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## CHANGES IN THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT OF THE BALTIC STATES

**ABSTRACT:** The main aim of the article is to analyze the security environment of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The author presents the security dilemmas of the Baltic States before their accession to NATO in 2004 (based on the example of the Republic of Estonia). Subsequently, the author shows the changes that have occurred in the security systems of the Baltic states since the beginning of the hybrid war in Ukraine in 2014. The author also draws attention to key security problems and points to Polish experiences that could be successfully adopted by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

**KEYWORDS:** Baltic States, Security, Baltic Sea Region, national defense, security environment



### INTRODUCTION

Security cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region is quite complicated and multi-faceted. It stems mainly from the fact that in the Baltic Sea Region, there are nine European countries, apart from the Russian Federation, with very different statuses. Poland, Germany, Denmark, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are both members of NATO and the European Union. Sweden and Finland have the status of neutral states, but, at the same time, they are also members of the European Union. Furthermore, Norway is a member of NATO, but not of the European Union.

In the context of the security of the Baltic States, it should be noted that Lithuania, Latvia and

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Estonia have come a very long way from the declaration of independence in 1991, through accession to NATO and the European Union in 2004, to the position of a reliable member, partner and ally of the Western community. It is not possible to reliably examine the national defense strategy of the Baltic States without a thorough review of the changes that have taken place in that states. Throughout all these years, the concept of security of the Baltic States has been changing under the influence of the international situation, gained experience, successes and mistakes made both externally and internally.

Therefore, the main aim of the article is to analyze the security environment of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as well as the key defense issues of the Baltic states.

### **DILEMMAS IN CHOOSING THE STRATEGIC DIRECTION OF THE SECURITY POLICY OF THE NEWLY INDEPENDENT STATE – ESTONIA CASE**

Having regained independence in 1991, Estonian political elite was faced with a key dilemma – choosing the directions for security policy that would prove effective in the new international situation. These strategic decisions were to be made during a turbulent period when Estonia still had no adequate military capabilities, had not developed the legal basis for national defense system, and suffered from shortage of financial resources. The newly independent state had to build its military power practically from scratch.

Theoretically, the Republic of Estonia had three feasible options to choose from:

- announcing the policy of ‘military neutrality’ combined with the concept of total defense (Finnish model);
- establishing close relations with the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (especially with Russia);
- integration with Western economic community and security alliances (European Union and the NATO)<sup>1</sup>.

The first option - military neutrality following the Finnish and Swedish models was perceived as a good practice in which both countries not being the NATO members declared military neutrality while adopting a total defense strategy. It was also pointed out that, despite

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<sup>1</sup> R. Rublovskis, M. Šešelgyte, R. Kaljurand, *Defence and security for the small. Perspectives from the Baltic States*, 2013, p. 62–63.

neutrality, Finland and Sweden adopted a pro-Western course and were heading towards integration with the European Union (eventually both countries joined the EU in 1995). The neutral option was also associated with the necessity of close political and military cooperation with the Baltic and Nordic countries. The weakness of this option was that it did not guarantee any lasting security. Both Lithuania and Latvia have regained their independence and were building the foundations of their statehood. In the early 1990s, the Baltic States did not have significant military potential neither individually, nor collectively. Finland and Sweden, on the other hand, were neutral and therefore proclaimed impartiality in the event of an armed conflict. In addition, less favorable geopolitical situation, smaller population, smaller territory, lesser defense infrastructure and shortage of properly trained and equipped armed forces contributed to the potential weakness of Estonian option of military neutrality built in the similar vein as in the aforementioned Nordic countries. The challenges faced by other Baltic countries were very much alike. Nevertheless, ultimately a part of the Finnish and Swedish concept of total defense involving the entire society has been adopted and further adapted to the specificity of Latvia<sup>2</sup>.

The second option for building the national security, i.e. establishing close cooperation with Russia and other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has aroused strong opposition from Estonian political elites since the very beginning. The paramount objective of the newly independent state that had just been released from almost 50-yearlong Soviet occupation was to break away from its gloomy past. Meanwhile, the Commonwealth of Independent States formed on 8 December 1991 by Russia, Belarus and Ukraine (later joined by a number of the former republics of the USSR), was regarded as a form of maintaining Russian domination over the region<sup>3</sup>. In addition, on 15 May 1992, at the initiative of Russia, several CIS countries (namely Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Russia) concluded an agreement in Tashkent which laid foundations for the CIS collective security system and military alliance. In 1993, three more countries, i.e. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Belarus joined the organization. Taking all those circumstances into consideration, the decision on cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States would mean Estonia return under the influence (both economic and military) of the CIS. Therefore, similarly to other

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<sup>2</sup> M.A.Kamiński, *Obrona narodowa Republiki Estonii*, Toruń 2018, p. 42-43.

