



Toward Comprehensive Defense: The Case of the Baltic States since 2014

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37105/sd.169>

Abstract

This article provides an assessment of the defense efforts undertaken by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania since 2014. This analysis is focused on national efforts in the field of military defense and societal resilience. The assessment of defense efforts undertaken by the Baltic states has been based on their pragmatic perception of threats, development of military capabilities, and preparations in the field of civil resilience. The research references publicly available governmental documents of the Baltic states, such as security and defense strategies and concepts, defense plans, and budgets. It discusses recent research and analytical works in the field of and defense of the Baltic states. The research suggests that despite national modalities, all of the Baltic states are implementing core elements of the comprehensive defense. Although there is solid progress in implementing comprehensive defense in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, there are still many challenges ahead.

Keywords

Baltic states, comprehensive defense, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania

Submitted: 21.09.2021 Accepted: 21.12.2021 Published: 31.12.2021

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1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War marked the end of the Soviet Union's occupation of the Baltic states for almost half a century. When regaining independence, the Baltic states focused their immediate efforts on assuring national security and developing capabilities needed for national defense. Geostrategic location and the nature and magnitude of a hypothetical threat posed by Russia compounded with limited available resources meant that the Baltic states alone were not able to provide for credible national defense. Back in early nineties, the Baltic states developed small land-centric armed forces and tried to complement them with territorial defense troops and societal resilience and resistance under the framework of total defense modelled after the Nordic nations. This situation prompted actions for political, military, economic, and social integration with the West. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania's accession to NATO and the European Union in 2004 were the ultimate success of achieving this long-term foreign and diplomatic objective. The early years of membership in NATO were a time when the threat for the Baltic states from Russian aggressive behavior in the post-Soviet space was not fully acknowledged nor understood by all of their Allies. Partnership with Russia was predominantly seen as a crucial factor for Euro-Atlantic security and solving global problems. The regional security concerns of the member states of NATO's Eastern Flank were received with caution, and there was no appetite for any NATO military reinforcements there. New member states were supposed to contribute to expeditionary operations, and their military security was thought to be automatically assured by membership in NATO. This philosophy resulted in the moderate modernization of the armed forces of the Baltic states that focused mainly on expeditionary capabilities. It also limited preparations for territorial defense and civil resilience efforts. This situation changed as a result of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the illegal occupation of Crimea.

Military threats from Russian aggressive behavior materialized and prompted a deliberate response from NATO and its members to include the Baltic states. Implementation of assurance and adaptive measures by NATO reinforced the defense of the Baltic states. However, the evolving, hybrid nature of possible threats and the limited scope of the enhanced Forward Presence also showed the need for the Baltic states to develop their own national defense capabilities to be able to respond immediately to armed aggression. The challenge grew even more with Russian subversive information operations and other hybrid activities. Therefore, the post-2014 period offers an interesting insight into the adaptation of the defense of the Baltic states to radical changes in the security environment. It allows for studying synergies and/or lack of them between allied, multilateral, bilateral, and national defense efforts.

This paper aims to present the evolution of the national approaches of the Baltic states to defense since 2014. The scope of the discussion focuses on national efforts in the field of military defense and societal resilience. References to international cooperation are limited to the aspects that directly contribute to defense of the Baltic states. The assessment of defense efforts undertaken by the Baltic states has been based on their pragmatic perception of threats, development of military capabilities, and preparations in the field of civil resilience. The research is based mainly on publicly available governmental documents of the Baltic states, such as security and defense strategies and concepts, defense plans, and budgets. It also reflects recent research and analytical works in the field of security and defense that discuss developments in defense of the Baltic states. Governmental and institutional

perspectives are confronted with academic and think tank assessments and recommendations. The article offers a brief analysis of factors influencing national approaches to military security and defense and provides an overview of the defense efforts undertaken by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania since 2014. A comparison of national approaches to defense since 2014 has been used for identifying common patterns in the defense of three Baltic states. The article then tries to look for synergies in national approaches and explore possible short- and medium-term developments.

