consist of professional soldiers on active duty. The main organiser of the parade is the Armed Forces itself, but the Ministry of Defence also has a say in the completion of the parade, including the troops participating, especially what concerns the allied troops. The main aim for choosing marching units is to ensure representation from all branches of the armed forces – from infantry and special forces to various mechanised units, allowing for the simultaneous demonstration of both Poland's domestic military production and weapons systems, as well as vehicles acquired from abroad. Alongside Polish units, representatives of allies permanently present in the country, including representatives of the NATO Training Center and Eurocorps, are also lined up (Saba, 2024).

A completely separate performance takes place in the air above the parade, which in some years has involved up to a hundred planes and helicopters (Radio ZET, 2018). In 2023, this included the parachuting of Polish paratrooper units with Polish flags and other national symbols. Since Polish Armed Forces Day is celebrated in the summer, the likelihood of aircraft overflights being cancelled due to bad weather is relatively lower compared to Estonia's Independence Day parade in February. Yet in 2008, the planned aircraft overflight from the parade was still canceled due to heavy rain (Szopa, 2008).

While the Estonian units drill separately within their own units and only gather for a joint rehearsal a day before the Independence Day parade, Polish units have a special camp at Warsaw-Babice Airport, which lasts about 10 days (Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego, 2024). There the chosen units for the parade will receive intensive training to ensure the movement and marching at the parade are as correct and synchronised as possible. Due to the parade, Warsaw's traffic and public are disrupted both on the day of the parade and the day before, including the closure of several important streets and highways, and even some bridges in the city center (Andruszewska, 2024).

3.2.2 The size of Polish Armed Forces Day military parades in 2007-2024

As mentioned before, the first time in contemporary Poland when the Armed Forces Day was celebrated with a proper parade was in 2007. In total, about 1000 soldiers and 100 vehicles participated. There was also a 40-soldier allied delegation from France, whose Bastille Day parade was previously attended by Polish units in July (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2007a). There was also a flyover of military planes and helicopters over the parade (ibid).

One of the aims for the parade was to popularize Polish Army Day. As analysts later noted, the holiday was previously not well known compared to the Constitution Day celebrated in May or Independence Day celebrated in November, although historically, this holiday is clearly more positive, as it honors one of the greatest triumphs in history of the Polish army. (Adamkiewicz, 2007). While August 15 was a public holiday and people got a day off from work, a street-survey conducted by a local radio station in 2006 showed, that there were still people, who believed that it is a holiday commemorating the birth of Polish People' Republic, which refers to Communist Poland during the Cold War (ibid).

The 2007 parade began with a review of the troops, conducted by President Lech Kaczyński, the twin brother of the then-Prime Minister, Jarosław Kaczyński, who ceremonially drove in an open, all-terrain vehicle in front of the troops (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2007a), accompanied by a honorary guard of Polish cavalry in historic uniforms and carrying sabers.

Although many people associated the initial idea of organizing the parade in 2007 with the election campaign (ibid), and the then opposition party Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*) even organized a protest against it (Janicki, 2009), a parade also took place the following year, when the Civic Platform had itself entered the government.

Compared to the Armed Forces Day parade in 2007, the next parade was even larger, as 1200 soldiers and representatives of 5 allied countries, including Ukraine (Szopa, 2008), participated. There is no exact data on the vehicles participating from official sources, as there is only a qualitative list of various weapons systems and machines that were shown at the parade. Nevertheless, from the recording of the parade, the author counted a total of 165 modern military vehicles participating. Similar to 2007 parade, the parade also included reconstruction units, wearing uniforms and weapons from various periods of the past – from the Napoleonic Wars to the Polish-Soviet War and World War II. An aircraft flyover was also planned, but was canceled due to rain (Szopa, 2008).



Figure 10. Number of soldiers participating at Armed Forces Day parade in Poland in 2007-2024. **Sources:** Listed in Appendix 2.

For a long time, the parade in 2008 also remained the last of such a large-scale celebration of Polish Armed Forces Day. In 2009, the government decided to cut the parade from Armed Forces Day celebration due to cuts in budget during the ongoing economic crisis (Janicki, 2009). The then Minister of Defence Bogdan Klich, told the media that the 2008 parade costs were about one million Polish Zloty (Wirtualna Polska, 2009), and under these circumstances, the Minister of Finance could have an additional argument for cutting the Ministry of Defence's budget, especially if funds are still being allocated to organise such expensive spectacles (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2009).

Thus, several years passed, during which Polish Armed Forces Day celebrations included weapons displays and a ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Marshal Józef Piłsudski Square, but no large national parade was organised. The first event resembling previous parades took place in 2013, featuring about 300 modern soldiers in addition to 120 reenactors, and a few dozen vehicles, both historic and contemporary (Dzeje, 2013). As available sources do not describe it as a real parade, but rather as a dynamic weapons exhibition (Defence24, 2013), and the number of participating soldiers was significantly smaller than the in the previous and following parades, this data was not included in the table. This event was also significantly shorter compared to the other parades in the studied timeframe, although it also included an military aircraft flyover (ibid).

However, in 2014, a proper full-scale parade was once again held, with approximately 1200 soldiers attending. There were also 120 vehicles and allied forces from the United States and Canada, altogether 90 soldiers, who represented the troops undergoing training in Poland (Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego, 2014). In addition, approximately 50 aircraft took part in the overflight this time, and the pre-war military vehicles or their reconstructions were also present (ibid).

Further increase in the size of the parade occurred in 2015, when 1500 soldiers and 170 vehicles already participated, including 42 tanks (Polska Zbrojna, 2015). This year, 60 planes and helicopters flew in the sky above the parade (ibid). Allied troops were again represented from two countries - 15 soldiers from USA and 30 from Canada (ibid). The parade was followed by a military picnic at the Polish National Stadium, where various types of weaponry and vehicles were demonstrated, people could meet soldiers, eat pea soup, and take part in various competitions and a concert later in the evening (ibid).

The parade had now become an annual tradition, and in 2016, 1500 soldiers and 150 vehicles took part. This year, the number of allies participating in the parade increased significantly, with soldiers from as many as 10 countries represented. Romania, Canada, Lithuania and USA were present with their representation units, and Estonia, Latvia, Germany, Portugal, Hungary and Ukraine had sent their colour guards.

The 2017 parade saw another increase in the number of vehicles, with already 200 participating that year. The number of soldiers remained at 1500. It is worth noting that, from this year onwards, official Polish sources no longer list all allied participants in the parade. The official press release from the Chancellery of the President only brought out by name the

participating US, Canadian, British and Romanian troops, who were present with their full units (Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2017). However, the author’s visual analysis of the parade recording indicates that colour guards were also present from Croatia, Estonia, Spain, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Hungary and Italy (Parzuchowski, 2017).