<sup>3</sup> K. Kai-Helin, *The Evolution of Estonian Security Options During the 1990s, 2005.*, p. 19-20.

Baltic States, the Republic of Latvia rejected the option of integration with the CIS.

The third option for building national security policy that has been ultimately chosen by the Republic of Estonia involved the turn towards NATO and the European Union. However, the path to integration with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization proved to be neither quick nor easy.

There were still numerous issues remaining to be solved, and one of the most urgent was the presence of Russian troops, since it posed a real threat to the newly independent state. In addition, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept of the "Near Abroad" territory including also the Baltic States remaining within the Russian sphere of influence was developed in Russian political and military doctrine. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Andrey Kozyrev described the "Near Abroad" as a unique, one of the kind geopolitical space where only Russia could ensure peace<sup>4</sup>. Russian politicians and military officers have often emphasized that it is in Russia's best interest to maintain influence in the immediate neighbourhood. An additional justification for the reasons of extended presence of Russian soldiers in the territory of the Baltic States was to ensure the protection of Russian minority living there<sup>5</sup>.

As a result of opting for joining the Western states, Estonia found itself at the threshold of rather difficult situation of forced self-sufficiency in defense. This term means the circumstances in which a state striving to participate in political and military alliances or functioning in systems that guarantee (military) security, remains outside the alliances, without security guaranteed, moreover - against its political will. This was a period of waiting for a new and desired security status deemed to be enduring. This was also the case of Estonia which only in 2004 joined the NATO together with other Baltic countries. However, immediately after regaining independence in 1991, Latvian authorities made efforts to strengthen their security by establishing bilateral and multilateral political and military relations with Western countries and forming alliances with international organizations.

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<sup>4</sup> K. Møller, *Russian Security Policy - In Search of a Major Power Identity*, „Baltic Defence Review” 2000, t. 1, nr 3 p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> J.W. Lamoreaux, *Acting small in a large state's world: Russia and the Baltic states*, „European Security” 2014, t. 23, nr 4, p. 572.

## COOPERATION WITHIN NATO AND THE SECURITY OF THE BALTIC STATES

Following the choice of the western option, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia found themselves at the beginning of their road in a rather difficult situation of "forced defensive self-sufficiency". The term refers to the situation of a state that, while striving to participate in political and military alliances or function in systems that guarantee security (military), remains outside the alliance without a guarantee of security. And all this against its political will. This is a period of waiting for a new, desired security status, notwithstanding the fact that it can last for many years.<sup>6</sup>

The accession of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to NATO and the European Union in 2004 was a great event in their history and has had a significant impact on raising their security level. The Baltic States became a member of the world's most powerful military alliance and could rely on the defense guarantees provided by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. In March 2004, NATO launched the Baltic States' airspace defense mission - Baltic Air Policing<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, as EU member states, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia could also count on the political support of their allies from the European community and strengthen their stability and economic development.

All this significantly strengthened the sense of sustainable security and was reflected in the strategic documents concerning the national defense of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia from that period. For example, the strategic document "National Security Concept"<sup>8</sup>, which was adopted by the Estonian Parliament in 2001 (i.e. three years before the Baltic States joined NATO), indicated that Estonia did not see an immediate military threat to its security at present or in the future. Besides, it was stressed that the continued reduction of the military threat hinges on the development of international relations, including the continuation of Euro-Atlantic integration and the development of Estonian defense capabilities. It was also noted that in the absence of immediate military threat, there are no concerns about the possibility of political pressure on Estonia (in terms of its internal or external policies) from a foreign country.

Moreover, even the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008 did not significantly reduce the feeling of security in the Baltic States. That is as evidenced by the fact that the

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<sup>6</sup> B. Balcerowicz, *Obronność państwa średniego* (Warszawa: Bellona, 1997), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Air policing: securing NATO airspace*, available at <[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_132685.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132685.htm?selectedLocale=en)>.