2. A comprehensive approach to national defense in Estonia

Russia has been traditionally recognized as a threat to the security of Estonia. The 2007 cyber-attack was considered just a warning and reinforced of the perception of Russia as an existential threat. Prior to 2014, Estonia published three versions of its national security concepts. The successive versions of the concept described the evolution of a Russian threat to Estonian security. In the state security concepts published in 2001 and 2004, Russia was just mentioned. In 2010, Russia's threat of political, economic, military, and energy tools to achieve its goals was noted. It was the 2017 concept that portrayed Russian activity as unpredictable, aggressive and provocative and as a source of instability and an immediate threat to Estonia's security (Riigikogu, 2017). Russia's desire to restore its position as a great power was assessed as a source for a possible sharp opposition by the West and the Euro-Atlantic collective security system. The 2017 concept noted Russia's use of military power as a tool for achieving its objectives. It described the strengthening of Russia's armed forces and increased military presence on the borders of NATO member states, including in the Baltic Sea region and on Estonia's border (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Estonia, 2017).

In attempts to deter and defend against security threats, Estonia adopted a comprehensive national defense concept. The comprehensive nature of defense is reflected in using both military and non-military capabilities as well as integrating activities and resources from the public and private sectors and civil society. The comprehensive national defense of Estonia develops, therefore: "military defense, the civilian support for military defense, international action, domestic and internal security, maintenance of the continuous operation of the state and society, and psychological defense" (Riigikogu, 2017, p. 3). This concept favors deterrence as a means for assuring national security. However, should the deterrence fail to prevent attacks against Estonia, it should be ready to take active steps. The chapter related to military defense focused on discussing collective defense, deterrence hand-in-hand with NATO partners, Host Nations Support system extension, national resistance, and resilience, and the importance of the Defense League supported by the constant allocation of 2 percent of its GDP on defense. In this edition of the National Security Concept, a special chapter was dedicated to the resilience and cohesion of society. It included considerations about the integration of society, strategic communication, and psychological defense to enhance society's resilience based on the assumption that a united society could be less prone to hostile influences (Riigikogu, 2017).

Plans for developing capabilities needed for national defense are included in national defense development plans covering the timeframe of a decade and in military defense action plans aimed at four year periods. The National Defense Development Plan 2017-2026 is the major strategic document to guide the development of national defense capabilities necessary to implement the comprehensive defense concept (Ministry of Defense of the Re-

public of Estonia, 2017). As a reaction to the deteriorating security environment after Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the plan called for the wartime structure of the Estonian Defense Forces to expand from 21,000 to 25,000 troops. As a result, the conscript service increased from 3,000 to 4,000 soldiers per year, and the role of women in the armed forces was extended. The 1st Infantry Brigade is planned to be a mechanized force by 2026, equipped with CV 90 combat fighting vehicles, armored personnel carriers, self-propelled artillery, and new generation anti-tank systems. The brigade has been ready to integrate a NATO heavy armor battalion since 2017. The 2nd Infantry Brigade will be developed as a full-scale motorized light infantry brigade with an additional artillery battalion. The development of military defense capabilities envisaged in the National Defense Development plan 2017-2026 also covers the increase in the Host Nation Support capabilities and air surveillance (Cieślak, 2021). The capability development plans also include establishing a cyber defense command based, investments in the Defense League and patriotic education, promoting research and development activity, and supporting Estonia's defense industry sector. The defense budget in Estonia has met the NATO required level of 2 percent of the GDP since 2012. In 2021, the defense spending is to increase to 645.5 million Euro (2.29% GDP), including some €10 million for HNS (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Estonia, 2021). An additional €46 million was also added to the previously planned defense investment programs to allow for the procurement of a coastal defense system.

An important contributor to Estonian comprehensive national defense is the voluntary Defense League, which is deeply rooted in the societal patriotic and national spirit (Małysa, 2017). This organization is voluntary and independent, but the Commander of the Defense League is directly subordinated to the Estonian Chief of Defense, who has the authority to command and control the troops/units composed of Defense League members assigned to the Estonian Defense Forces during wartime (Glińska, 2018). The Defense League gathers 16,000 members, and with support organizations, a total of 26,000 members (The Defense League, 2021). An important characteristic of the Defense League is permitting members to possess weapons in their homes. This enables a rapid reaction to emerging threats and supports mobilization. The solution was verified during "snap mobilizations", in which more than 85% of volunteers reported to their units. The National Defense Action Plan 2019-2022 includes provisions for creating six new companies of the Defense League; thus the mobility of its four battalions will increase (source). The 2020-2023 action plan envisages the EDL budget to be €43 million per year, an increase in personnel up to 30,000 in 2022, and extensive exercises (Baltic News Service, 2019).

