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North-eastern flank

Militarisation of the Baltic frontier

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DIIS REPORT 2025: 04

North-eastern flank

MILITARISATION OF THE BALTIC FRONTIER

Veronika Slakaityte and Izabela Surwillo

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BALTNET	Baltic Air Surveillance Network
BALTRON	Baltic Naval Squadron
BMS	Battle Management System
BSI	Baltic Security Initiative
CVR(T)	Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance (Tracked)
EDCA	Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement
eFP	Enhanced Forward Presence
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HNS	Host Nation Support
HQ	Headquarters
IBCS	Integrated Battle Command System
IFV	Infantry Fighting Vehicle
JCIDS	Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System
JLTVs	Joint Light Tactical Vehicles
LŠS	Lietuvos Šaulių Sąjunga ('Lithuanian Riflemen's Union')
MLRS	Multiple Launch Rocket Systems
MNC-NE	Multinational Corps Northeast
MND N	Multinational Division North
NASAMS	National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PGZ	Polska Grupa Zbrojeniowa ('Polish Armaments Group')
PfP	Partnership for Peace
PPBE	Planning, Programming, Budgeting and Execution
PzH	Panzerhaubitze ('Armoured')
SNMG1	Standing NATO Maritime Group 1
SOF	Special Operations Force
TDF	Territorial Defence Forces
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VJTF	Very High Readiness Joint Task Force

ABSTRACT

As part of a two-volume series, this report provides a critical analysis of NATO's north-eastern flank – Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – as a vital bulwark against evolving Russian threats. It examines how the four countries have transitioned from post-Soviet vulnerabilities into pivotal contributors to NATO's collective defence through unprecedented military modernisation, strategic infrastructure development and societal resilience. Shaped by their history of external domination and the pressing need to counter regional threats, these countries have integrated NATO forces and operationalised total defence strategies. All four states have well exceeded NATO's 2% GDP defence spending benchmark and are aiming for 5% and above in the coming years. Enhanced deterrence frameworks, including NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and joint regional capabilities, have fortified the region's capacity to counter conventional and hybrid threats. Despite these advancements, critical gaps in civil defence infrastructure and resource mobilisation remain. This report analyses the region's indispensable role in NATO's deterrence-by-denial strategy and offers actionable recommendations to address vulnerabilities, ensuring sustained readiness and the Alliance's long-term security posture.

NATO Military unit hierarchy: symbols, functions and strengths

NATO symbol	Military unit	Function	Strength
XXXXXX	Theatre	Theatre command	1,000,000–10,000,000
XXXXX	Army Group	Front command	400,000–1,000,000
XXXX	Theatre Army	Command	100,000–200,000
XXX	Corps	Formation	20,000–60,000
XX	Division	Formation	6,000–25,000
X	Brigade	Formation	3,000–5,000
III	Regiment Group	Unit	1,000–3,000
II	Battalion/Squadron	Unit	300–1,000
I	Company/Battery/Troop	Unit/sub-unit	100–250
•••	Platoon	Sub sub-unit	20–50
••	Section/Patrol	Sub sub-unit	12–24
•	Squad	Sub sub-unit	6–12
Ø	Crew	Sub sub-unit	2–4

Source: NATO 2023b, 825–26.

INTRODUCTION

On 12th December 2024, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte underscored the need for Allies to adopt a wartime mindset, urging an acceleration of defence production and spending to address the growing security threats posed by Russia. Highlighting the scale of the challenge, Rutte warned that NATO is not sufficiently prepared for the intensified confrontation expected within the next four to five years (NATO 2024b). Similarly, on 20th January 2025, the European Commissioner for Defence and Space Andrius Kubilius emphasised the necessity of transformative action in European defence readiness. Drawing from historical precedents like Jean Monnet's 'Victory Plan', he stressed that Europe faces an existential challenge that demands immediate and coordinated responses (European Commission 2025). Meanwhile, Europe grapples with a staggering disparity in its defence posture and production vis-à-vis Russia.

Although EU defence spending has reached record levels annually since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (European Defence Agency 2024), the conflict has also exposed the extent to which European armed forces and defence industries remain ill-prepared for high-intensity warfare. Munitions stockpiles in major allied countries were critically low – insufficient to sustain more than three days of active combat. While Europe retains a clear technological edge over Russia, its defence industrial base remains fragmented and slow to scale. In contrast, Russia's state-directed military-industrial complex currently holds a distinct advantage in surge capacity, producing an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 tanks annually – approximately twice the combined output of Europe's five largest producers (Matchavariani 2024). In its February 2025 assessment, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service warned that, once the war in Ukraine concludes, Russia could reconstitute its military within two years to a level capable of challenging one or more NATO states – unless

the Alliance significantly strengthens its forces and reaffirms the credibility of Article 5 (Forsvarsministeriet 2025). At present, much of Europe's military infrastructure – including roads, railways, and ports – remains inadequate for rapid force mobilisation. Simultaneously, European states face a persistent wave of hybrid threats, ranging from sabotage and cyberattacks to disinformation campaigns, electoral interference, and covert operations along NATO's eastern periphery.

NATO responded by activating plans to reinforce its north-eastern flank and increasing its forward deployments. The new geopolitical context also highlighted the critical need for Allied nations to enhance manufacturing, resolve stockpile deficiencies, and reinforce NATO's strategic edge (Wolff et al. 2024). However, the strain on resources also revealed the depth of Europe's dependency on external suppliers, particularly the United States. For instance, in 2022 the EU countries sourced 78% of their weapons externally, nearly 80% of them from the US (Dmitrieva 2025). This dependency came into sharp focus after Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025. The Trump administration's renewed diplomatic engagement with Russia, coupled with explicit scepticism toward NATO's collective defence obligations, has reignited European anxieties regarding the United States commitment to NATO, forcing them to reassess their strategic reliance on Washington for security (Depetris 2025). Trump's repeated assertions that US protection is conditional on European financial contributions have pushed NATO's European members to accelerate investment and pursue greater strategic autonomy (Naishadham 2025), while also reigniting doubts about the credibility of Article 5. The recent US proposal for NATO Allies to raise defence spending to 5% of GDP has further strained transatlantic relations, prompting concern over its feasibility, economic impact and strategic rationale. In response, the NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has suggested a future defence spending target of 3.7% of GDP (Kirkegaard 2025). While most Allies see these targets as excessive, the four frontline states are committed to further increases due to the direct Russian threat: Estonia and Lithuania aim for 5% by 2026, Latvia by 2028, and Poland has already set 4.7% for 2025 – the highest in the Alliance (Euronews and EBU 2025; Eurotopics 2025; TVP World 2025; BNS 2025b).

