

Reinforcing the frontier: the Baltic states' Armed Forces in border protection tasks

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In recent months, the Armed Forces of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – as with their Polish counterparts – have been engaged in protecting the border with Belarus in connection with the migrant crisis triggered by the Lukashenka regime. In Lithuania and Latvia, this military assistance proved necessary already in its initial phase. Both these countries' borders with Belarus were unprepared for the unprecedented pressure in the form of illegal migration, with several hundred attempted crossings a day. This included gaps in infrastructure, surveillance and personnel. Estonia, which does not share a border with Belarus and is not directly affected by the crisis, is supporting its Baltic neighbours and Poland with police and military forces. It is also taking preventive measures against the possibility of the weaponisation of migrants on the Estonian-Russian border.

However, the regular forces of the Baltic states are too overstretched in terms of personnel and materiel to aid the border guards and police in protecting the borders on a larger scale. They are already assisting the health services in efforts to curb the next wave of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as continuing participation in military exercises and foreign operations. Reinforcing the border with Belarus would be possible through the greater involvement of the territorial defence troops and reservists. Both Latvia and Estonia have carried out snap military exercises for these forces in the eastern regions, signalling their readiness to rapidly roll out a border protection operation if needed.

Lithuania: strengthening the border and amending legislation

The use of Lithuania's Armed Forces in protecting its border with Belarus (679 km) has been ongoing since July. By November the number of personnel assigned to this task had risen from 260 to around 1,200. These are both professional soldiers and members of territorial defence forces (The National Defence Volunteer Forces which are part of the Land Forces). They are supported by the paramilitary Riflemen's Union. Lithuanian troops are involved in: the construction of a temporary barbed wire fence along the entire border (at the end of November it covered over 100 km), logistics, surveillance and patrolling of the border zone (including vulnerable sections), reinforcing border points, and guarding detention centres for illegal immigrants.

Lithuania has also introduced new legal solutions enabling the Armed Forces to perform their mission more effectively in crises below the threshold of war. On 10 August the parliament approved amendments to the Law on the Organisation of National Defence and Military Service, and to the Statute on the Use of Military Force. They concern assistance to

agencies subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior. Due to these amendments, the parliament can activate additional police powers for military personnel in an emergency situation for a period of three months. These include: persecuting and detaining, giving mandatory instructions, limiting access to designated areas, inspecting documents, searching persons and vehicles. When the state of emergency was introduced along the border strip with Belarus on 10 November, the Ministry of Defence raised the level of readiness for the Armed Forces to facilitate the redeployment of military personnel in the event of an escalation of the crisis. Some units were also moved closer to the border to prevent possible attempts by larger groups of illegal migrants to force their way across the border. A Forward Operating Base for troops taking part in border protection duties was established in Druskininkai.

Latvia: the time of the territorial defence forces

Latvia has been using its military directly for crisis management on the border with Belarus (173 km) to a lesser extent than Poland and Lithuania. Since July border guards have been supported by the territorial defence forces – *Zemessardze* (the National Guard) – under the National Armed Forces Law. They are equipped with the necessary vehicles and unmanned systems. Currently, 100–150 troops are deployed to the border zone. Cadets from the National Defence Academy are set to join them soon. In addition to protecting and monitoring vulnerable sections of the border, their tasks include providing logistical assistance in accommodating some of the migrants who have managed to illegally cross the border, and the construction of a temporary barbed wire fence. The operational (professional) component of the Armed Forces is almost entirely located and exercised in the west of the country, while the eastern regions are covered mainly by the National Guard. This includes Latgale, which borders Belarus and is dominated by Russian-speakers. The Latvian authorities are handling the Armed Forces' activities in the border zone cautiously as the opposing side – which is building a narrative of NATO aggression – could leverage it into its disinformation campaigns.

Latvia is also continuing a cycle of military exercises, which began in summer and that coincided with the Russian-Belarusian "Zapad 2021" manoeuvres and the migrant pressure from Belarus. From 30 August to 3 October, it conducted a large-scale exercise of the entire defence system "Namejs 2021" with the participation of roughly 8,500 troops, or 60% of the Armed Forces' personnel. In addition, from 13 November to 12 December, the National Guard held snap exercises ("Decisive Point") in Latgale, involving 3,000 troops from all four brigades of the territorial defence forces. This was a reaction to the escalation of the crisis caused by Belarus, and a demonstration of their capability to reinforce the eastern border in Latgale, which is seen as a potentially vulnerable area in the context of hybrid threats.

Estonia: helping neighbours and gaining experience

Estonia's Armed Forces, along with the Police and Border Guard, are participating in border protection efforts in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. In addition to supporting their allies, these deployments are aimed at gathering crisis management experience in emergencies involving illegal immigration, which may also affect the country in the future. Tallinn is hedging against the risk of turning Pskov airport into yet another hub for the transfer of migrants, thus diverting them to the Estonian-Russian border (294 km). In July, it sent dozens of military and police personnel with unmanned systems to Lithuania and also

donated 100 km of barbed wire. In November, 30 police officers were detached to Latvia. The deployment to Lublin Voivodeship, which began in early December, involves 50 soldiers of the engineering forces. Their task is to repair and build a temporary fence. A team of Estonian soldiers with unmanned systems is operating on other sections of the border. They will remain in Poland until the end of the year.

In November, Estonia also began to preemptively enhance the protection of its eastern border. An engineer battalion started erecting a temporary barbed wire fence at that time. Roughly 1,700 reservists from engineer units were called up (the turnout was 55%) in order to support these activities. They – along with members of the territorial defence forces (*Kaitseliit*) – set up a 40-kilometre barrier on vulnerable sections of the border in its northern and southern parts as part of the "Okas 2021" exercise held from 17 to 25 November. "Okas" is a series of snap readiness and refresher exercises for reserve soldiers held regularly since 2016. Summoned reservists are given up to 48 hours to join activated units.