Reliance on reserve components is clearly visible in the Estonian comprehensive approach to defense. The Commander of the Estonian Defense Forces pointed at the importance of reservists for the state's security. As the majority of Estonian reservists store their service weapons at home, they are able to report immediately in the case of a threat of aggression. He expressed his conviction that one day active armed forces personnel will also have their service weapons stored at home during a crisis period. This has been considered especially important already from the point of view of the formation of military units. A more important observation is tied to future defense requirements, which may include doctrinally different scenarios than current threats (Veebel, 2019). To meet future defense education requirements, the Defense League will organize national defense camps to ensure that young people from all regions of Estonia have the opportunity to participate in national defense camps of uniform quality. It aims to increase people's readiness to protect Estonia's independence. The concept is supported by the Ministry of Defense, to ensure that young Estonians are offered equal opportunities for national defense education.

3. Comprehensive national defense in Latvia

The State Defense Concept adopted in 2012 recognized the potential of a military conflict but assessed it as low (Saeima, 2012). The State Defense Concept of 2016 took into account “the aggression in Ukraine fueled by the Russian Federation and its significant challenges to security in Europe and global international order” (Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Latvia, 2016). The Russian armed forces’ high readiness and mobility capabilities were seen as a challenge by reducing reaction time for NATO to respond to any direct aggression (Ploom, Šliwa & Veebel, 2020). The aggression was seen as a military threat, so special attention was given to special services, social networks, prevention of information operations, and the danger of societal radicalization (Nickers, 2016). It leads to putting an accent on effective strategic communication, counterintelligence and preventive measures, developing a unity of society (Rostoks & Vanaga, 2016). The National Security Concept adopted in 2019 acknowledged that the security of Latvia was influenced by the mutual interaction of several military and non-military factors. The external security risks and threats to national security were assessed as remaining high. Russia was considered the main threat to national security because of its continued confrontation with the West and its aggressive security policy implemented in the Baltic Region. Threats posed by Russian policy include a wide range of non-military and military hybrid activities. Russia expanded its deployment of information, compatriot, and educational policies, along with cultural and humanitarian activities, trying to influence its internal political processes and public opinion. Latvia is aware of Russia’s strengthened military potential and the high intensity of its military activities close to its borders. The modernization of the armed forces, combat readiness checks, deployment of additional troops and creation of new ones, aggressive scenarios in exercises are considered proof of the increased military threat to the security of Latvia. The newest State Defense Concept of 2020 discards the scenario of a large-scale high intensity conflict between NATO and Russia as the latter cannot afford it. Therefore, the most realistic scenario may be a hybrid war or a surprise attack to seize some territory which was described as a more likely scenario that Latvia’s defense system could face (Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Latvia, 2020).

The Latvian approach to national defense builds upon the foundations of the model of total defense adopted earlier by the Nordic states. Comprehensive national defense is intended to ensure security and crisis preparedness across all sectors of the state and society, including preparedness for military conflicts. The Latvian comprehensive national defense reinforces NATO’s collective defense and other regional initiatives. It aims at the enhancement of Latvia’s deterrence capabilities and building resilience against possible crises or armed conflicts. The need for a comprehensive approach results from the complexity of threats to Latvia’s security, which means that the traditional national defense system along with its armed forces will not be able to respond effectively to all of the hybrid threats alone. A comprehensive state defense system is expected to enable all governmental and non-governmental organizations to contribute to crisis preparedness and management. Such a system will, according to official documents, “ensure resilience against external impacts, resist and recover from major shocks and challenges”. Since 2018, the national defense system of Latvia has been adjusted to new threats and challenges.

Latvia’s military defense is based on the capabilities of the National Armed Forces. The development of operational capabilities tries to balance the requirement to preclude a surprise attack and stay within a limited budget. Therefore, the Latvian armed forces are currently developing a special operations unit, military engineering, air defense, command and control, mechanization, indirect fire, and other significant capabilities. The concept puts emphasis on early warning systems to detect and defend against a surprise attack, command

and control systems that are resilient against electronic warfare, and overall military readiness, including for the National Guard. The organized forces would be a mechanized infantry brigade together with the National Guard brigades, which are planned to be equipped with combat support elements, such as indirect fire and anti-tank and air defense capabilities. Latvia's national armed forces include 6,600 army troops, along with 8,200 National Guard troops and 3,000 reserve troops (Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Latvia, 2019). The National Guard is directly subordinated to the Chief of Defense. It supports regular units and operates as a part of land forces under collective defense scenarios. The National Guard facilitates host nation support, preserves the mobilization system, supports law enforcement forces, and assures critical infrastructure security. The National Guard maintains the high readiness of quick reaction platoons and companies to defend against hybrid threats, such as "little green men" and support local administration in crisis situations (Andzas & Veebel, 2017). In efforts to address the requirements of conventional military defense, the Latvian armed forces continue efforts related to the development of air defense, fire support, command and control, and mechanized infantry capabilities. The development of logistic support and infrastructure is worth noting as it remains crucial for any further build-up of Latvian armed forces. Latvia keeps promoting recruitment for the National Guard and incentivizes service in this formation.