Despite divergent national defence budgets, heightened security concerns have pushed European defence policy from rhetoric to action – exemplified by proposals such as the €800 billion *Rearm Europe* programme, announced on 4 March 2025. This initiative aims to channel increased national defence spending over the next four years into procurement and defence-industrial capabilities (Soler 2025). This marks a historic recalibration of European security policy, aligning with Kubilius'

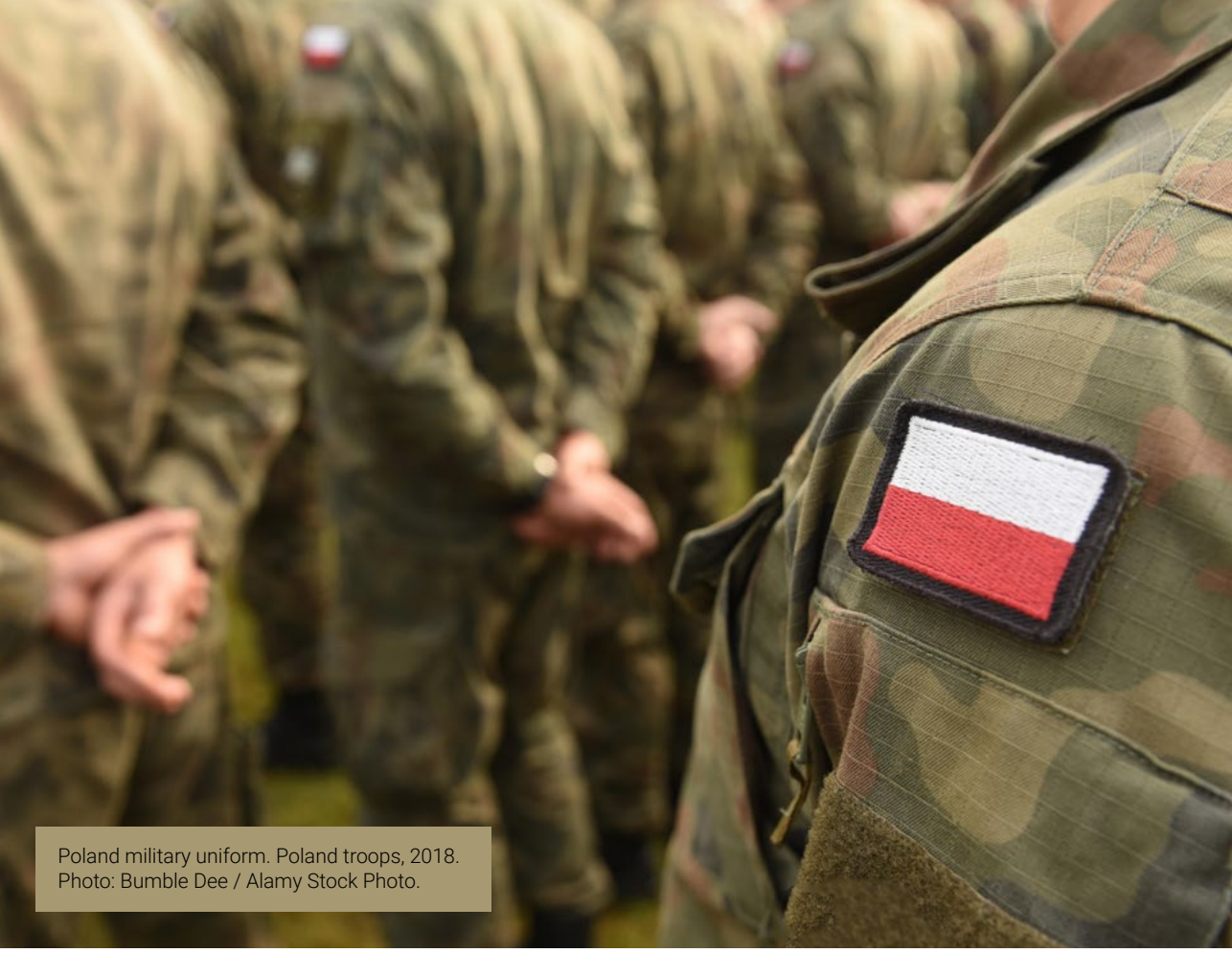
earlier call for €500 billion in military investment, reinforced missile defence and space security (Christie 2025). The continent will also follow the *European Defence Industrial Strategy*, led by Kubilius since March 2024, which aims to shift procurement to at least 50% within Europe by 2030 and 60% by 2035 (Dmitrieva 2025). These rearmament efforts reflect the urgency among European NATO members to enhance self-sufficiency and reorient their strategic posture in response to Russia's expanding military-industrial capacity and long-term revisionist ambitions. While European leaders remain committed to transatlantic cooperation, Trump's rhetoric has accelerated a paradigm shift in the EU's defence posture, compelling even former sceptics to acknowledge the necessity of military investment and strategic autonomy. As NATO adapts to evolving threats, the focus remains on capability-driven investment, ensuring efficiency and interoperability, rather than rigid spending benchmarks.

Amid these ongoing challenges, NATO's north-eastern flank emerges as a linchpin of the Alliance's collective defence. In the context of this report, the term refers specifically to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. While some academic and strategic literature includes additional countries within this category, these lie beyond the scope of this analysis. Once a Soviet frontier, today the north-eastern flank has transformed into a critical buffer against Russian aggression, marked by accelerated military modernisation, enhanced societal resilience, and deepening integration into NATO's deterrence frameworks.

This report analyses the security and defence developments in the four country cases, in the context of their unique historical trajectories and geopolitical considerations. While united by their pursuit of NATO and EU membership as pillars of their security framework, each country has adopted a distinct approach to shared challenges. Against the backdrop of heightened threats from Russia – exacerbated by the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine – the report evaluates accelerated defence investments, critical infrastructure upgrades, and integration with NATO structures. Each case study highlights the evolution of military capabilities and the operationalisation of total defence strategies while identifying key milestones and persistent vulnerabilities along NATO's north-eastern flank.

This report is not a military-operational analysis, but a strategic and policy-oriented assessment grounded in academic research, policy literature, media reporting, and publicly available datasets from national statistics agencies and international organisations. Given the rapidly changing security environment, its scope covers the period from the early 1990s to 18 March 2025, with developments beyond this date

not reflected. To ensure consistency, accuracy, and analytical rigour, all financial figures are presented in euros,[1] with NATO datasets serving as the primary reference for defence expenditures. Where applicable, NATO estimates are substituted with official government data from the case study countries to reflect the most precise and up-to-date figures. As part of a two-volume analysis (see *Northern horizon: strengthening security in the Baltic Sea region* for complementary insights), this report can be read alongside its companion volume for a comprehensive regional overview, as a standalone assessment, or by focusing on individual case studies. It delivers both a strategic overview and in-depth, case-specific assessments, equipping policymakers with multi-level analysis for informed decision-making.



Poland military uniform. Poland troops, 2018.
Photo: Bumble Dee / Alamy Stock Photo.