<sup>8</sup> *Eesti Vabariigi julgeolekupoliitika aluste heakskiitmine*, Vastu võetud 06.03.2001 (RT I 2001, 24, 134), available at <<http://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/72805>>.

Latvian strategic document "National Security Concept 2008" included a statement "Currently Latvia has no direct military threats. Despite some events, which have raised concerns on purposes of neighboring states, for instance, military conflict in Georgia, training of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Byelorussia Ladoga and Zapad 2009, the security situation in the Baltic Sea region may be described as safe and stable"<sup>9</sup>.

Unfortunately, the illusory sense of security has also translated into lower defense spending by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Although this was also greatly affected by the economic crisis that began in 2007.

Table 1  
Percentage of GDP of national defense expenditure in the Baltic States in 2004-2017.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Estonia</b>	1.6%	1.5%	1.4%	1.7%	1.8%	1.8%	1.8%	1.68%	1.90%	1.91%	1.96%	2.06%	2.15%	2.14%
<b>Latvia</b>	1.3%	1.3%	1.6%	1.5%	1.6%	1.2%	1%	1.01%	0.88%	0.93%	0.94%	1.04%	1.44%	1.70%
<b>Lithuania</b>	1.4%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.1%	1.1%	0.9%	0.79%	0.76%	0.76%	0.88%	1.14%	1.49%	1.77%

Source: Rudzīte-Stejskala K., *Financing Defense* [in:] *Apprenticeship, Partnership, Membership: Twenty Years of Defense Development in the Baltic States*, Lawrence T., Jermalavičius T. (eds.), Tallinn: 2013, p. 172; *Defense expenditure as a share of GDP and annual real change based on 2010 prices* [in:] NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017)*, PR/CP(2017)111, 2017, available at <[https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2017\\_06/20170629\\_170629-pr2017-111-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_06/20170629_170629-pr2017-111-en.pdf)> p. 8.

Given the defense expenditure of the Baltic States from 2004-2017, it is evident that only Estonia increased its spending in this area quite consistently striving for the level of 2% of GDP required by NATO (which was achieved in 2015). On the other hand, Lithuania and Latvia went in the opposite direction and cut their defense spending to below 1% of GDP (in 2010-2014). Such a situation always has negative consequences, as a lack of investment in the modernization of the armed forces means a reduction in the state's defense capabilities. It was only the annexation of the Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of the Hybrid War in Ukraine, as well as an increased sense of threat from the Russian Federation, that made Lithuania and

<sup>9</sup> National Security Concept 2008, available at <[http://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2008\\_nd\\_en.pdf](http://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2008_nd_en.pdf)>.

Latvia began to raise their defense spending.

As far as Polish experience in this area is concerned, appropriate statutory solutions are one of the keys to success in the process of modernization of the Armed Forces and a stable increase in the defense budget. Following Poland's accession to NATO (which took place in 1999), in 2001, the Polish Parliament passed a law on the reconstruction and technical modernization and financing of the Armed Forces<sup>10</sup>, as part of political consensus. It stipulated that defense expenditure would be no less than 1.95% of GDP. This principle proved to be so durable that despite many changes of governments, it has been maintained until today (and even in 2017 a provision was introduced that defense expenditure will gradually increase to 2.5% in 2030)<sup>11</sup>. The stability of the law provisions made it possible to triple the defense budget over the years - from 3.1 billion dollars in 2000<sup>12</sup> to 10.8 billion dollars in 2018<sup>13</sup>; thereby, Poland became one of the European leaders in this area. Therefore, it seems that similar legal solutions could also work in the Baltic States. The law adopted by the Parliament is much more difficult to change, and the Minister of Finance must comply with its provisions when constructing the state budget. The above unquestionably limits the government's temptation to cut defense spending (especially during the crisis).

The annexation of Crimea and the Hybrid War in Ukraine have proved that the Baltic States are under real threat. Moreover, the Russian Federation provoked many "incidents" in the Baltic Sea Region in an attempt to intimidate the Baltic States. For example, on 5 September 2014, the Russian FSB kidnapped an officer of the Estonian Security Service from an Estonian border post on the territory of Estonia (i.e., NATO territory), and transported him to Moscow<sup>14</sup>. It should be stressed that the kidnapping took place shortly after US President Barack Obama's visit to Tallinn<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The Act of 21 May 2001 on reconstruction and technical modernization and financing of the Polish Force Armed, Dz.U. of 2019 No 1453, available at <<http://prawo.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20190001453>>

<sup>11</sup> M.A.Kamiński, Military Law in the Republic of Poland, "Safety & Defense" vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, p. 32., <https://doi.org/10.37105/sd.51>; M.A.Kamiński, Prawo bezpieczeństwa narodowego, „Wiedza Obronna”, vol. 268, no. 3, 2019, s. 57-76, doi: <https://doi.org/10.34752/vwz4-j897>.