Latvia has continued its efforts to develop its comprehensive defense system and strengthen society's resilience. This part of defense preparations aims to ensure the continuity of government at all levels in any crisis situation, protect Latvia's information space and cyber defense, and non-violent civil resistance against occupation forces. The Latvian approach to comprehensive defense puts emphasis on the importance of education. A voluntary state defense education covering civil population consciousness and patriotic education has been developing for some time. However, from 2024 onward, it will be a mandatory part of education and will receive specifically allocated resources allowing for the development of curricula and preparing quality personnel. The Youth Guard Development Program is intended to increase membership by promoting patriotic spirit, raising membership up to 12,000 in 2027, and investing in weapon systems, equipment, and infrastructure (Flanagan et al., 2019).

4. Lithuanian total defense

When Lithuania joined NATO, it reconsidered national security and defense policy as the priority as the security situation was evolving significantly at the time. The membership assessment was connected with a hope the militaries in Europe would reorient to outside regions and be more involved in peacekeeping or humanitarian operations. However, 2014 was a sobering and alarming year for Vilnius as after Russia had attacked Georgia, speeded up the 2008 Russian armed forces military reform, carried out the annexation of Crimea and initiated a war in eastern Ukraine. Those facts challenged the existing security arrangements and started to further revise awareness of Russia as a threat. The military strategy adopted by Lithuania in March 2016 considers the threat of conventional armed aggression no longer as a theoretical one. It points at irregular military formations that might be used to destabilize a NATO member state and test the credibility and unity of the Alliance (Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania, 2016). The strategy also takes into account information and cyber-attacks, regional crises and activities of foreign intelligence services.

Taking into consideration the new situation, Lithuania reconsidered its defense policy, highlighting the importance of deterrence. It has been an integral principle of defense based on the assumption that total and unconditional resistance must involve all national resources to defend the state. Every citizen and the entire national resources will oppose a threat. For that reason, specific laws and regulations were adopted with respect to international law. Legitimately, the country approved the law regulating rules of engagement sanctioning the use of weapons during peacetime which was based on experiences coming from the war in Ukraine and invasion of the so-called “little green men.” Such a proactive approach to face non-military threats was important to speed up the reaction of military and voluntary forces in cases of, e.g., provocations, attacks of armed groups, crossing border by armed people or in general facing unconventional threats (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Lithuania, 2014). The changes in the security environment forced Lithuania to reconsider and accelerate a comprehensive implementation of credible deterrence. This became possible because of the defense budget growth allowing to enhance defense capabilities. NATO’s decisions to boost its deterrence and defense efforts in the Eastern flank were recognized as a critical factor from a national perspective.

Lithuania developed a formula of effective deterrence founded on three pillars: national defense capabilities, NATO deterrence, defense measures and the whole-of-society/total defense approach. Between 2014 and 2020, the Lithuanian defense budget rose four times in nominal terms, increasing from 0.76 to 2.02 percent of the GDP. This allowed for an extensive build-up of armed forces and their technical modernization. A second brigade started to be developed, and self-propelled artillery and air defense systems were bought (Cieślak, 2021). In the context of national defense capabilities, Lithuania decided to enhance and adapt territorial defense to a new situation based on historical experiences. Lithuania developed required national defense capabilities, but does not plan to fight alone, as the collective defense is an essential element of approach to its national defense. In this respect, the National Defense Volunteer Force, subordinated to land forces, strengthens the entire Lithuanian territory as the backbone of territorial defense (Zaleski, Śliwa & Veebel, 2020). The volunteer force is organized into six territorial units covering the entire territory of Lithuania. The National Defense Volunteer Force is a credible part of national defense capabilities based on the high motivation of members (Vileikiene, Pociene & Alekneviene, 2015).