POLAND

On 4 June 1989 Poland's partially free elections ended communist rule, igniting democratic transitions across Eastern Europe. Led by the Solidarity movement, Poland prioritised Euro-Atlantic integration and resilience against Eastern threats, which became a cornerstone of regional security and stability.

Economic outlook

Since the fall of communism in 1989 Poland has transformed into a strong, market-based economy. Its GDP between EU membership in 2004 and COVID-ridden 2020 has increased by around 150% (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2004; 2020). Poland was also the only EU country to avoid recession during the 2008 financial crisis due to conservative fiscal policies, a diversified industry, and cautious banking. EU structural funds have also been crucial, with Poland receiving close to €250 billion by 2023 (Portal Funduszy Europejskich 2024) and access to an additional €137 billion in 2024 (Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów 2024), making it the top recipient of EU funding. Currently, the EU's sixth-largest economy, Poland has been investing in modernisation of its military and the country is also in the process of building the largest land army in the EU.

MILITARY FORCES: FORMATION, STRUCTURE AND ENHANCEMENTS

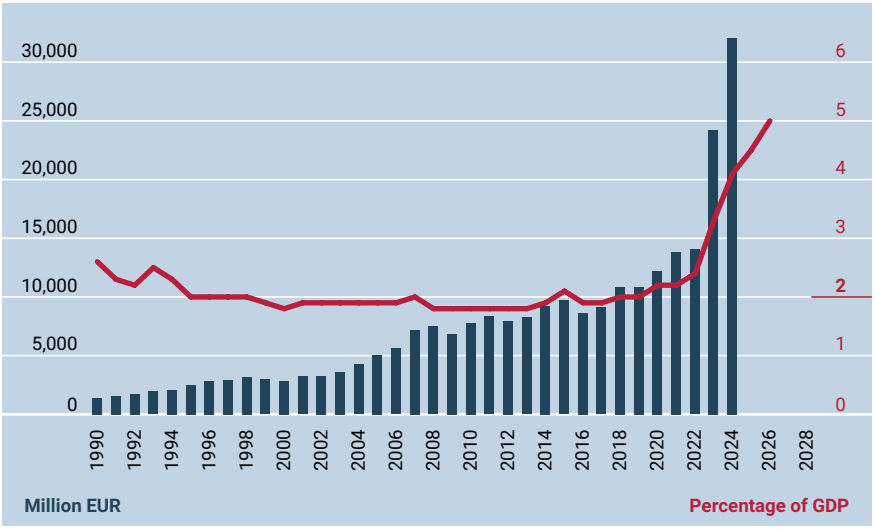
The Cold War-era Polish People's Army, primarily a conscript force with around 400,000 active-duty personnel at its peak (Rochowicz 2019), emphasised mass mobilisation with armoured and mechanised units, using Soviet-era hardware like T-72 tanks and MiG fighter jets. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Poland started to slowly reorient its military towards Western standards, albeit the process was gradual. In the early 1990s Poland received large quantities of leftover East German military equipment from reunified Germany, including BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles, T-72 tanks, artillery and support vehicles. These transfers – conducted largely between 1991 and 1995 – were either donated or provided at a steep discount and allowed Poland to modernise its forces at low cost (Nassauer 1995; McCloud 2024). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s modernisation was slow and largely incremental. Poland maintained a core of Soviet-era hardware – MiG-29s, Su-22s, T-72M1s, and BMP-1s – while attempting limited upgrades such as the PT-91 'Twardy' tank, a domestic modernisation of the T-72 (Cieślak 2024). Efforts to acquire modern Western systems were constrained by budget limits until the early 2000s.

Signing of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) framework document by Poland in 1994 initiated efforts to elevate Poland's political, legal, institutional and military standards, leveraging PfP mechanisms to build interoperability with NATO forces (Pszczel

2024). This transformation also marked a fundamental doctrinal shift – from Warsaw Pact-era emphasis on mass mobilisation and territorial defence towards NATO-compatible force structures focused on flexibility, joint operations, and expeditionary capability. Early in its NATO alignment Poland prioritised participation in peacekeeping and stabilisation missions, such as in Bosnia and Afghanistan, to learn NATO procedures and enhance interoperability. These efforts were underpinned by a commitment to democratic control of the military, enshrined in the 1997 constitution, which declared the armed forces neutral in political matters and subject to civilian oversight (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 1997). Poland joined NATO in 1999.

Since the early 2000s Poland has pursued a comprehensive modernisation programme, systematically acquiring advanced Western systems such as Leopard 2 tanks, F-16 fighter jets and Patriot missile defence systems. Conscription was formally suspended in 2009 (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2009). While Poland achieved partial mobilisation by the early 2010s, it still relied heavily on the legacy systems, and critical capability gaps remained in air defence, naval strength and mechanised infantry support, with many formations still using upgraded Soviet-era platforms (Cieślak 2024). By 2011 the Polish army had reduced its size to less than 100,000 active-duty personnel (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli 2012, 7).

Figure 1. Defence spending in million EUR and as a percentage of GDP



Source: Dataset compiled by Slakaityte 2025a.

Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 started to reorient Polish defence policy again. Poland's consistently good economic performance allowed for the increase in military expenditure in the following decade (see Figure 1), albeit this process only accelerated in the late 2010s. Poland went from €9 billion of defence expenditure in 2014 (NATO 2024c) to €37 billion (PLN 158 billion) in 2024 and €43.5 billion (PLN 186.6 billion) in the 2025 budget (Ministry of Finance 2024), effectively more than quintupling its defence spending within eleven years. The growth of the Polish armed forces followed a similar trajectory. The number of the military personal, which amounted to around 99,000 at the time of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, grew to 166,800 in 2021 (NATO 2024c), reaching approximately 206,000 in 2024 (Polska Zbrojna 2025), making it the third-largest army in NATO (after the US and Turkey) and the largest among NATO members in the EU (NATO 2024c).

Although Poland's defence budget fluctuated around NATO's required 2% of GDP during the 2010s (NATO 2024c), the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 set Poland on a path toward greater military investment and strategic expansion. Polish defence budget as a percentage of GDP reached 3.26% in 2023 (Slakaityte 2025a) – amounting to 8.12% of Polish government spending that year (SIPRI 2023a). In 2024, defence spending amounted to 4.2% of GDP (€37 billion) with over half of that budget allocated to the modernisation of the armed forces (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej 2024c). Poland's defence budget is projected to reach 4.7% of GDP in 2025 (Gov.pl 2024). By the end of March 2025 Poland's defence spending stood at 4.48% of GDP – the highest share among all NATO states (KAM 2025a).

