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Baltic Bastions: New defence strategies for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia

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"[...] they will be treated like pigs in their own country". This sentence comes at the end of a long series of blatant threats by Russian President Putin against the three Baltic States, in this case Latvia. The statement was made in response to the alleged mistreatment of Latvia's Russian-speaking population. Such statements cause great fear of attack in these states, which had to fight hard for their independence from Russia. Faced with the feared reduction of Western support for Ukraine and the resulting sharp increase in the potential threat from Russia, the three Baltic States published new defence strategies in 2023. But how do the Baltic States intend to secure their independence, and are these concepts a blueprint for other states?

It was only in the early 1990s that the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were able to declare their independence from Soviet occupation and embark on a democratic transformation along the lines of European democracies. They warned the "West" of the threat posed by Russia long before 24 February 2022, and were ultimately proven right. Now the various domestic problems of Western allies such as Germany and the US are jeopardising military and financial support for Ukraine. The Baltic States are very critical of this development and fear a similar threat to their own geopolitical situation. After all, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is of paramount importance for the security of these states as a guarantor against the aggressor Russia.

The Baltic States have been members of NATO and the European Union (EU) since 2004. For years, they have met their self-imposed commitment to spend two per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence and are pushing for other NATO members to do the same. If the US withdraws from Europe, the Baltic States must seriously fear for their independence. In light of Russia's continued threatening gestures and

the developments in Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania have developed new defence concepts and Estonia, a new defence plan for the years 2024 to 2027.

Civil duty in Lithuania

In Lithuania, the new National Defence Plan was adopted by the Lithuanian Defence Council on the 6th of November 2023. The National Defence Plan outlines the self-image of the Lithuanian state in times of war. According to the Office of the President, the National Defence Plan is intended to ensure that the various elements of the overall defence function as a unit. The plan covers armed defence, mobilisation and civil resistance. It deals not only with military issues, but also defines the involvement of civil servants, non-governmental organisations, businesses and all citizens.

Armed defence, mobilisation and the organisation of civil resistance are defined as the main elements of the defence plan, and various strategic objectives are presented. The focus is on the defence of Lithuania's sovereignty and territorial integrity against armed attack. This will be ensured through the efforts and resources of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, NATO, state and

local authorities, economic actors and Lithuanian citizens. In principle, public order and security in Lithuania should also be guaranteed. The new defence plan will ensure the protection of strategic sectors, material and immaterial assets and the supply of essential goods and services to the population.

Mobilising exercise planned for 2024

These rather abstract goals of the Lithuanian defence plan are supported by concrete implementation plans. A major mobilisation exercise is planned for 2024. Global defence players will also be involved in national mobilisation preparations. In addition, a system for training the Lithuanian population in civil resistance will be established. Cooperation between the institutional and municipal levels should ensure these measures. A National Defence Coordination Council has been established to ensure cooperation between state and municipal authorities, companies and organisations. The acquisition of additional defence systems is also planned. A joint procurement agreement with Sweden for a mobile air defence system was signed in December 2023.

But the defence plan, drafted by a group of experts from the Lithuanian President's Office, was criticised by some Lithuanian political actors. The opposition criticised the unclear financing and the late preparation of the defence plan.

Lithuania is also currently discussing increasing the size of its armed forces by reintroducing universal conscription. Following the Russian invasion of Crimea, a system of limited military service was reintroduced in 2015. Under this system, only a certain proportion of conscripts are selected by a digital computer programme and called up for nine months of military service. General conscription for men and possible conscription for women are now being discussed. A first reform of conscription was successfully passed in the first reading in parliament in December 2023. It raises the age limit for compulsory military service from 18-21 to 18-23. Under the reform, a university degree would no longer be accepted as a reason for deferring military service. The aim is to create the legal

conditions for the transition to general conscription.

Security guaranteed by German brigade?