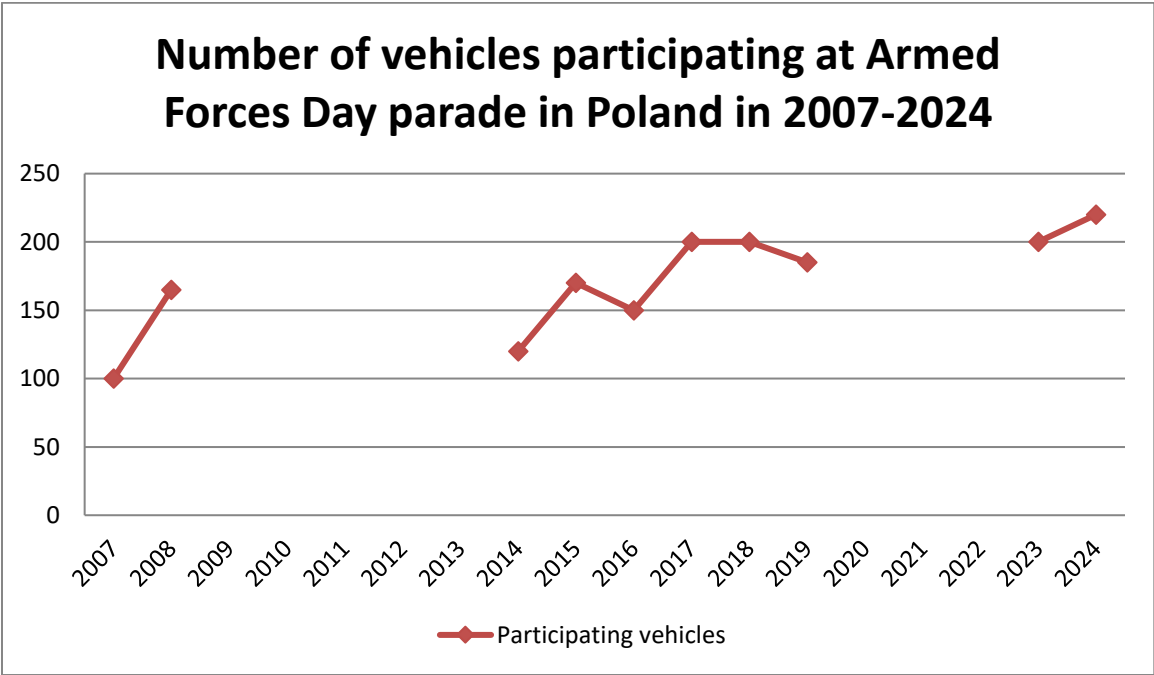


Figure 11. Number of vehicles participating at Armed Forces Day parade in Poland in 2007-2024. **Sources:** Listed in Appendix 2.

The parade held in 2018, was the first Armed Forces Day parade organised on Wisłostrada beside the Wisła river, instead of Aleje Ujazdowskie, where the parades had previously been held (Radio ZET, 2018). Once again, 200 military vehicles and nearly 1500 soldiers participated in the parade. This time, about a hundred aircraft soared above the parade (ibid).

In the studied period, this parade also included the biggest number of allied states, as visiting troops and colour guards from 16 different countries participated. The parade in 2018 was named “The Great Independence Parade“, as it took place in the anniversary year, marking 100 years since the creation of the Second Polish Polish Republic on November 11, 1918. In addition to contemporary units, there were about 900 reenactors from different eras, from early Middle Ages to the 20th century. About 650 reenactors were marching on foot and approximately 260 were on horses (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, 2018).

The parade in 2019 showed another remarkable increase in size, as this time the number of troops had already increased up to 2600, although the number of participating vehicles had slightly decreased to 185. There were also 60 military aircraft performing the spectacle in the air (Chancellery of the President, 2019). The number of participating allied countries had decreased to 5, with only the US, British, Romanian and Croatian troops stationed in Poland present, as indicated in the official press release (ibid), and a color guard from Estonia (Radio Maryja, 2019).

In the studied period, this was also the only parade which took place outside of Warsaw, and according to the official explanations, the parade took place in Katowice to commemorate the centenary of the First Silesian Uprising (Chancellery of the President, 2019). It was an important military conflict in the post-World War I Poland, resulting the division of Silesia between Poland and Germany in 1921 (Chancellery of the Prime Minister, 2021).

However, Warsaw was not left without a parade in 2019 either, as an unprecedented military parade had already taken place on Wisłostrada on May 3. This parade was comparable in size to the 2018 Armed Forces Day parade, as there were more than 2000 participants present, including Polish and allied soldiers, and personnel from forces subordinate to the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of the Interior and Administration (Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2019). Additionally, over 200 vehicles and 80 military aircraft participated in the parade in May. (ibid). In addition to celebrating Constitution Day on May 3, the parade also marked Poland's 20 years in NATO and 15 years in the European Union (ibid).



Figure 12. Number of allies participating at Armed Forces Day parade in Poland in 2007-2024. **Sources:** Listed in Appendix 2.

In 2020-2021, the parade was cancelled due to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rebelińska, 2023). Nevertheless, there was also no Armed Forces Day parade also in 2022, but this time the decision was officially justified by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (ibid). Instead, the military focused on organising smaller military picnics with demonstrations of their equipment and recruiting volunteers to the army (ibid).

However, this did not mark the end of the parading tradition on Armed Forces Day. Despite the ongoing Russian invasion in Ukraine, the parade was organised again in 2023. This time, the parade was held again in Warsaw on Wisłostrada, with 2000 soldiers and 200 vehicles participating. Units from 5 Allied countries were also present – the allies stationed in Poland and a color guard from France (Prezydent RP Andrzej Duda, 2023).

The last parade in the studied period, as well as the most recent one to date, took place in 2024. This time, the size of the parade had increased to 2500 soldiers and 220 vehicles. There were only 3 allied countries participating with their representation, in addition to those from Eurocorps and the NATO Joint Force Training Center (Saba, 2024).

In conclusion, the most remarkable increases in the years of 2007, 2014, and 2023 when the parading tradition was (re-)established. During the more stable periods, the size also notably increased in the years 2008, 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2024. Apart from cancellations of the

parades, especially in 2009 and 2022, the only notable decrease in size during the stable period of organising the parades took place in 2016, but even this was rather modest.

3.2.3. Factors explaining the increase in size for Armed Forces Day military parades in Poland in 2007-2024

The following chapter will test the suitability of theoretical expectations assumed to explain the observed increases in size of the studied Armed Forces Day parade in Poland in 2007-2024. To do that, the analysis first focuses on examining the validity of the hypothesis expecting the increase in size of military parades taking place before the elections in case of democratic backsliding. This is followed by testing the second hypothesis where the increase in size is expected to take place, after a hostile neighbouring country has invaded another neighbour.