Enhancing domestic defence has also involved numerous reforms and strategic initiatives in recent years. A significant milestone in Poland's military development was the creation of the Territorial Defence Forces (TDF) in 2017. Designed as a reserve force to bolster homeland defence, the TDF enhances Poland's capacity to respond to hybrid threats and provides a critical link between the professional armed forces and local communities. In April 2022 the *Homeland Defence Act* was enacted, built on three pillars: increased funding, a new defence concept, and expanding the Polish Armed Forces (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2022). The Act has introduced voluntary military service, which includes 28 days of basic training followed by up to 11 months of specialised training. This initiative aims to expand the Polish Armed Forces to approximately 300,000 soldiers by 2035, comprising around 250,000 professional soldiers and 50,000 members of the TDF (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej 2024c).

The Polish Army is not only growing in numbers but is also becoming increasingly modernised. The *Technical Modernization Plan for the Polish Army* for 2021–35 plans to allocate a record €122.1 billion for new weapons and military equipment (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, n.d.-a). Every branch of the Polish Armed Forces is undergoing significant modernisation (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej 2023). The Land Forces are strengthening their capabilities with new acquisitions, including 250 Abrams tanks from the US set for delivery by end of 2026 (Vandiver 2025), and 180 K2 Black Panther tanks from South Korea, to be delivered by end of 2025 (Army Recognition 2024a). Additionally, K9 howitzers from South Korea are being integrated, with full delivery expected by 2026. These purchases are intended to supplement domestic production. Polish Armaments Group (*Polska Grupa Zbrojeniowa* in Polish, PGZ), a state-owned holding company established in 2013, which comprises of over 50 Polish defence enterprises, plays a key role in reinforcing Poland's defence industrial base (www.money.pl 2022). As the largest defence consortium in Poland, PGZ has a broad portfolio that includes the production of weapons, ammunition, and advanced defence technologies (PGZ 2025). PGZ both ensures key capabilities, such as those developed under the Borsuk infantry fighting vehicle and the Narew air defence system, and engages in strategic partnerships with international firms, such as Hyundai Rotem, to support local production and servicing of K2 tanks (www.money.pl 2024). Alongside PGZ, private firms such as WB Group and Nitro-Chem are gaining prominence in areas like drones, communications and explosives, helping diversify and expand Poland's defence industrial base (Prus 2024; Army Technology, n.d.).

The Polish Navy is also progressing with its plan to build multi-role frigates, with the first ship entering construction in January 2024 (Dziennik Zbrojny 2024). New Kormoran mine countermeasure vessels have also already been commissioned (Ciślak 2024). Plans are underway for the Orka submarine programme, although specific contracts are still being finalised (Dziennik Zbrojny 2023c). Additionally, the construction of the first Delfin-class reconnaissance vessel began in 2024 as part of a two-vessel order (Ciślak 2022).

In the Air Force, modernisation includes the acquisition of F-35 fighter jets, with deliveries scheduled from 2024 through 2030 (Sabak 2020), and Apache helicopters, pending finalisation after US State Department approval (Pacholski 2024). FA-50 light combat aircraft have already been received, with additional units arriving through 2028. Furthermore, Poland's aviation fleet has been enhanced with AW101, AW149, and Black Hawk helicopters (Dziennik Zbrojny 2023b; 2023a; Szopa 2023). In a notable advancement, Poland completed the acquisition of two Saab 340 early

warning and control aircraft from Sweden in 2024 – its first airborne surveillance platforms of this kind. After extensive crew training, the aircraft achieved initial operational readiness in September, with the first combat mission flown on 27th November 2024 near the Belarusian and Kaliningrad borders (Defence Express 2024).

The ongoing war in Ukraine highlighted the importance of air defence and Poland is making significant progress in strengthening its air and missile defence capabilities. Through the WISŁA programme, the country is deploying the Patriot missile defence system, which will provide robust protection against long-range missile threats, with initial deliveries completed and key components scheduled to arrive between 2024 and 2029 (Army Recognition 2024b). The Mała Narew programme, which began deploying systems in 2023, adds an additional layer of security by focusing on short-range air defence, ensuring critical infrastructure and military assets are better protected, with full implementation planned by 2035 (Army Recognition 2023). To bring it all together, Poland is implementing the Integrated Battle Command System (IBCS). Adopted in 2024, this advanced technology ensures seamless integration of diverse defence systems. Poland, the second country after the US to implement it, aims for full deployment by 2031 (Adamowski 2024).

Over the years Poland has bolstered its security by deepening ties with NATO and the US, advocating for a greater military presence, including a permanent US base and missile defence systems (see Table 1). On 15 August 2020, Poland's Minister of National Defence, Mariusz Błaszczak, and US Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo, signed the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) to bolster the US troop presence in Poland (Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Poland 2020). At the June 2022 NATO summit, President Joe Biden announced the first permanent US military presence in Poland, including the US Army V Corps Forward Command Post, an Army garrison headquarters, and a field support battalion (United States Department of State 2025). These forces strengthen NATO's eastern flank, enhancing command, interoperability and prepositioned equipment management. Currently, approximately 10,000 US troops are stationed in Poland on a rotational basis.

Table 1. NATO and US military presence in Poland

Military structures in Poland		Location	Established
Allied structures	NATO Joint Force Training Centre	Bydgoszcz	2004
	3rd NATO Signal Battalion	Bydgoszcz	2010
	NATO Military Police Centre of Excellence	Bydgoszcz	2013
	NATO Force Integration Unit	Bydgoszcz	2015
	NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group	Bemowo Piskie	2017
	NATO Counterintelligence Centre of Excellence	Kraków	2017
American structures	US Combat and Logistics Support Component	Powidz	2017
	Division Command	Bolesławiec	2017
	US Armoured Brigade Combat Team	Żagań (HQ) and other locations	2017
	Combat Sustainment Support Battalion	Powidz	2017
	Equipment Storage and Maintenance Complex	Powidz	2019
	Forward Command of the US Army V Corps	Poznań	2020
	Units deployed after the war in Ukraine	Rzeszów Jasionka	2022
	US Army Garrison Poland	Various	2023
	Missile Defence Base	Redzikowo	2024
Other multinational structures	Multinational Corps Northeast Headquarters	Szczecin	1999
	Lithuanian–Polish–Ukrainian Brigade HQ	Lublin	2015
	Multinational Division Northeast Headquarters	Elbląg	2017

Source: Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, n.d.-b.