<sup>12</sup> International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2001*, 2001, vol. 101, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2019*, 2019, vol. 119, p. 135.

<sup>14</sup> Estonia angry at Russia 'abduction' on border, BBC News, available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29078400>>.

<sup>15</sup> M.A.Kamiński, *Intelligence Sources in the Process of Collection of Information by the U.S. Intelligence Community*, „Security Dimensions”, 2019, t. 32 s. 82–105, <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0014.0988>

The critical aspect in defense of the Baltic States is the solidarity and coherent policy of the member states of the North Atlantic Alliance and other countries of the Baltic Sea Region (Sweden, Finland). The Western community must speak with one loud voice on this issue, thus leaving no room for doubt. Not only is unity a guarantee of an effective deterrent policy, but it also strengthens NATO's credibility.

In this context, it is also sustainable to continuously develop the so-called Contingency Plans for Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland. It was launched during the 2010 NATO Summit in Lisbon in the event of an attack on the territory of one of these countries<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, an important aspect is the continuation of the Readiness Action Plan initiated during the 2014 NATO summit in Newport. The Plan assumes, among others, numerous NATO activities in the eastern flank countries. Poland and the Baltic States strongly favor the increased presence of NATO soldiers in their territories. There are also many voices that the presence of the North Atlantic Alliance troops should be permanent instead of rotating, which would be perceived as a clear signal of the NATO members' great determination to defend the Baltic States.

From the strategic point of view, in the event of a possible crisis or conflict, Poland's role should be to secure the border with the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus with own forces in anticipation of rapid support from the allied forces. Another strategically crucial element is to secure the so-called Suwalki Gap, i.e., a narrow section (approx. 65 km) lying on the Polish territory between the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus. The loss of the Suwalki Gap would mean cutting off the land road to the Baltic States<sup>17</sup>. Support for Poland provided by NATO forces in defending this section means de facto 'to be or not to be' for Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in case of a possible crisis or armed conflict.

Another issue concerns the Baltic States' capabilities to repel the initial attack by their own forces and create the conditions for the rapid acceptance and support for the North Atlantic Alliance (Host Nation Support – HNS) forces. Taking account of the size of the three states' Armed Forces, this task of defense in a clash with the overwhelming forces of the enemy will be tough. In 2019, the Lithuanian army in peacetime consisted of 19,850 soldiers, the Latvian

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<sup>16</sup> U. Demmer, R. Neukirch, *NATO Developed Secret Contingency Plans for Baltic States*, „Spiegel Online” 2010, available at <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/fear-of-russia-nato-developed-secret-contingency-plans-for-baltic-states-a-733361.html>>.

<sup>17</sup> L. Elak, Z. Śliwa, *The Suwalki Gap – Nato's Fragile Hot Spot*, „Zeszyty Naukowe AON” 2016, vol. 103, no 2, p. 25-26.



– 6210, and the Estonian - 6060<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, each of these three countries has a different model of armed forces. In Estonia, conscription to the army has been consistently maintained since 1991, and it enjoys strong public support (in a public opinion poll in March 2018, as many as 94% of respondents indicated that young men must fulfil the conscript service obligation<sup>19</sup>). Latvia, on the other hand, went through a process of military professionalization in 2006 and has the thoroughly professional Armed Forces, although there is still a political discussion on the return to the conscription system. Lithuania also went in this direction - first, it carried out the process of professionalization of the Armed Forces in 2008, but it restored conscription to the army after the annexation of the Crimea and the outbreak of the Hybrid War in Ukraine in 2015.