Democratic backsliding

The starting point of the quality of democracy in Poland in the studied period was remarkably similar to Estonia. The Liberal Democracy Index of V-Dem of Poland was 0.8 out of 1 in 2007 and remained stable at 0.83 from 2008 to 2013 (as shown in Figure 13). In 2014, the ranking first dropped to 0.82, and to 0.78 in 2015. However, by 2016, there was severe backsliding in democracy, as the score dropped to 0.59 and continued in steady decline to 0.51 by 2019. This was followed by another noticeable decrease, reaching to 0.45 in 2020, and declining even to 0.42 in 2021-2022. In 2023, the score was 0.45 before rebounding in 2024 with a noticeable increase to 0.62 which still remains lower than the score before the beginning of democratic backsliding, indicating serious problems in the quality of democracy and rule of law still to be solved.

According to the V-Dem's annual reports, the main issues detouring the Polish democracy included the government's attempts to weaken and influence civil society, increased government influence on media, civil service (Pospieszna, 2017: 31) as well as the weakened autonomy of both the legislative and judicial branches (Kaiser, 2021). This matches well with the logic explained in the theoretical part, where the weakened constraining factors are expected to lead to the increase in size of the parades.

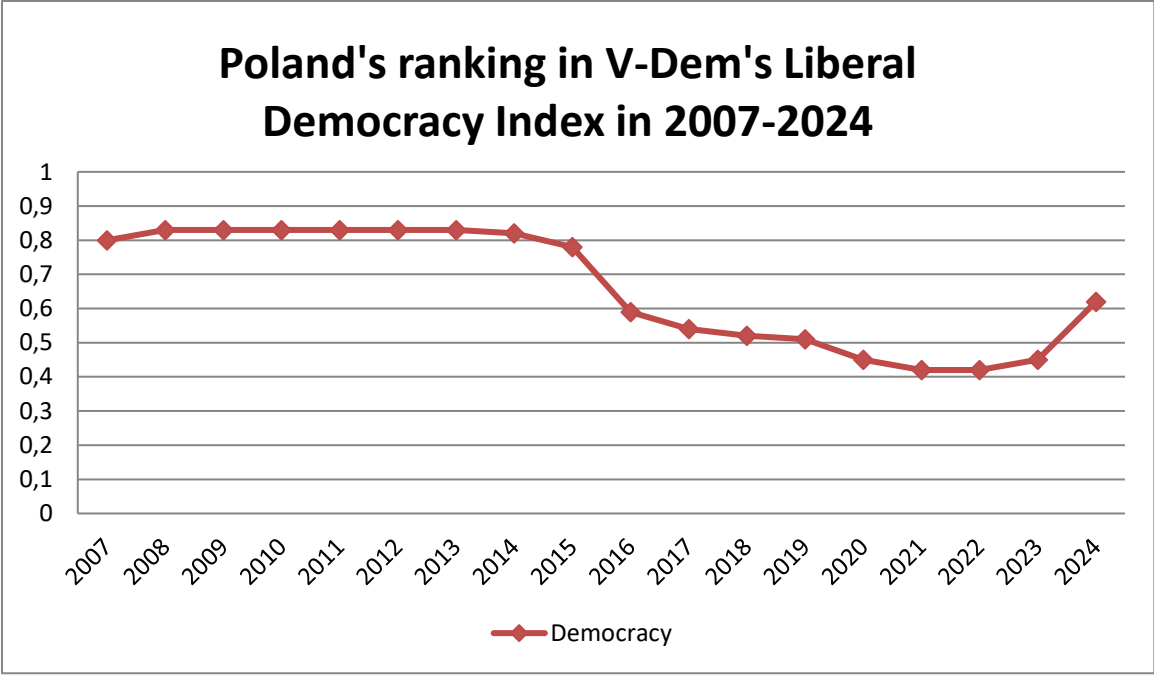


Figure 13. Democracy in Poland 2007-2014. **Source:** V-Dem. 2025.

Similarly to Estonia, Poland has had Prime Ministers from two different parties in the studied period – Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) and Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*). However, the Polish parliament has two chambers – lower house Sejm and upper house Senat – both elected at the same time during the general elections. Another significant difference is that, although coalition governments are usually also needed in Poland for the parliamentary majority, in the studied period, Poland has also been ruled by Law and Justice with absolute majority, with its minor partners in both Sejm and Senat. Thus, during the period under review, there has been only one government in which the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence were from different parties, and that is the government of Donald Tusk, which took office in 2023, in which the Minister of Defence Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz belongs to the Polish People’s Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*).

This time, according to the hypothesis, *if democratic backsliding, then increase in size of the annual military parade in democratic states*, the parades held on the years of parliamentary elections are expected to increase in size after the democratic backsliding has taken place. In the context of Poland, this means the elections held in 2019 and 2023, as the democratic backsliding on the larger scale already begun after 2015, and by the time of elections in 2019 and 2023, the checks and balances to the executive power were already notably mitigated. As the evidence below (Figure 13) suggest this has indeed happened – as significant increases in

size of the parade took place both in 2019 and 2023 when the parliamentary elections were held.

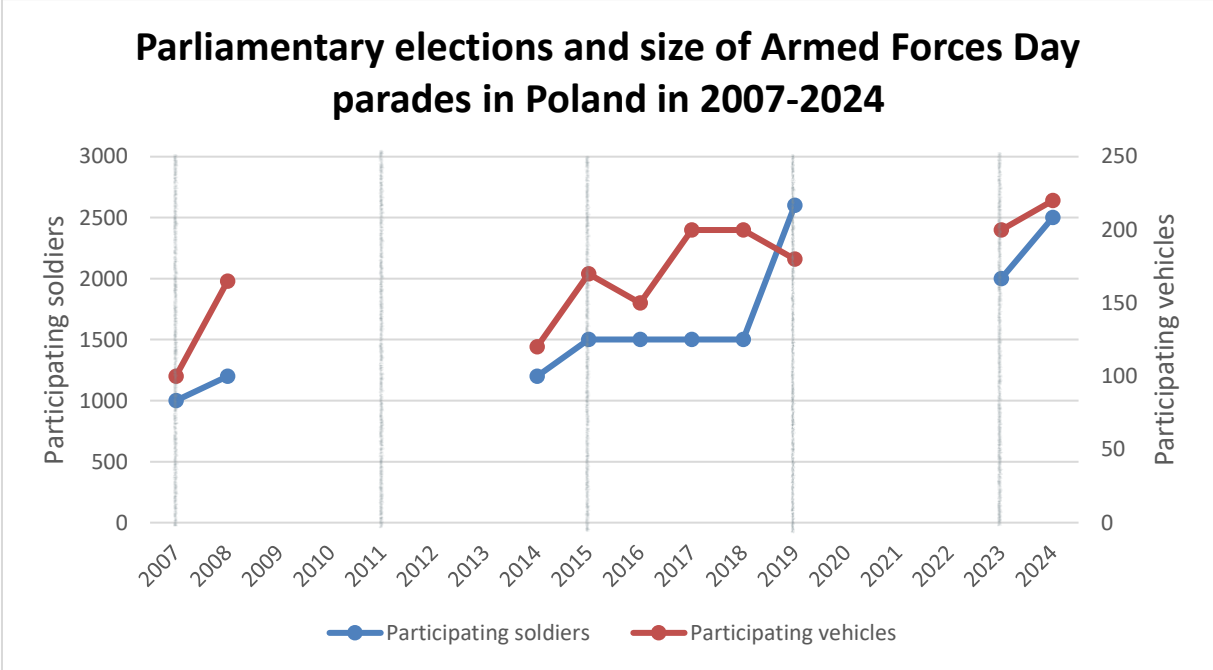


Figure 14. Parliamentary elections and size of Armed Forces Day parades in Poland in 2007-2024.