In recent years Poland has enhanced its military infrastructure and increased its troop presence in its eastern regions, closer to the borders with Russia and Belarus, amidst the worsening security situation in the eastern neighbourhood. The weaponisation of migrants at the Belarusian border as a hybrid warfare tactic since 2021 prompted Poland to construct a 5.5-metre high steel wall along the Belarusian border in 2022, extending approximately 186 kilometres (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji 2022). In late 2022 Poland also built a three-row razor wire barrier measuring 3 meters wide and 2.5 meters high, and between 2022 and 2024, completed a 200 kilometres electronic barrier along its border with Russia's Kaliningrad exclave (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej 2022; Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji 2023). The most ambitious step came in May 2024 with the launch of the 'Eastern Shield' (*Tarcza Wschód* in Polish) initiative. This comprehensive defence programme represents one of the largest investments in Polish national security since World War II, with a planned budget of approximately €2.3 billion, allocated over four years (2024–28) (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej 2024a). It includes the construction of modern physical barriers, enhanced surveillance systems and anti-tank defences designed to deter and delay hostile actions. Additionally, the initiative incorporates advanced electronic warfare systems including imagery and signals intelligence, acoustic monitoring, and artificial intelligence-driven data analysis to boost operational awareness and response capabilities. The Eastern Shield will cover nearly 700 kilometres of Poland's eastern border, with fortification infrastructure of varying complexity planned for approximately 400 to 500 kilometres of that stretch (Ibid.). Poland has committed national funding to the programme and is also seeking financial support from the European Union and NATO.

In April 2024, in response to the militarisation of Kaliningrad and Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, Polish President Andrzej Duda expressed Poland's readiness to host nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear sharing policy as a part of potential NATO eastern flank reinforcement (Chiappa 2014). In March 2025 – together with the Baltic States – Poland announced their withdrawal from the 1997 Ottawa Convention, which bans the use of anti-personnel mines (Reuters 2025).

The Polish defence and foreign policy has been supported by domestic public opinion. As of autumn 2024, Poles were strongly in favour of reinforcing the EU's military equipment production capacity (83%), increasing military spending within the EU (81%), and stronger cooperation within the EU on defence matters (85%) (Eurobarometer 2024).

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Poland's geopolitical location and historical context have fostered a strong perception of the Russian threat, with 94% of Poles expressing concern following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This sentiment remained high at 85% by autumn 2024 (Eurobarometer 2024).

While the military sector is undergoing modernisation and expansion, there is a concerning lack of civil defence infrastructure in Poland, including the air strike alert system and evacuation plans for civilians, while new shelters are not being constructed. Data from 2022 indicated that only 3.78% of the population (1.4 million people) could find space in the existing protective structures. Official government data listed 224,113 emergency shelters and 10,622 protective structures nationwide – including 903 shelters and 8,719 hiding places (Bińczyk 2024). However, 68% of the shelters and over half of the hiding places inspected did not meet the required technical standards (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli 2024).

The *Act on Civil Protection and Civil Defence* came into effect in January 2025 with the aim of addressing these gaps. The act outlines responsibilities and structures for protecting the population in both peace and wartime and includes provisions on planning, threat detection, warning systems, the use of collective protection facilities, and the organisation of civil defence (Ujazdowski 2025). Municipalities must prepare evacuation plans and leverage existing structures such as the national firefighting and rescue system, crisis management bodies, medical services, and non-governmental organisations. Crucially, the Act emphasises shelter planning, construction and maintenance. Authorities must ensure capacity for 50% of urban and 25% of rural populations during emergencies (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji 2024b). The shelters must comply with safety standards and have a dual-use friendly functionality, with public transit systems like subways, serving as potential facilities. Up to 100% financial support is available for construction, upgrades and maintenance, with clear protocols to inform the public of shelter locations in emergencies. At least 0.3% of GDP is allocated to new civil protection measures (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji 2024a).

Citizens are also encouraged to be ready to sustain themselves for 72 hours in crises. In April 2022 the Government Centre for Security released a civil preparedness guide titled *Be Prepared – A Guide for Times of Crisis and War* (Rządowe Centrum Bezpieczeństwa 2022). This guide offers practical advice for civilians on preparing for and responding to crises, including natural disasters, power outages and wartime

scenarios. It emphasises creating emergency plans, assembling survival kits with essential supplies, staying informed through reliable communication channels, and practicing key safety measures such as first aid, responding to alarms, and ensuring personal and family safety.

Additionally, civilians have a chance to experience military training and learn about army life through two new programmes offered by the Polish Army. 'Train with the Army' provides basic weekend sessions on skills like fitness and combat, while 'Train like a Soldier' offers a more immersive and extended training experience (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej 2023). Both programmes aim to strengthen military-public ties, raise awareness of military service and promote national defence readiness. Moreover, in 2024 the army started running 'Vacations with the Army', a voluntary military training programme for young Poles, which includes 27-days of training over the summer for a monetary compensation (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej 2024b).

Lithuanian military uniform. Lithuania troops, 2018.
Photo: Bumble Dee / Alamy Stock Photo.

LITHUANIA

On 11 March 1990, Lithuania adopted the *Act of the Re-Establishment of the State*, restoring its independence and legal continuity based on interwar sovereignty. Rejecting the Soviet occupation initiated by the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in 1940, Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to declare independence, sparking nationalist movements across the USSR.

Economic outlook

Lithuania underwent major economic transformations in the 1990s. In 1990 its GDP was under €39 million (Lukaitytė-Vnarauskienė 2008), or just €10 per capita, with inflation surging to 383% in 1991 and 1,163% in 1992 (Kuodis 2008). The economy progressed through three phases: transitioning from a planned to a market economy (1990–94); restructuring and shifting trade to Western Europe (1995–97); and accelerated growth from the 2000s, interrupted by a significant GDP contraction of -14.84% during the 2009 financial crisis (Gruzevskis and Blaziene 2005, 65; Worldometer 2024). By 2024 Lithuania's GDP reached €77.8 billion (BSN 2025), with nominal GDP per capita of €27,197 (Focus Economics 2024). Despite early volatility, Lithuania's rapid economic expansion has solidified its position as a resilient and integrated European economy.

MILITARY FORCES: FORMATION, STRUCTURE AND ENHANCEMENTS

Lithuania's geopolitical position – bordered by Belarus and the Kaliningrad region – has made defence a national priority. Between 1992 and 1994 public opinion reflected fears of invasion and economic coercion by Russia, with 60% supporting closer NATO ties and 57% favouring membership (Bajarunas 1995, 104–5). In August 1993 Lithuania still housed 35,000 Russian troops, 1,000 tanks, and 180 aircraft (Andriškevičius 2014, 170), whose withdrawal required substantial international pressure from the UN, EU and US (Rudzitis 1999, 161–62). In 1994 President Brazauskas formally requested NATO membership and Lithuania joined the 'Partnership for Peace', signalling its commitment to the Alliance and its contribution to NATO-led peacekeeping missions (NATO 1997). In 1995, NATO supported the creation of the Baltic Battalion in Latvia, followed by Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON) and Baltic Air Surveillance Network (BALTNET) (Kyrychenko 2021, 79). The US–Baltic Charter of Partnership, signed on 16 January 1998, committed US support for the accession of the Baltic States to NATO and EU, providing military aid, Green Beret training, and a €17.3 million Congressional package to modernise Baltic defence forces (Rudzitis 1999, 167). Over the next decade, Lithuania demonstrated that NATO membership posed no threat to Russia and secured its full participation in Euro-Atlantic processes (Čekuolis 2003).