With a relatively small number of soldiers in active service, an effective system of mobilization to the armed forces is an essential factor in pushing back the initial enemy attack with their own armed forces. For example, the Estonian Defense Forces (EDF) are built on the principles of a reserve army, which means that their main power is the units in reserve that consist of people who have undergone military training. Thus, the combat readiness of the EDF depends directly on the number and skills of the trained conscripts, their further training when in reserve, and efficient and flexible notification of the reservists (e.g., via national e-services channels). As a result, the planned size of the Estonian Defense Forces for wartime is 21,000 soldiers (the so-called high-readiness reserve), and after full mobilization, the number of EDF soldiers may increase up to about 60,000<sup>20</sup>. The Estonian Defense League (with 15800 members), which performs tasks in the field of territorial defense, also plays an important role. The situation in the other two Baltic States is worse, as the suspension of conscription caused a reduction in the number of reservists and harmed the possibilities of reservists' effective training, and thus lowered the defense potential of Lithuania and Latvia. Both countries are aware of this and are seeking to improve this situation.

It was pointed out that in Poland, which carried out the process of professionalization of the Armed forces in the years 2008-2010, the system of training of reservists should be

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<sup>18</sup> International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2019*, 2019, vol.119, p. 101, 123, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Estonian Ministry of Defence, *Public opinion and national defence*, 2018, available at <[https://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article\\_files/public\\_opinion\\_and\\_national\\_defence\\_2018\\_march.pdf](https://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article_files/public_opinion_and_national_defence_2018_march.pdf)>, p. 6-7

<sup>20</sup> Riigikaitse arengukava, available at <<http://www.mil.ee/et/kaitsevagi/riigikaitse-arengukava>>.

improved, and territorial defense expanded. Therefore, in 2016, the Territorial Defense Forces were created as a separate type of the Armed Forces, which are to number 53 thousand soldiers and support over 100 thousand professional soldiers<sup>21</sup>.

Today, the link between external and internal security is increasingly apparent. That requires extending the strategy from a narrow military defense framework to other relevant areas. Rapid changes and dynamic processes in the security environment at local, regional, and global levels cause that national security systems are continually evolving. The above also applies to the Baltic States. That is mainly due to the need to prepare an appropriate response to the challenges posed by the increase in asymmetric threats, which are difficult to combat since, among other things, they are of cross-border nature. Moreover, the development of new technologies, the incredible growth of cyberspace, the intensification of the information struggle, and the increasing dependence of the countries on information infrastructure make non-military defense equally important as military defense. The massive cyberattack on Estonia's ICT infrastructure carried out by Russian hackers in 2007<sup>22</sup> has already been proven that. Cyberspace is now increasingly a political and military battlefield and thus should be defended on a par with the defense of the country's territory, airspace, and territorial waters.

Given the relatively small territorial area and few military forces, the Baltic States' defense strategy presumes the scenario that the enemy can quickly occupy part of the territory. At the same time, however, the characteristic is the fact that the approach to the state defense is uncompromising. For example, the Estonian strategic document "National Security Concept 2017<sup>23</sup>" states that Estonia will defend itself regardless of the circumstances and size of the enemy military advantage. Besides, it was added that if the state temporarily loses control over part of its territory, Estonian society will engage in the organization of resistance in the area.

Nonetheless, for the strategy of strong resistance to be implemented effectively, the high morale of the citizens is necessary, both in times of peace and in times of crisis and war. The

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<sup>21</sup> M.A.Kamiński, *Profesjonalizacja i modernizacja techniczna Sił Zbrojnych RP w pracach ustawodawczych (2008-2010)* [w:] *Przestępczość w XXI wieku : zapobieganie i zwalczanie: problemy prawno-kryminologiczne*, red. E.Pływaczewski, W.Filipkowski, Z.Rau, Warszawa 2015 , p. 308-323.

<sup>22</sup> W. Ashmore, *Impact of Alleged Russian Cyber Attacks*, „Baltic Security & Defence Review” 2009, vol. 1, no 11; J. Davis, *Hackers Take Down the Most Wired Country in Europe*, „Wired Magazine” 21.08.2007, available at <<https://www.wired.com/2007/08/ff-estonia>>.

<sup>23</sup> *National Security Concept 2017*, available at <[http://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article\\_files/national\\_security\\_concept\\_2017.pdf](http://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article_files/national_security_concept_2017.pdf)>

psychological defense is a tool that can be used if the social unity is to be achieved around the state defense, as well as make citizens more resistant to the actions of the information war waged by the Russian Federation. In this respect, the Baltic states (especially Estonia and Latvia) have been implementing the assumptions of psychological defense in government policy for a long time and can serve as a model for other NATO states<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> M.A. Kamiński, *Obrona Narodowa Republiki Estonii*, Toruń p. 231-241.

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