At the same time, increase in size of the parade is also evident in 2007 and 2015, when the large-scale democratic backsliding had not yet begun. The only election year in which the parade was not held was 2011, which was also right in the middle of the period of the best state of democracy, as measured by V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index.

In 2007, President Lech Kaczyński, who is widely regarded as the author of the idea of the Armed Forces Day military parade, justified the decision to hold the parade as a tribute to the soldiers (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2007b). The same sentiment was conveyed by Defense Minister Aleksander Szczygło, who said that the idea to organize a parade on Armed Forces Day came about after the celebration of Constitution Day on May 3, when no one was thinking about the elections yet (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2007c).

At that time, the country was led by the Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński, twin brother of President Lech Kaczyński, both being the founders of the ruling party Law and Justice, of which the Defence Minister Szczygło was also a member. In his Armed Forces Day speech, the President promised that Poland would begin to build a strong army (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2007b).

However, the opposition and the media associated a grand parade with the election campaign (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2007b). The main opposition party, Civic Platform, even organized a protest against it (Janicki, 2009), and the accused the Chancellery of the President in refusing to grant the access to the honorary tribune to the closest associates of Warsaw's mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz's belonging to the Civic Coalition (Lisicki & Olszewska, 2007).

Already then, the international media accused PiS in undermining democracy by trying to weaken the judiciary and muzzle state media (Al Jazeera, 2007), although when comparing the earlier data from V-Dem, there had been no meaningful democratic backsliding in 2007, nor in the last few years before it (V-Dem, 2025).

After the 2007 elections, Donald Tusk from the Civic Platform party became Prime Minister, the state of democracy had increased a bit, and from 2009, the parade was not organized for several years, also skipping the election year in 2011. Finally, the tradition to organise military parades was properly restored in 2014, and the parade, which took place two months before the 2015 elections, was already much larger than the previous year, whereas the state of democracy had slightly deteriorated. This was also the first parade for President Andrzej Duda from Law and Justice party, who had won the presidential elections earlier that spring.

In 2015, Law and Justice won an outright majority in the elections, followed by rapid democratic backsliding. Although the party was still led by Jarosław Kaczyński, Beata Szydło became the Prime Minister, who was replaced by Mateusz Morawiecki in the late 2017. By that time, the tradition of parades was already well-established, but the size was relatively stable, fluctuating primarily in the number of vehicles, although PiS again had achieved the positions of the Prime Minister, President, Minister of Defence and now even majority in the parliament.

Ahead the elections in 2019, the Armed Forces Day parade was decided to be held in Katowice where its size increased significantly. While the official explanation to hold a parade in Katowice was to commemorate the historically significant Silesian Uprising (Chancellery of the President, 2019), it is worth noting that Katowice was also the constituency where the Prime Minister Morawiecki ran for the election, although even as he is from the Silesian region, his earlier life and career associates him with Wrocław, more than hundred kilometers in the West. According to the local media, this was a strategy of the party leader Kaczyński to deploy the biggest names in Law and Justice's candidate list to these constituencies where the fight for votes is the most fierce, as the election results there were

hard to predict (Dziadul, 2019). In any case, both the Prime Minister and the President delivered a speech at the parade emphasising the great importance of the history of the Silesian region to Poland (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2019).

It is also noteworthy that for the May 3 Constitution Day, an unprecedented military parade with 2000 participants was also organised in Warsaw (Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2019), as in contemporary Poland the Constitution Day had not previously been celebrated with a parade. In official communication this parade was also associated with celebrating the anniversaries of Poland's accession to the European Union and NATO. In either way, this is also an important element supplementing to the increase in size the parade before the 2019 parliamentary elections.

Although Law and Justice managed to win the elections again by a landslide in 2019, the parade ceased to take place for three years, with the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine being the official reasons for the cancellation (Rebelińska, 2023). However, despite the war in Ukraine war still going on, it was decided to reorganise the parade in 2023, when elections were again approaching. In addition to the parade, more than 70 military picnics were organised across the country where soldiers introduced their equipment and weaponry (Ministerstwo, 2019).

Before the parade, the leader of Law and Justice Jarosław Kaczyński emphasised the specialness of this time's parade, as it focuses on the modernisation of Polish Armed Forces, which has been continuously strengthened since 2015 (Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów, 2023). He also underlined how important a strong army is to the country's development and the well-being of its citizens (ibid). With this, Law and Justice wanted to show itself as a solid guarantor of security for the Polish people, who can feel safe regardless of what is happening in the world (and in neighboring Ukraine).

During the election campaign, Law and Justice also repeatedly tried to oppose themselves on security issues with the main opposition party Civic Platform, portraying the latter as weak leaders who are not able to ensure safety for the Poles. One of the most striking examples of this was when the Minister of Defense Mariusz Błaszczak disclosed military plans from 2011 while the Civic Platform was in power in a social media video. In that video, Błaszczak told that according to that plan half of Poland would have ceded to Russia in case of military, with the proper fighting only starting from the Wisła river in the center of the country (Klementi, 2023). In Błaszczak's words: "Lublin, Rzeszów and Lomža could have been Polish Butcha"

(ibid). Former military leaders then accused the Defence Minister in disclosing the secrets of the state, or possibly even the secrets of NATO (ibid).

For that time, Law and Justice had lost almost a quarter of its support after the 2020 abortion ban, which it had been unable to regain in the following years while the gap with Civic Platform was considerably smaller (Ewybory.eu, 2025). This possibly could have further increased the motivations of the leadership to use every opportunity

Therefore, even with the expectations of increase in size of the parade in case of democratic backsliding of were proved to be true for the election years of 2019 and 2023, the increase in size for the election year is also visible in the years of 2007 when the tradition was created, and in 2015 while the democratic backsliding was not yet alarming. There are also significant increases after elections in 2008, 2024, when Civic Platform had regained leadership, and in 2017 which are not explained by this theory.

Increasingly aggressive neighbour

As an alternative explanation to the increase in size of annual military parades the second stated hypothesis is that *increasingly aggressive neighbour will lead to the increase in size of the annual military parade*, with the assumption that if a hostile country decides to attacks one of its neighbours, it will also raise security related concerns among its other neighbours, resulting an increase in size for their annual military parade.