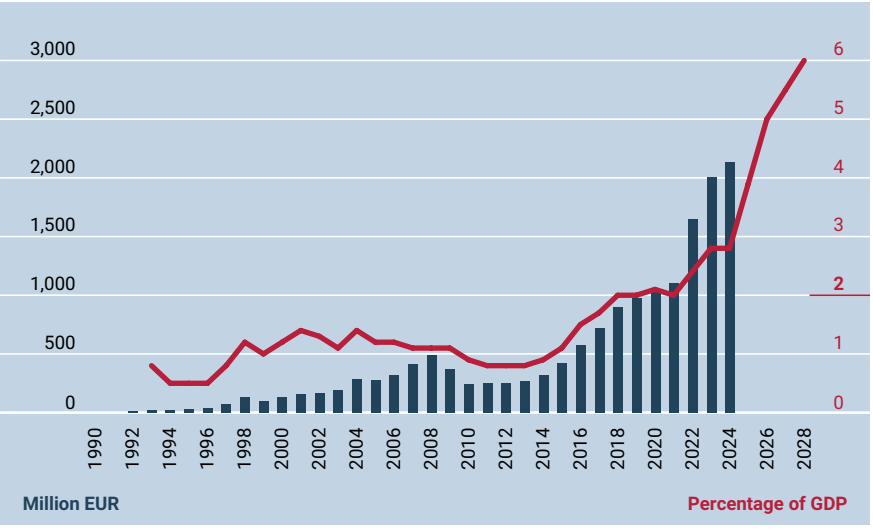
The 2002 NATO Prague Summit solidified Lithuania's integration into the Western security framework, dispelling early scepticism about Baltic membership destabilising the region. Lithuania's strategic location and its defence reforms, including its first National Security Strategy (2002), showcased its commitment to Euro-Atlantic security. Legislative changes facilitated military cooperation with NATO and EU states, while diplomatic efforts with Russia – including joint exercises and arms control – helped ease geopolitical tensions at the time.

During its early independence some doubted Lithuania's ability to establish its own forces due to destruction of military hardware by the departing Russian troops, instead suggesting reliance on external guarantees. Lithuania, however, prioritised building its defence capabilities. The 'Iron Wolf' motorised infantry brigade became the military backbone, supported by a navy with light anti-submarine frigates and an air force with Czech-made aircraft (Bajarunas 1995, 115–16). Conscription and territorial defence were key pillars. By 2002 Lithuania had 4 infantry brigades, a logistics brigade, 12 specialised battalions, 10 territorial defence units, and approximately 38,000 personnel (Šlekys 2017, 45). This extensive military spending was later criticised as a bid for NATO membership rather than a commitment to long-term defence (Jokubauskas 2015, 147). Despite challenges transitioning from Soviet-era practices, Lithuania's limited international deployments from 1994 carried strong political significance. Post-NATO accession, priorities shifted to its *National Security Strategy*, emphasising NATO operations, international exercises, and arms control. Simultaneously, EU accession marked a key economic milestone and affirmed Lithuania's integration as a modern liberal democracy in the West.

Upon NATO accession, Lithuania restructured its military around a mechanised infantry brigade, a 4,000-strong active reserve, and a Special Operations Force (SOF), with total personnel capped at 19,781 in 2004 (KAM 2004). Military leadership prioritised network-centric warfare and agile, precise units, but this approach proved capital-intensive. NATO's presence enhanced Lithuania's land-heavy forces, notably through Allied contributions to the air domain. In 2004 NATO established an Air Policing capability at Šiauliai Air Base (NATO 2024a).

In 2008, conscription – an interwar tradition – was suspended, marking a shift toward an all-volunteer force at the time of the Russo–Georgian War and the global financial crisis, as well as a renewed focus on territorial defence. Defence Minister Juknevičienė (2008–12) established Domestic Support Forces for rapid responses to local incidents and aggression. By 2014 Lithuania had balanced territorial defence with strategic visibility and international commitments.

Figure 2. Defence spending in million EUR and as a percentage of GDP



Source: Dataset compiled by Slakaityte 2025b.

NATO's limited presence in the Baltic States initially caused security concerns, while the US support for a stronger NATO posture was hesitant. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea marked a turning point, leading to a permanent rotational US military presence, which was further reinforced after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Rostoks 2022, 94).

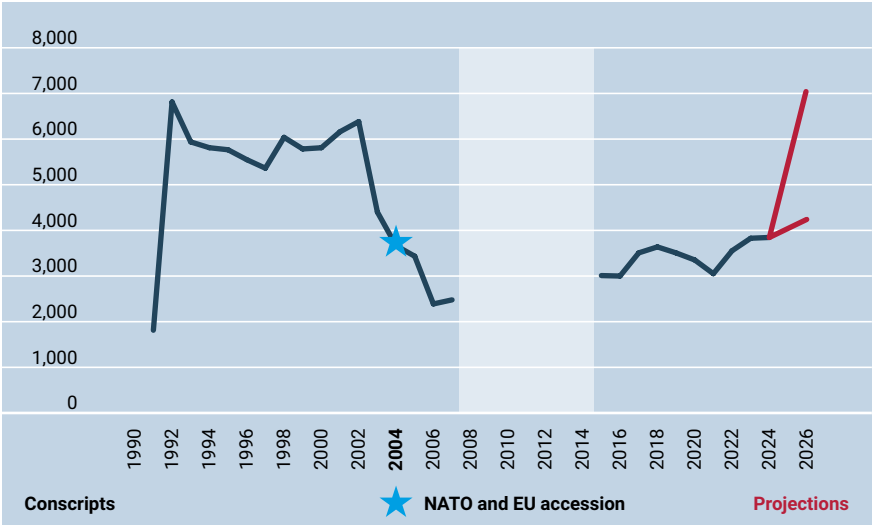
The 2014 events also spurred Lithuania to increase its defence budget. Russian aggression in Ukraine galvanised civil society, pressuring hesitant leaders to act. Major General Žukas highlighted the military's dire state, with units at 25% strength and depleted ammunition (Šlekys 2020, 309). In March 2014, political parties committed to raising defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2020, a goal met under President Grybauskaitė's leadership as the budget rose from 0.88% in 2014 to 2% in 2019 (Figure 2). Lithuania reinstated compulsory military service in 2015 and made key acquisitions, including PzH 2000 howitzers, Boxer vehicles and NASAMS systems, greatly enhancing its armed forces' firepower and mobility (Šlekys 2017, 50).