Lithuania has big plans for its defence budget: in 2023, Lithuania's defence budget will reach 1.77 billion euros, or 2.52% of Lithuania's gross domestic product (GDP). Lithuania has also set itself the goal of reaching the three per cent mark for defence by 2027 at the latest. To put this into perspective: Germany's defence budget is expected to reach €64 billion in 2023, representing 1.6 per cent of GDP.

The planned German brigade in the country is also an important element in the national defence strategy. The visit of German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius on 18 December and the signing of the "Roadmap Action Plan" with the Lithuanian Defence Minister will lay the foundation for the permanent stationing of the German brigade. Lithuania hopes that the German brigade will strengthen its defence potential and enhance NATO's deterrence and collective defence. The first hundred soldiers are expected to arrive in the capital Vilnius as early as 2024. The majority of the brigade is expected to arrive in 2025 and 2026, with the German brigade reaching full operational capability in 2027. To achieve this, Lithuania has committed to building all the necessary civilian and military infrastructure.

Latvia: focus on defensibility

Latvia also adopted a new National Defence Concept this autumn. It was approved by the Latvian Parliament on 5 of October. The concept is intended to define the strategic principles, priorities and measures of Latvia's military defence in times of peace and war, as well as in situations of national threat. The concept is characterised by four main lines of action for Latvia's national defence: strengthening deterrence, defence capability, strengthening resilience and the ability and will to defend the country. The need to strengthen the collective defence of NATO and the international role of the EU, as well as Latvia's active participation in international cooperation formats, were identified as priorities.

Specific objectives of the defence concept include strengthening Latvia's external borders with NATO

and the EU and developing the capacity of the State Border Guard. In particular, Latvia plans to detect and counter cyber threats and threats from foreign intelligence and security services. It also plans to strengthen the national defence system and the defence capabilities of the National Armed Forces (NBS). In the area of defence systems, Latvia's capabilities in air defence, coastal defence, long-range missile artillery and unmanned aerial vehicles will be developed and new armoured infantry fighting vehicles will be introduced. Local industry in Latvia will be more closely involved in order to increase ammunition production in the country.

Conscription reloaded

This is based on the planned expansion of the national armed forces to 31,000 active and 30,000 reserve personnel. According to the Global Firepower Index, Latvia currently has around 6,500 active and 15,000 reserve personnel in 2023. The planned strengthening of the armed forces goes hand in hand with the decision taken in April to reintroduce conscription. From 1 January 2024, all male Latvian citizens between the ages of 18 and 27 will have to perform either military or civilian service. Latvian women will be able to opt for voluntary service. Latvia follows the other Baltic States in reintroducing military service. Lithuania reintroduced military service for a certain proportion of conscripts with a digital selection process in 2015 following Russia's invasion of Crimea, and is now discussing universal conscription for men as well as the possible obligation of women. Estonia never abolished universal conscription.

National Defence 101 – F for failed?

Latvia is also looking for an even stronger NATO presence in its country. The long-term goal is the stationing of a fully-fledged Allied combat brigade in Latvia, capable of contributing to Latvia's defence alongside the national armed forces. The new defence concept also addresses issues such as culture, education and language. For the 2024/2025 school year, national defence education will be compulsory in all schools. The aim is to provide Latvian children with a minimum set of skills for dealing with crisis and war situations at an early age. In addition, from 1 January 2026, all content in Latvian public media

will be published only in Latvian and a language belonging to the European cultural area. This does not include Russian. The development of a national security plan based on the priorities of this concept is planned for 2024.

Like Lithuania, Latvia has set itself the target of spending three per cent of national GDP on its defence budget by 2027. In 2023, the defence budget will amount to €986 million, or 2.25 per cent of GDP. This share is expected to increase steadily in the following years, reaching 2.4 per cent of GDP in 2024 and 3 per cent in 2027.

Marija Golubeva of the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) and former Latvian interior minister criticised the lack of concrete plans to strengthen society in the new Latvian defence concept. The concept is inadequate to respond to hybrid threats, and its plans are too one-sided and simplistic. Golubeva criticises the way the concept deals with Latvia's Russian minority. Instead of seeking a positive identification of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia, it proposes a forced unification of the population, such as the erection of monuments to Latvian history and the suppression of the Russian language in the Latvian media.