In the case of Poland, the identified critical junctures are the same as for Estonia (as portrayed in Figure 15). Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that since the Armed Forces Day parade takes place in August, Russia's aggression against Ukraine had already begun in the first half of both 2014 and 2022, so in Poland there was time to react to them already during the parade planning phase. The 2008 Russian invasion to Georgia began only two weeks before the Armed Forces Day and its parade, meaning that according to the theoretical assumptions the increase in size reacting to this is expected to occur in 2009, as the parade for 2008 was already planned ahead of Russia's invasion to Georgia.

Nevertheless, the evidendence derived from the increases in size in case of Armed Forces Day parades Poland in the studied period clearly fail to meet these expectations. Even as the size of parade increased in 2014, the parades in 2009 and 2022 were even not held, Moreover, in 2022, the effect on Russia's full-scale invasion was the opposite of what was expected, as the

war in Ukraine was used to justify the continued cancellation of the parade, continuing the absence of the parade that had already begun with the COVID-19 pandemic.

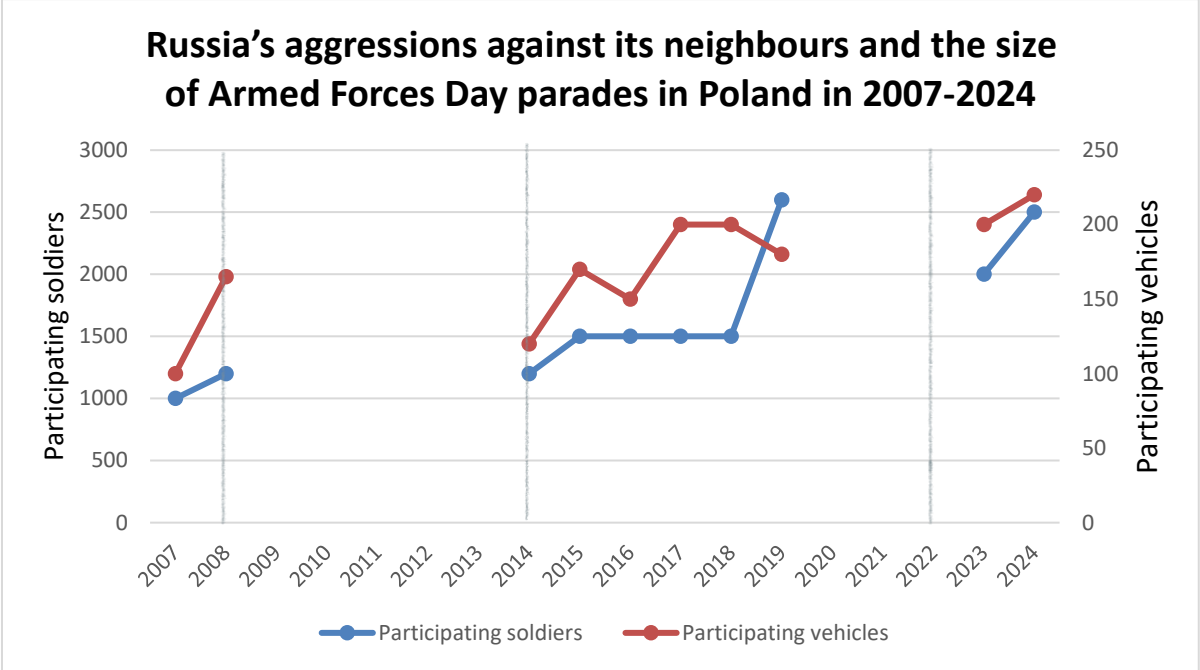


Figure 15. Russia’s aggressions against its neighbours and the size of Armed Forces Day parades in Poland in 2007-2024.

Therefore, the only year where the factor of increasingly aggressive neighbor could explain the increase in size is 2014, when a proper parade was again organised in Warsaw for the Armed Forces Day celebrations after five years. The same spring, Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and beginning of the war in Donbas, had taken place. As the tradition to organise Armed Forces Day parades was recreated after many years, this also marks the increase in size of the parade, as its disappearance and subsequent return were due to political decisions. Thus, this pattern is consistent with the hypothesis.

Nevertheless, similar to Estonia, Poland also has its own direct experience with malicious activities organised by its neighbour in the studied period, as in summer 2021 Belarus started instrumentalised migration attacks at the Polish border (Allik, 2024). According to the hypothesis, this should have been an additional motivation to organise a big parade in 2022, but it did not happen. Since the parade was canceled in 2022 precisely because of the war in Ukraine, it is hard to believe that this will be the reason for the parade to be held again in 2023.

In conclusion, democratic backsliding seems to be somewhat linked with the increases in size for the annual military parades in Poland, as it explains the increases in the election years of 2019 and 2023 when this was also the expected outcome. However, there are also several increases which are not expected by this explanation, including also in two election years – 2007 and 2015, but nevertheless occur. In this case, the alternative explanation, which expected the increase in parade size in 2009, 2014 and 2022, was even less valid, as a significant increase in size only occurred in 2014, whereas in 2009 and 2022 there was instead a notable decrease with the official explanation of the latter being the Russia's invasion to Ukraine itself.

4. Discussion

In the case of Estonia, the main findings of the analytical part show that the increase in size for the annual Independence Day military parade occurred in the years 2008, 2014, 2015 and 2023. Although two of them – the parades in 2015 and 2023 - appeared in the year of election, which was not expected as Estonia has not experienced democratic backsliding, the much better explanation for these increases, based on the evidence, turned out to be the increasingly aggressive neighbour, which through initially identified critical junctures was able to explain both of these increases. In addition, a smaller increase in size of the parade also occurred in 2009 when the increasingly aggressive neighbour was also expected to play a role.

Furthermore, although not the part of initially derived critical junctures, the increase in the size of 2008 could also be explained through the same mechanism. In that year Estonia itself experienced a biggest threat to its security since regaining its independence, when Russia initiated the mass riots and cyber attacks that are later known as the Bronze Night which presumably also served as understandable threat for the population, and therefore diminished the restraints to organise a bigger parade despite the increase of public costs.

Compared to the case of Estonia's Independence Day parade, the tradition of Poland's Armed Forces Day military parade is relatively more recent, as it was first held in its current form in 2007. Presumably partly because this tradition is not yet so clearly rooted, there were significantly more fluctuations in the size of Poland's Armed Forces Day, including also two longer periods, when the parade was not held for a few years. Altogether, the increase in size of this parade was identified in the years of 2007, 2008, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2023 and 2024.

In this context the hypothesis explaining the increase in size with increased democratic backsliding managed to foresee the increase the size of these parades in the years of 2019 and 2023, but is largely unable to explain the other increases, especially as the increase also occurred twice during the years of earlier elections in 2007 and 2015. It could be speculated that also the first parade that occurred in 2007, took place in extraordinary favouring conditions in terms of reduced constraints, as the Prime Minister and President back then were twin brothers from the same party Law and Justice, and even the Minister of Defence belonged to the same party. However, as the measurement did not indicate a significant democratic backsliding in that year, this explanation cannot be directly attributed to the factor studied.