Since 2017 Lithuania has significantly enhanced its Host Nation Support (HNS), particularly in Rukla and Pabradė, to bolster NATO's eFP and rotational deployments. Key investments include expanded barracks, logistics hubs, pre-positioned

ammunition storage, upgraded training areas and integrated air defence infrastructure, ensuring rapid force deployment and sustained high-readiness operations. The eFP multinational battalion battle group, based in Rukla, operates under the mechanised infantry brigade Iron Wolf of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, training alongside its soldiers. In 2020, Lithuania integrated Systematic's SitaWare Frontline Battle Management System (BMS) into its Vilkas Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFVs) for the Iron Wolf Brigade, enhancing battlefield awareness, data exchange, and decision-making while reducing friendly fire risks (Zielonka 2020).

The rising prominence of hybrid warfare led to institutional reforms and the creation of rapid response units, enabling swift action during the 2021 hybrid attack at the Belarusian border (Bankauskaite and Šlekys 2023; Surwillo and Slakaityte 2022). The coordinated migrant influx also triggered rapid fortification including fencing, surveillance systems and expanded patrol infrastructure. In early 2025 Lithuania's minister of defence met with Polish and Finnish counterparts to discuss coordination between Poland's *Eastern Shield* and the regional Baltic Defence Line. The countries are aligning their border fortification efforts. Lithuania has confirmed plans to mine segments of its border with Russia and Belarus as part of broader counter-mobility measures (Babaiev 2025).

Figure 3. Conscription in Lithuania 1991–2026



Source: Dataset compiled by Slakaityte 2025c.

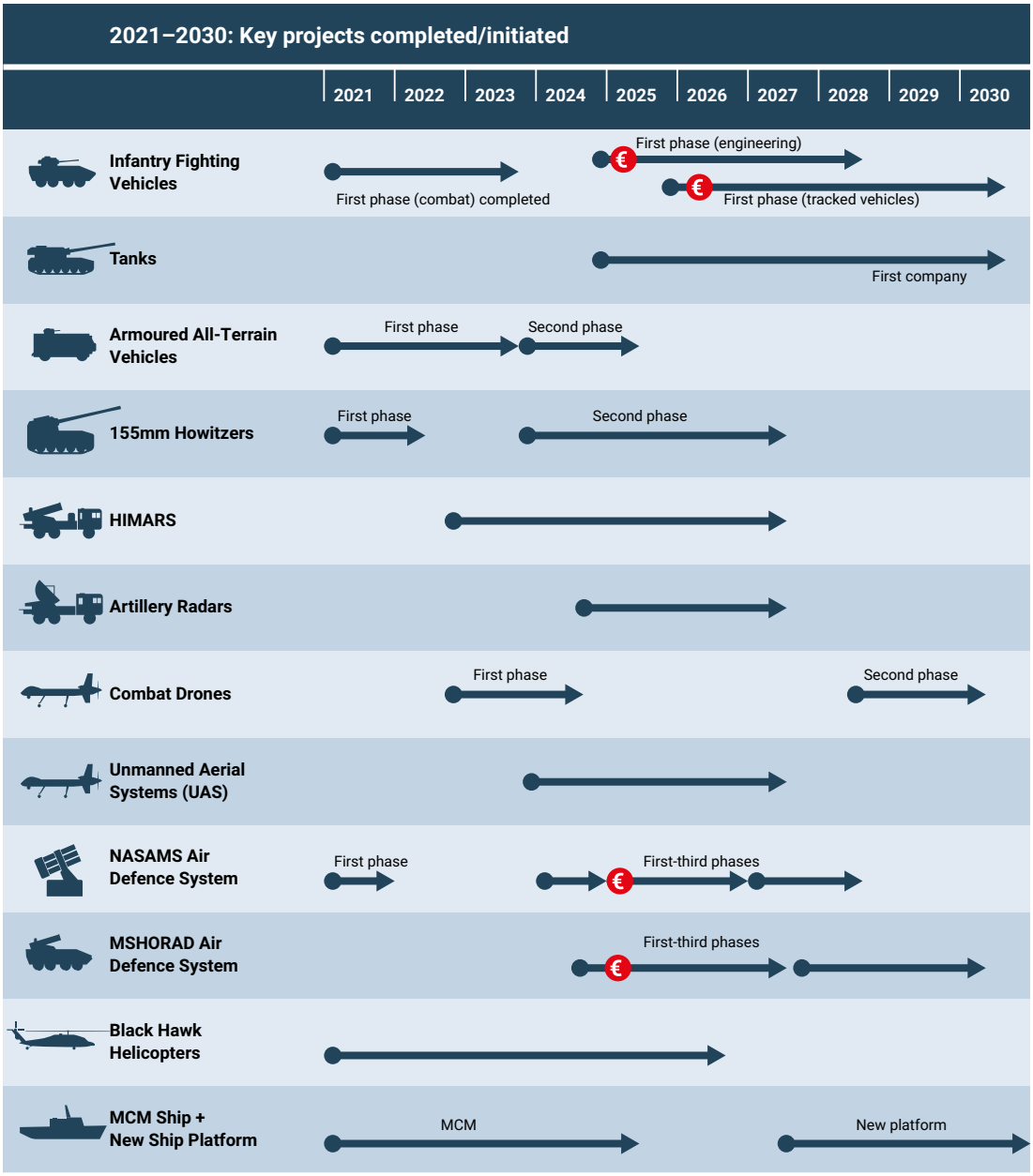
Increased conscription (see Figure 3) and professional soldier numbers enabled Lithuania to form its second and third infantry brigades, Žemaitija and Aukštaitija. With US support, Lithuania established divisional-level headquarters in 2019 (Jakučionis 2019). NATO's eFP, launched after the Wales and Warsaw summits, ensured a permanent troop rotation. To support the growing military presence, Lithuania – backed by Germany, the US, and NATO – upgraded infrastructure, including Zokniai airport, training grounds, and equipment storage. In 2021, the Baltic States and Sweden agreed on Carl Gustaf anti-tank ammunition, with additional orders placed in 2023 (Saab 2021; 2023).

In December 2021, a survey recorded 89% support for Lithuania's NATO membership and 88% approval for Allied forces in the country, alongside growing public trust in the military and respect for soldiers (KAM 2022). In early February 2022, Lieutenant General Rupšys highlighted the need for vigilance and accelerated refresher training for reserve soldiers, reinforcing military readiness for evolving threats (Jakučionis 2022).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, prompted rapid enhancements to Lithuania's armed forces. In May political parties committed to allocating at least 2.5% of GDP to defence and establishing new civilian and cyber forces (Gaučaitė-Znutienė and Pankūnas 2022). In November, Lithuania initiated its largest military acquisition: eight HIMARS rocket artillery systems and training ammunition from the US, costing €450 million (Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2022). NATO further reinforced its north-eastern defences following the 2022 Madrid Summit, elevating battlegroups to brigade level, significantly increasing their size and capabilities for independent operations. Germany leads a permanent, combat-ready brigade in Lithuania, with a forward command element operational since September 2022 and full deployment of 4,800 troops and 200 personnel by 2027. The brigade includes armoured and motorised infantry battalions, bolstering deterrence against Russian aggression (KAM 2023b).