Estonia - according to plan

In Estonia, a new defence plan for the years 2024 to 2027 was approved by the Estonian Minister of Defence Hanno Pevkur on 18 July 2023. The plan is based on the ten-year plan for the development of national defence in Estonia until 2031, which was submitted in 2021. The aim is to ensure that the goals set out in the ten-year plan are achieved within the specified timeframe and that the necessary resources are provided. The defined objectives have been developed on the basis of the military recommendations of the Commander-in-Chief of the Estonian Defence Forces (Eesti Kaitsevägi) and the requirements of NATO's Force Capability Goals. The defence plan provides for a number of concrete measures to enhance Estonia's defence capabilities. Overall, more than 50 per cent of the defence budget will be spent on new acquisitions, such as medium-range artillery and air defence systems. These are intended to secure the entire Estonian territory. New armoured vehicles, self-propelled artillery, HIMARS multiple launch rocket systems and anti-

ship missiles will be procured over a four-year period.

The Estonian Defence League (Estonian: Kaitseliit), a volunteer military association of trained and armed civilians of the Estonian armed forces, will also receive a budget of around €300 million. Of this amount, 65 million euros is earmarked for new acquisitions to support territorial defence. In order to strengthen the defence and resistance, a division (a large military group of several thousand people) has also been set up, which will include a British brigade (between 1,000 and 5,000 people). Britain is in charge of the NATO troops stationed in Estonia. The total strength of the defence forces is to be increased from 26,700 to 43,700 soldiers.

Saving motivation with a new crisis reserve?

In connection with the new defence concept, a so-called national defence service or crisis reserve is also being discussed in Estonia. In the election manifesto for the parliamentary elections in May 2023, the reform party of Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, which is now in power, called for a debate on such a defence service. The idea is to give every Estonian citizen the opportunity to participate in the defence of the state. The public broadcaster and newspapers have also taken up the issue, and representatives of the parties represented in Parliament have expressed their support for the principle of such a defence service. On 19 December 2023, the Defence Committee of the Parliament discussed the idea and listened to various experts. Brigadier General and Head of the Armed Forces Academy, Vahur Karus, also gave positive feedback on the idea from the military side.

Young people who have to do military service could join this defence service or crisis reserve. However, they would not serve directly in the army, but in civilian service or in the field of internal security. This is comparable to civilian service. Conscripts can choose to do civilian service instead of military service for moral or religious reasons. However, the current civilian service is widely criticised for failing to motivate those performing the service. The new defence service is expected to solve this problem and develop a new motivation to maintain civil society in times of war. As the majority of conscripts have not yet been called up, thousands of people would

be available for military service. Women are also being considered. There are, however, those who doubt that such an obligation would actually lead to greater motivation for civic engagement among young people.

Estonia has by far the most ambitious goals when it comes to defence spending as a percentage of GDP. In 2023, the Estonians spent 2.85 per cent of their GDP on defence. By 2024, Estonia wants to pass the 3 percent threshold and spend around 3.2 per cent of its GDP on defence. By 2027, a total of more than €5.6 billion will be invested in the defence budget, ensuring a regular annual budget of more than 3 percent of GDP.

Conclusion: The Baltic States - A Role Model?

One thing is clear: the threat from Russia can be felt on a daily basis in the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. With the attack on Ukraine and the associated questioning of international borders, the Baltic states recognise the real danger of a Russian attack and an assault on their independence. This is intensified by the danger of a decline in military and financial support for Ukraine from its Western allies. Nobody knows exactly what form this attack will take (military, hybrid, on the digital battlefield). That is why the response of the three states is deliberately broad but consistent: The three Baltic states have responded to the changed security situation with their security concepts. These concepts are embedded in long-term planning. This reflects the conviction that the conflict with Russia is not a short-term one, and that this is the only way - in close coordination with NATO - to ensure their national security.