The second hypothesis is even less telling in the Polish case, as out of three expected increases in size of parades in the context of increasingly aggressive neighbour, only one occurred. Therefore, even though the parade which was held in 2014 after Russia first invaded Ukraine, showed an increase in size, in other two times – in 2009 and 2022, when the increase was also expected to take place, the parade even got cancelled. In addition, this hypothesis also fails to explain several other increases in size of Polish parades in the studied period, which took place respectively in 2007, 2008, 2017, 2019 and 2024.

At the same time, out of the unexplained increases in the Polish, only the increase in size of 2007, is comparable to the other increases by its margin that the hypotheses are able to explain. In addition to the years where the parade was re-established, the example of 2019 clearly stands out. Not only was the parade significantly increased in size and employed into the campaign event outside the capital for the time in the ongoing tradition, but on that year also an additional military parade was organised on the Constitution Day in May, so that the people in Warsaw would not miss out. Therefore, it could also be argued that whereas the increase by 50 vehicles or 200 soldiers out of more than 1000 could also be a coincidence, as some fluctuation in the size of parades seems natural, an increase of nearly more than 1000 soldiers, supplemented by an unprecedented additional parade likely is not. Almost as equally telling is the increase in size in 2023, as the parade in 2022 was canceled under the pretext of the war in Ukraine, but even though the war in Ukraine had not ended, an unprecedentedly grand parade was organized before the elections. Thus, it is clear that even if there are also other explanations to an increase in size, the democratic backsliding still has had its influence to the size of parades in the Polish context, as the evidence is also able to explain the mechanisms behind it.

Together the findings across cases suggests, that there is no single explanation for the increase in size of the parades. While the evidence is clear in the case of the increased size of parades in Estonia in 2008, 2009, 2015 and 2023, were influenced by increasingly aggressive neighbour, and the parades in 2019 and 2023 in Poland by democratic backsliding, these findings are not generalisable cross cases, although, in the Estonian case elections the increase in size of the parades also in the years of elections were not due to electoral campaign purposes, although the ruling elite could have benefited from it.

In addition to the already analysed influencing factors, the size of military parades seems to be affected by practical considerations, such as the capacity of the venue where the parade is

held. For example, in the case of Independence Day parades in Estonia, the two most notable increases in size – in terms of both participating soldiers and vehicles – occurred when the parade was successively organised in Pärnu and Narva (in 2008 and 2009 as well as 2014 and 2015). While the first parades held after regaining the independence. A similar pattern applies to the case of Polish Armed Forces Day parades, where moving the parade from Aleje Ujazdowskie to Wisłostrada in 2018 resulted in the organisation of significantly larger parades. Furthermore, the largest Polish parade during the studied period, in terms of participating soldiers, was the only one held outside of Warsaw, in Katowice.

Decisions to hold a parade outside its traditional venue or away from the capital are ultimately made by the political leadership. As stated by the Estonian Defence Forces spokesperson Ingrid Mühling, when asked why the parade in 2012 took place in Tartu: "We (the Defence Forces) are at the parade where the country's leadership decides" (Teeveere, 2012). This is also why the location of the parades received significant attention in the previous chapter, in addition to the size of the parades.

In addition, the anniversaries also appear to play a role in the increased size of annual military parades. However, their impact was not as universal, as in the case of and was primarily reflected in the number of participating allies, being the most evident in the year 2018 for both countries, when they celebrated the 100th anniversary of (re)gaining independence.

At the same time, the Estonian 90th Independence Day parade in 2008 also brought a notable increase in size when it was organised in Pärnu – the city where the declaration of independence was initially read out in 1918. However, there was no increase in size for the Estonian Independence Day parade in 2013 for the 95th anniversary, and increases seen in 2018 for the 100th anniversary, and 2023 for 105th, remained more modest compared to the increase in 2008.

The substantial increase in size of Estonia's Independence Day parade in 2014, which had not been previously fully explained by earlier hypotheses, may be explained by the 10th anniversary of Estonia's accession to NATO and the European Union. That year also marked the first time allied soldiers marched in the parade, although this alone does not explain such a substantial increase, but it might reflect the seriousness and importance with which the parade was organised.

For the Polish Armed Forces Day parade, the most significant anniversary was the already mentioned parade in 2018, which stood out due to the inclusion of historical elements, such as the involvement of many participating reenactors. That year also featured the largest aircraft overflight during the period under review. However, neither the 2008 nor the 2023 parades were as strongly linked with the Independence Day anniversary. Interestingly, no parades were held to mark the major anniversaries of the Battle of Warsaw, despite it being the principal historical event commemorated on August 15. The only full-scale parade held during the anniversary year of the Battle of Warsaw occurred in 2015. It featured a notable increase in size, as well as a wide range of additional side events compared to other years. However, this timing also coincided with the parliamentary elections and heightened Russian aggression, making it difficult to attribute the increase solely to historical commemoration.

While for Poland, the increase in the size of the parades may appear to reflect the increase in the size of defence spending and a growing number of soldiers, in the case of Estonia, the size of its parades have in the general trend even a shown a notable decline since 2015. At the same time, the total number of soldiers in Defence Forces has increased, and both countries have undergone military modernization, although defense spending has dramatically increased only in the last couple of years (NATO, 2023.). It is important to note that the actual size of military units has consistently been much larger than the number of troops and equipment showcased in the parades, which means that, if desired, more soldiers and vehicles could always be found to participate in the parade.

The role of allied troops at the parades was very dynamic for both countries. Initially, each allied participant received considerable attention in the official communication. However, over time, the emphasis on highlighting each participating country diminished, and eventually the number of allied countries represented at the parade declined.

Judging by the timing of these shifts, it appears that signalling wide range allied commitment at annual parades became less important following the deployment of NATO's multinational battlegroups in 2017. At the same time, major military exercises have continued to increase in scale (Banka & Bussmann, 2023:), involving a significantly larger number of allied countries (ibid).

A shared feature of both countries is that the increase in size of military parades is that at certain times it has been useful for the government to portray itself as a guarantor of security. Through a parade the government can reassure people its people that they are safe and protected, which is why the size of the parade may not be so much a signal to a potential enemy, but rather to strengthen the sense of security of its own people, especially as the increases related to increasingly aggressive neighbour often remained moderate, and likely therefore less noticed outside of the country. According to the hypotheses tested, this of course seems to be more true in case of Poland, but it is also worth to add that even if Estonia has increased the size of its military parades in response to the increasingly aggressive neighbour the increases have remained relatively moderate, and presumably a few hundred more soldiers or a couple dozen vehicles at the parade, does not surpass the threshold for credible deterrence against Russia, although certain modern weapons systems, which were not in the focus of this study, as well as allied commitment might.