The armed forces also cooperate with the Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union, a paramilitary organization of some 12,000 volunteers. The union constitutes trained reserve manpower to reinforce either armed forces or the National Defense Volunteer Force to contribute to defense and resistance in case of occupation. The Union is organized in ten regions, which are composed of light infantry type companies, which cooperate with local communities. Half of the Riflemen’s Union members are young riflemen now, which changed the pre-2014 age balance when the older generation dominated. The riflemen are distributed into several groups based on their wartime tasks, and training received. Combat riflemen, who received full basic military training, will be assigned to active military units. “Owl” riflemen being journalists or public relations specialists will contribute to STRATCOM efforts, while kinetic riflemen will protect critical infrastructure and support local municipality or military commandants. Civil resistance riflemen are planned to engage in logistic support and IT services. In the case of military occupation, civil resistance riflemen are supposed to participate in non-violent resistance (Zdanovicius & Statkus, 2020). To prepare society for defense against any armed aggression, Lithuania developed the “Guide to Active Resistance” in 2016, providing guidance in the case of occupation to preserve resilience and support resistance (Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania, 2016).

Assuming that a military conflict in the region could erupt with only a short warning period, the guiding principle was to limit response time to a minimum. The renewed military

strategy adopted in 2016 focused on preparing the Lithuanian Armed Forces to meet a possible aggressor based on a significant evolution of the armed forces' structure, their readiness, manning, training and equipment. Part of the armed forces is kept in high readiness to allow for a rapid reaction to surprise military or hybrid attacks (Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania, 2017). An important factor was renewing conscription in August 2015 after being suspended in 2008. The reason was the need to have trained reserves to join armed forces on short notice. The plans for active military reserves discussed in 2016 called for a reserve of 30,000 to 40,000 active military personnel. It was estimated that by 2020 at least 15,000 active reservists would be available (Zdannovicus & Statkus, 2020). In 2020 the new iteration of martial law was adopted in Lithuania. It clarified the status and role of citizen armed resistance units as well as that for partisans.

An important pillar of Lithuanian deterrence is described as the whole-of-society/total defense approach. This concept rests on the conviction that if society can maintain awareness of threats, it is immune to the disinformation and develops the ability to defend the country. Its defense is supported by education and motivating citizens to defend the state, boost their resilience, and increase non-violent and armed resistance skills. The Mobilization and Civil Resistance Department under the Ministry of Defense regularly visits schools and other institutions with educational lectures. Due to COVID-19, some of the lectures are conducted online. Non-Governmental Organizations, along with state institutions and the Riflemen's Union are engaged in educational and training activities related to national security and defense. In 2017, the national security and state defense program was adopted for the last grades of high school. Initially, it was voluntary and did not attract many participants. However, one may expect this kind of education will be expanded to enhance a patriotic spirit among younger generations and that it will become an integral part of curricula for the high schools.

5. Conclusions

The deterioration of the security environment caused by Russia's aggressive actions reinvigorated the defense efforts of the Baltic states after 2014. After a decade of contributing to NATO expeditionary operations, the Baltic states shifted their focus on collective and national defense against conventional and hybrid threats. Aside from membership in NATO, the recent years saw substantial developments in the field of national defense in all of the Baltic states. A comprehensive approach to defense has become a cornerstone of national policies since 2014, and significant efforts have been made by all of the Baltic states to turn this concept into reality. The Baltic states continue to implement comprehensive (total) defense concepts to be better prepared to address the full spectrum of threats to their security. The capability to defend against both conventional and hybrid threats has been incorporated in the Baltic states' national defense strategies and concepts. While the efforts undertaken by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania differ to some extent, there are a lot of commonalities in the approach adopted by those states since 2014. The sense of urgency translated into increased defense budgets, build-up and modernization of armed forces, reinforced territorial defense and reserve components and strengthened social resilience. The development of conventional military capabilities in all of the Baltic states is constrained by limited resources available. Therefore, capabilities for land combat are prioritized to assure a high level of attrition to possible aggressors. The threat of a Russian surprise hybrid attack and the destabilization by means of information and cyber-attacks prompted the development of rapid reaction capabilities by armed forces of the Baltic states. At the same time, the build-

up of territorial defense and reserve components have been taking place. The Baltic states pay close attention to reinforcing social resilience to counter malign information campaigns. With solid progress in implementing the concepts of total or comprehensive defense in recent years, it is clear how much still remains to be done. To make total defense work, more efforts are needed to solidify its legal and conceptual frameworks, develop and field required military capabilities, and reinforce societal resilience.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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