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The Baltic states respond to incidents involving Ukrainian drones

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On 23 March, a Ukrainian drone crashed near Lake Lavysas in the Varėna district of Lithuania. It likely veered off course during an attack by unmanned aerial vehicles on the Russian oil terminal in Primorsk, as a result of Russian electronic warfare measures. On 25 March, likely for the same reason, further Ukrainian drones flying from Russian territory crashed in Latvia, in the village of Dobročina in the Krāslava municipality, and in Estonia, on the chimney of the Auvere cogeneration plant, which forms part of a large power generation complex. The incident did not disrupt energy transmission. In the Latvian and Estonian cases, the intended target of the drones may have been the port of Ust-Luga. Lithuanian radar systems did not detect the object in their airspace, whereas Latvian and Estonian systems did so in the following days.

Violations of the Baltic states' airspace by Ukrainian drones have so far been rare. The first such intrusion into Estonian territory, in Tartumaa, took place in August 2025. In previous years, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have also faced incidents involving incursions by Russian drones. In July 2025, Russian Gerbera-type drones entered Lithuanian airspace on two occasions, likely en route to Ukraine, one of which carried an explosive payload. In September 2024, a Russian Shahed-type drone crashed in Latvia. Its target was also likely located in Ukraine.

The governments of the Baltic states treat airspace violations very seriously, particularly as they diminish residents' sense of security. The narrative advanced by the authorities regarding these events is aimed at emphasising the responsibility of the Russian aggressor rather than that of Ukraine, which is acting in self-defence. The incidents are also prompting Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to strengthen their capabilities to detect and counter foreign unmanned aerial vehicles.

Commentary

- **In light of the failure of the Lithuanian radar system to detect the airspace violation, the authorities in Vilnius are focusing on reassuring the public that the airspace protection system is being expanded and that the state has secured adequate funding for this purpose.** They are also withholding details of the ongoing investigation, including the type of unmanned aerial vehicle, although they have confirmed that it originated from Ukraine. Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys stated that a joint investigation with Ukraine is under way to determine how the Ukrainian drone came to crash on Lithuanian territory.

By 2030, Lithuania plans to develop its airspace threat detection system, particularly for objects operating at lower altitudes. Last year, it decided to allocate €500 million to this effort. Lithuania operates seven long- and medium-range radars, but these systems face difficulties in detecting small, low-flying objects such as drones. Air defence is based on three short-range NASAMS 3 batteries and very short-range systems, including RBS 70 NG, Grom MANPADS, and Avenger. In recent years, Vilnius has contracted GM200 and Giraffe 1X radars to detect low-flying targets, as well as counter-drone systems from the Polish company APS.

- **The Latvian government responded calmly to the incident.** It has emphasised that the exchange of information between state institutions proceeded correctly and that there is no need to introduce additional crisis measures. According to Defence Minister Andris Sprūds, consultations with NATO allies and Kyiv are ongoing. Latvia operates three stationary long-range radars and one mobile unit. These are complemented by short-range Giraffe 1X and PS-70 radars. As regards air and missile defence, Riga expects three batteries of the medium-range IRIS-T SLM air and missile defence system to be delivered in 2026. Very short-range air defence relies on Piorun and RBS-70 MANPADS. As part of a NATO initiative, various electronic warfare and counter-unmanned aerial systems are being tested at Latvian training grounds, although none have yet been introduced into service with the Latvian National Armed Forces.
- **Estonia is monitoring the situation in the eastern part of the country with concern.** The government has announced enhanced surveillance of airspace in the north-east of the country and over the Gulf of Finland, while the incident itself led to the scrambling of NATO fighter jets stationed in Estonia. The Minister of Defence did not rule out extending the no-fly zone along the border with Russia in the north-eastern part of the country. The Prime Minister emphasised close cooperation with allies in the region. Tallinn operates four long-range radars, with a fifth currently under construction. These are complemented by five mobile short-range Giraffe AMB radars. In 2023, Estonia purchased three batteries of the medium-range IRIS-T SLM air and missile defence system, which are due to be delivered in 2026. Its very short-range air defence includes around one hundred ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft guns, as well as very short-range Mistral and Piorun missiles. As for the detection and countering of drones, Estonia has a relatively large number of companies developing and producing electronic warfare and counter-unmanned aerial systems, although their products have not yet been introduced into service with the Estonian Defence Forces.