As the final observation, in the case of Poland's Armed Forces Day parade, the increased size of the parade in 2008 and 2024 have not been fully by any of the proposed explanations nor the hypotheses tested before. In both years, Law and Justice was in power prior to the elections and had organized a large parade during the election year, which upset the Civic Platform. Subsequently, when Civic Platform came to power, it responded by organising an even bigger parade the following year. One possible explanation for this pattern is the internal political power struggle, where each rival feels inclined to replicate and outbid the actions of the other rival that the rivals are doing something, the other camp must repeat and outbid the initial act.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to contribute to filling the research gap in the existing academic literature on military parades, by focusing simultaneously on two different understudied elements – military parades in democracies and the increase in size within existing traditions. To do that the research question was “What explains the increase in size of military parades in democratic states?”

As there were no existing theories explaining the increase in size of annual military parades, especially in democracies, the study first had to develop the hypotheses from the existing literature on the functions of military parades more in general. Altogether there were two hypotheses that the study later tested - *if democratic backsliding, then increase in size of the annual military parade in democratic states*; and *if increase in aggressiveness of neighbour, then increase in size of the parade in democratic states*. By employing process-tracing, the study examined closely two similar cases - Estonia’s Independence Day military parade and Poland’s Armed Forces Day military parade - in the period of 2007-2024, focusing on the key moments when the increase in size of the annual parade occurs.

As a result, neither of the explanations were universally able to explain the increase in size across cases with the same efficiency. In the case of Estonia, the increasingly aggressive neighbour turned explained almost all the increases, whereas in the case of Poland, it was able to explain only one increase. At the same time, in the Polish case, the explanation of democratic backsliding proved to be quite telling in explaining the increases in size in case when democratic backsliding had occurred, and the increase was expected. Thus, this study highlights how the increase in size of the parades often do not occur randomly, but could be explainable through several factors and considerations that affect the size of parades – from practical limitations to deliberate functions, which is why neither hypothesis could universally describe all parades.

Nevertheless, this study further proves the importance of military parades and how they can be used by the political elite to pursue their goals by using public funds. In any case this topic deserves further research as the discussions start similar traditions also in other democratic countries are currently being held.

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Appendix 1. Data sources for the size of Independence Day parades in Estonia in 2007-2024

A. Participating soldiers

Year	Number of solides	Source
2007	683*	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2008	1081	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2009	1115	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2010	1202	Miil, M. 2010. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 18 Eesti Vabariik 92. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-92-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2011	990	Käo, O. 2011. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 19 Eesti Vabariik 93. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-93-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2012	1100	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2013	1100	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2014	1350	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2015	1402	Miil, M. 2015. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 23 Eesti Vabariik 97. Kaitsejõudude paraad Narvas. <i>ERR</i> ,

		https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-97-kaitsejoudude-paraad-narvas (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2016	1077	Miil, M. 2016. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 24 Eesti Vabariik 98. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-98-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2017	1053	Miil, M. 2017. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 26 Eesti Vabariik 99. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-99-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2018	1131	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2019	904	Miil, M. 2019. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 28 EV101. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/ev101-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2020	982	Miil, M. 2020. EV102. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 29 EV102. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/ev102-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2021	-	
2022	736	Mölder, T. 2022. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 30 EV104. Kaitseväge paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/ev104-kaitsevae-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2023	881	Mölder, T. 2023. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 31 EV105. Kaitseväge paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/vabariigi-aastapaeva-paraad-ev105-kaitsevae-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2024	840	Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2024. 24. veebruaril peetakse Tallinnas Eesti Vabariigi 106. aastapäeva paraad. https://mil.ee/uudised/eesti-vabariigi-106-aastapaeva-paraad-peetakse-tallinnas-vabaduse-

		valjakul/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).
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* The Independence Day parade in 2007 was cancelled in the last minute due to cold weather.

B. Participating vehicles

Year	Number of vehicles	Source
2007	14*	Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2007. Kaitsejõudude paraad Eesti Vabariigi 89. aastapäeval. https://mil.ee/uudised/kaitsejoudude-paraad-estiviabariigi-89-aastapaeval/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2008	47	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2009	63	Krimm, T. 2009. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 17 Eesti Vabariik 91. Kaitsejõudude paraad Narvas. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/estiviabariik-91-kaitsejoudude-paraad-narvas (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2010	61	Miil, M. 2010. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 18 Eesti Vabariik 92. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/estiviabariik-92-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2011	67	Käo, O. 2011. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 19 Eesti Vabariik 93. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/estiviabariik-93-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2012	75	Käo, O. 2012. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 20 Eesti Vabariik 94. Kaitsejõudude paraad Tartus. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/estiviabariik-94-kaitsejoudude-paraad-tartus (last accessed 28.04.2025). Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2012. Kaitseväge kolonnid liiguvad Tartusse. https://mil.ee/uudised/kaitsevae-kolonnid-liiguvad-tartusse/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2013	78	Miil, M. 2013. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 21 Eesti Vabariik 95. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> ,

		https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-95-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2014	103	Taimre, E. 2014. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 22 Eesti Vabariik 96. Kaitsejõudude paraad Pärnus. ERR, https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-96-kaitsejoudude-paraad-arnus (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2015	141	Miil, M. 2015. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 23 Eesti Vabariik 97. Kaitsejõudude paraad Narvas. ERR, https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-97-kaitsejoudude-paraad-narvas (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2016	90	Miil, M. 2016. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 24 Eesti Vabariik 98. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. ERR, https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-98-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2017	109	Miil, M. 2017. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 26 Eesti Vabariik 99. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. ERR, https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/eesti-vabariik-99-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2018	82	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2019	40	Miil, M. 2019. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 28 EV101. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. ERR, https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/ev101-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2020	45	Miil, M. 2020. EV102. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 29 EV102. Kaitsejõudude paraad Vabaduse väljakul. ERR, https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/ev102-kaitsejoudude-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2021	-	
2022	18	Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2022. Eesti Vabariigi 104. aastapäeva paraad peetakse Tallinnas Vabaduse väljakul. https://mil.ee/uudised/eesti-vabariigi-104-aastapaeva-paraad-peetakse-tallinnas-vabaduse-

		valjakul/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2023	28	Mölder, T. 2023. Vabariigi aastapäeva paraad: 31 EV105. Kaitseväe paraad Vabaduse väljakul. <i>ERR</i> , https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/vabariigi-aastapaeva-paraad-ev105-kaitsevae-paraad-vabaduse-valjakul (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2024	31	Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2024. 24. veebruaril peetakse Tallinnas Eesti Vabariigi 106. aastapäeva paraad. https://mil.ee/uudised/eesti-vabariigi-106-aastapaeva-paraad-peetakse-tallinnas-vabaduse-valjakul/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).

* The Independence Day parade in 2007 was cancelled in the last minute due to cold weather.

C. Participating allied states

Year	Number of allied states	Source
2007	-	
2008	-	
2009	-	
2010	-	
2011	-	
2012	-	
2013	-	
2014	5	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2015	6	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2016	6	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2017	6	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.