The concrete plans in the defence concepts focus on military armament. The purchase of air defence systems, for example, is intended to underline the country's defensive capabilities and increase deterrence. However, civilian elements are also being integrated into the strategies. Civil society is becoming more involved in national defence. This is a blueprint for other countries, especially Germany. But it must be said that the societies of the three Baltic states are generally more open to this. Nevertheless, there is no lack of communication and explanation in the political sphere that this is in the interest of the security of

each individual citizen. This is a basic prerequisite for a resilient society with the corresponding awareness.

The Baltic states remain committed to NATO and aim to spend three per cent of their gross domestic product on defence. They are working towards this goal with determination and careful planning. The behaviour of the three Baltic states can serve as a model for other countries and NATO members, particularly in defence matters. In Germany, for example, spending at least two per cent of GDP on defence has been a problem for years. This will not be the case in 2023 either, and the two per cent will only be reached in 2024 if expenditure from other ministries is classified as "defence-related". The ifo-Institute (Leibniz Institute for Economic Research at the University of Munich) estimates that 1.7 per cent of German GDP will be spent on defence in 2024. The need and the associated will and commitment of the Baltic states to defend their countries against an

attack by the aggressor Russia should be taken seriously and understood as a point of reference in Germany and throughout NATO. Sustainable deterrence of Russia and other threats is only possible by building up our own defence capabilities. The three countries have recognised this. After all, they were right once before about the threat from Russia.

Attached:

An overview in tabular form of the most important measures of the defence concepts and national defence expenditure.

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Tabular overview of the most important measures of the Baltic defence strategies

Estonia



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Defence budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2023 – EUR 600 mill. • 2024 – EUR 1,33 bill. ➤ more than EUR 5.6 billion for defence from 2024 to 2027
GDP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2023 - 2.85% of GDP for defence • 2024 - 3.2% of GDP • from 2024: annually more than 3 per cent of GDP for defence
Military actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more than 50 per cent of the defence budget spent on new acquisitions (artillery and air defence systems, new armoured vehicles, self-propelled artillery, HIMARS multiple launch rocket systems and anti-ship missiles) • EUR 300 million budget for Estonian defence alliance • formation of a division with a British brigade • increase in armed forces from 26,700 to 43,700 personnel
Civil actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discussion on defence service/crisis reserve in civilian agencies and internal security

Lithuania



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Defence budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2023 – EUR 1,7 bill. • 2024 – EUR 2,06 bill.
GDP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2023 – 2.52 % of GDP for defence • 2024 – 2.71% of GDP ➤ more than 3 per cent of GDP for defence by 2027 at the latest
Military actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • defence of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lithuania • comprehensive mobilisation exercise in 2024 • involvement of global players in national mobilisation preparations • acquisition of new defence systems
Civil actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mobilising and organising civil resistance • protection of strategic sectors, material and immaterial assets and supply of essential goods and services to the population • developing a system for training the Lithuanian population for civil resistance • establishment of National General Defence Council



Defence budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2023 – EUR 986 mill. 2024 – EUR 1,3 bill.
GDP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2023 – 2.25 % of GDP for defence 2024 – 2.4% of GDP 2025 – 2.5% of GDP ➤ more than 3 per cent of GDP for defence by 2027 at the latest
Military actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> enhancing protection against cyber threats and foreign intelligence and security services strengthening Latvia's, NATO's and the EU's external borders and improving the State Border Guard's capabilities strengthening the national defence system and the defence capabilities of the National Defence Forces (NBS) enhancement of air defence, coastal defence, long-range rocket artillery and unmanned aerial vehicles. introduction of new armoured infantry fighting vehicles increase the size of the armed forces to 31,000 active personnel and 30,000 in reserve strengthened NATO presence
Civil actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> support local industry for ammunition production reintroduction of military service from 1st of January 2024 for men between the ages of 18 and 27. introduction of national defence education all public media content to be in Latvian and a language of the European cultural area only (Russian is not included). standardisation of society by suppressing the Russian language and honouring Latvian history through the erection of monuments

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