2018	11	Salmann, E. 2018. 100 aastat iseseisvuspäeva paraade. D. Kazakova. <i>Eesti Vabariigi 100. aastapäeva paraad</i> , pp. 21-100. Tallinn: Eesti Kaitsevägi.
2019	9	Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2019. Eesti Vabariigi 101. aastapäeva paraad peetakse Tallinnas Vabaduse väljakul. https://mil.ee/uudised/eesti-vabariigi-101-aastapaeva-paraad-peetakse-tallinnas-vabaduse-valjakul/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2020	8	Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2020. Homme peetakse Tallinnas Eesti Vabariigi 102. aastapäeva paraad. https://mil.ee/uudised/homme-peetakse-tallinnas-eesti-vabariigi-102-aastapaeva-paraad/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2021	-	
2022	4	Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2022. Eesti Vabariigi 104. aastapäeva paraad peetakse Tallinnas Vabaduse väljakul. https://mil.ee/uudised/eesti-vabariigi-104-aastapaeva-paraad-peetakse-tallinnas-vabaduse-valjakul/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2023	6	Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2023. Homme peetakse Tallinnas Eesti Vabariigi 105. aastapäeva paraad. https://mil.ee/uudised/homme-peetakse-tallinnas-eesti-vabariigi-105-aastapaeva-paraad/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2024	5	Eesti Kaitsevägi. 2024. 24. veebruaril peetakse Tallinnas Eesti Vabariigi 106. aastapäeva paraad. https://mil.ee/uudised/eesti-vabariigi-106-aastapaeva-paraad-peetakse-tallinnas-vabaduse-valjakul/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).

Appendix 2. Data sources for the size of Armed Forces Day parades in Poland in 2007-2024

A. Participating soldiers

Year	Number of soldiers	Source
2007	1000	TVN24. 2007. Defilada wojska przejdzie ulicami Warszawy. https://tvn24.pl/polska/defilada-wojska-przejdzie-ulicami-warszawy-ra31419-ls3605248 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2008	1200	Janicki, K. 2008. Święto Wojska Polskiego i nie do końca udana defilada. <i>Histmag.org</i> , https://histmag.org/Swieto-Wojska-Polskiego-i-nie-do-konca-udana-defilada-1967 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2009	-	
2010	-	
2011	-	
2012	-	
2013	-	
2014	1200	Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego. 2014. Defilada w Święto Wojska Polskiego. https://www.bbn.gov.pl/pl/wydarzenia/5776,Defilada-w-Swieto-Wojska-Polskiego.html?search=925289 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2015	1500	Polska Zbrojna. 2015. 15 sierpnia – defilada i piknik. https://www.polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/16802?t=15-sierpnia-defilada-i-piknik (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2016	1500	Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. 2016. Udział Prezydenta w obchodach Święta Wojska Polskiego. https://t.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/udzial-prezydenta-w-obchodach-swieta-wojska-polskiego,303 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2017	1500	Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. 2017. Defilada z okazji Święta Wojska Polskiego. https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/defilada-z-

		okazji-swieta-wojska-polskiego,696 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2018	1500	Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej. 2018. 6. August. Święto Wojska Polskiego - Wielka Defilada Niepodległości (Video). Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BuK-dak4H4 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2019	2600	Chancellery of the President. 2019. Poland celebrates Armed Forces Day. https://www.president.pl/news/poland-celebrates-armed-forces-day,37043 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2020	-	
2021	-	
2022	-	
2023	2000	Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów. 2023. Zapraszamy na defiladę z okazji Święta Wojska Polskiego – zobacz najnowocześniejszy sprzęt naszej zmodernizowanej armii. Gov.pl, https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/zapraszamy-na-defilade-z-okazji-swieta-wojska-polskiego--zobacz-najnowoczesniejszy-sprzet-naszej-zmodernizowanej-armii (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2024	2500	Saba, E. 2024. Wielka Defilada z okazji Święta Wojska Polskiego. <i>Wojsko-Polskie.pl</i> , https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/kgzw/articles/aktualnosci-w/wielka-defilada-z-okazji-swieta-wojska-polskiego/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).

B. Participating vehicles

Year	Number of vehicles	Source
2007	100	Opole News. 2021. 15 sierpnia. Święto Wojska Polskiego. https://opole-news.pl/15-sierpnia-swieto-wojska-polskiego/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2008	165	ZDZISŁAW Parzuchowski. 2013, 1. March. Święto Wojska Polskiego - Defilada 2008-08-15 (Video). Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zExqv4eup8 (last accessed 28.04.2025).

2009	-	
2010	-	
2011	-	
2012	-	
2013	-	
2014	120	Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego. 2014. Defilada w Święto Wojska Polskiego. https://www.bbn.gov.pl/pl/wydarzenia/5776,Defilada-w-Swieto-Wojska-Polskiego.html?search=925289 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2015	170	Polska Zbrojna. 2015. 15 sierpnia – defilada i piknik. https://www.polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/16802?t=15-sierpnia-defilada-i-piknik (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2016	150	Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. 2016. Udział Prezydenta w obchodach Święta Wojska Polskiego. https://t.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/udzial-prezydenta-w-obchodach-swieta-wojska-polskiego,303 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2017	200	Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. 2017. Defilada z okazji Święta Wojska Polskiego. https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/defilada-z-okazji-swieta-wojska-polskiego,696 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2018	200	Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej. 2018. 6. August. Święto Wojska Polskiego - Wielka Defilada Niepodległości (Video). Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BuK-dak4H4 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2019	185	Chancellery of the President. 2019. Poland celebrates Armed Forces Day. https://www.president.pl/news/poland-celebrates-armed-forces-day,37043 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2020	-	
2021	-	
2022	-	
2023	200	Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów. 2023. Zapraszamy na defiladę z okazji Święta Wojska Polskiego – zobacz najnowocześniejszy

		sprzęt naszej zmodernizowanej armii. Gov.pl, https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/zapraszamy-na-defilade-z-okazji-swiet-wojska-polskiego--zobacz-najnowoczesniejszy-sprzet-naszej-zmodernizowanej-armii (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2024	220	Saba, E. 2024. Wielka Defilada z okazji Święta Wojska Polskiego. <i>Wojsko-Polskie.pl</i> , https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/kgzw/articles/aktualnosci-w/wielka-defilada-z-okazji-swiet-wojska-polskiego/ (last accessed 28.04.2025).

C. Participating allied states

Year	Number of allied states	Source
2007	1	TVN24. 2007. Defilada wojska przejdzie ulicami Warszawy. https://tvn24.pl/polska/defilada-wojska-przejdzie-ulicami-warszawy-ra31419-ls3605248 (last accessed 28.04.2025).
2008	5	Szopa, M. 2008. Defilada 15 VIII 2008. <i>Wprost</i> , https://www.wprost.pl/zycie/136475/Defilada-15-VIII-2008.html (last accessed 26.04.2025).
2009	-	
2010	-	
2011	-	
2012	-	
2013	-	
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