In 2023 Lithuania maintained 23,000 active soldiers, 7,100 reservists, 118 artillery units, 30 infantry fighting vehicles, three helicopters, and four surface vessels (Polyakova et al. 2023). The December 2023 Lithuanian–German Roadmap formalised plans for the permanent stationing of a German Brigade in Lithuania, with €1.1 billion allocated for infrastructure, training development, and logistics upgrades. NATO's eFP Battalion in Lithuania has become an integral part of the brigade (KAM 2023a).

Figure 4. Modernisation efforts of the Lithuanian army



€ Planned additional allocations from the Defence Fund.

Source: Author translation (KAM 2024b).

In July 2024 the Lithuanian parliament adopted a defence tax package, raising defence spending to 3% of GDP, while businesses advocated for at least 4% (Juozapaitis 2024). The US Department of Defence's Baltic Security Initiative (BSI) also continues to enhance Baltic defence with approximately €207.48 million in 2024, prioritising air defence, maritime awareness and land forces near Russia's borders (Salerno-Garthwaite 2024). Additionally, Lithuania's universal conscription reform, finalised in July 2024, strengthens the active reserve, ensuring readiness amid evolving regional threats (Karčiauskas 2024). In the near term, the additional funding accelerates military acquisitions and modernisation plans (see Figure 4), drawing critical lessons from Ukraine's defence experience.

To meet NATO standards, Lithuania is acquiring artillery systems, infantry fighting vehicles, armoured vehicles, anti-tank weapons, drones, anti-drone systems, and developing battle management and simulation systems, with a growing emphasis on combat and reconnaissance drones (Juozapaitis 2024). As part of this broader effort to enhance defence capacity, in June 2024 Lithuania signed a landmark agreement with Rheinmetall, the German defence giant, to establish a €180 million ammunition plant within the country. The project, designated as a matter of state importance, will significantly bolster Lithuania's defence capabilities (Rheinmetall 2024). The *Modern Soldier Equipment Programme* was officially announced in August 2024, with plans to invest €1.2 billion over the next decade to enhance the Lithuanian Armed Forces capabilities (Defence Industry Europe 2024). In October 2024 Lithuania signed a €370 million contract with the ARTEC consortium for 27 additional Boxer Vilkas IFVs, expanding its fleet to over 110. Deliveries are scheduled between 2027 and 2029 (Defense News Army 2024). In December 2024 Lithuania committed to purchasing 44 German Leopard tanks – the first tanks are expected to arrive in 2029. Lithuania is negotiating an earlier delivery date to align with its goal of a fully operational national division by 2030, though funding constraints may delay this to 2036–40 (BNS 2024a). In January 2025 Lithuania signed a €14 million contract with Saab Bofors Dynamics AB to acquire Carl Gustaf M4 anti-tank recoilless rifles with deliveries in 2025–26 (Defense News Army 2025a) and received 50 new Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs), expanding its fleet to 500 under a US defence cooperation initiative. The JLTV programme, launched in 2019, saw 200 vehicles delivered by 2024, with 300 more arriving in 2025 from Oshkosh Defense (Defense News Army 2025b).

A wargaming study published in October 2024 highlighted Lithuania's ability to withstand a Russian offensive for ten days until NATO reinforcements arrive but

emphasised the need for an additional €10 billion investment over four years, nearly doubling its 2024 defence budget to 5% of GDP (Špokas 2024). In January 2025 a decision was made to increase defence spending to 5–6% of GDP starting in 2026, making it the first NATO nation to pledge this level. The State Defence Council called the decision 'historic', emphasising the need for preparedness despite the risk of aggression being 'real but not imminent' (Dapkus 2025).

On 28 January 2025 Lithuania re-established the 1st Mechanized Division to enhance military capabilities and strengthen NATO's deterrence on the north-eastern flank. Commanded by Brigadier General Aurelijus Alasauskas, the division integrates Iron Wolf, Griffin and Reserve Brigade Aukštaitija, alongside air defence, engineer, reconnaissance and artillery units. It aims for full operational capacity by 2030 and will serve as a key NATO force. The move follows Lithuania's intent to become Multinational Corps Northeast's (MNC NE) fourth framework nation. The division will operate tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and expanded artillery and air defence assets, reinforcing regional security (NATO 2025). Also in early 2025, Lithuania announced plans to consolidate state-owned defence companies under a single holding structure to improve efficiency and coordination. Prime Minister Gintautas Paluckas endorsed the reform, aiming to expand joint ventures with foreign partners. Oversight will be strengthened through the Defence Industry Policy and Innovation Department, established in 2023 (BNS 2025a). In March 2025, with spending of over 3.85% (KAM 2025a), Lithuania is aiming to strengthen its defence and deterrence capabilities against the ongoing threat of Russian aggression.

In 2026, Lithuania's updated Conscription Law will take effect, requiring men aged 18 to 22 to perform military service, with an emphasis on enlisting soon after completing secondary education. While the new Law aims to reduce deferments, students who enrol in higher education before being added to the annual conscription list may defer their service for the duration of a single uninterrupted study program – such as a bachelor's or vocational degree. The standard service duration remains up to nine months; however, those with in-demand specialisations, such as engineering or medicine, may have their service shortened to three or six months, depending on military needs (KAM 2025c). Active reserve service will extend from 10 to 15 years, with periodic training. The reform aims to increase the number of trained reservists and conscripts, currently 3,800–4,000 annually, strengthening Lithuania's defence capabilities (Narkūnas 2024). By 2030 Lithuania aims to reach 15,500 professional soldiers and 50,000 active reservists (BNS 2024b). Nonetheless, in an October 2024 study, a defence ministry survey revealed that 61% of Lithuanians had not

considered joining the country's defence forces, and 10% had ruled it out entirely. Respondents with higher education or living in major cities were more likely to consider joining (BSN 2024).

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

The Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (*Lietuvos Šaulių Sąjunga, LŠS* in Lithuanian) is Lithuania's primary organisation for mobilising civil society in total defence. As a voluntary organisation, uniting around 50,000 members, it supports the armed forces, state institutions and crisis response efforts. In wartime the LŠS integrates into the military, while in peacetime it focuses on civic education, national security training and public preparedness. LŠS equips citizens with self-reliance, crisis response and resistance skills. Fully embedded in Lithuania's civil defence and national security strategy, LŠS strengthens societal resilience and national defence capabilities against evolving threats (Lietuvos Šaulių Sąjunga 2025).

In January 2022 the escalating geopolitical tensions led the Cabinet to approve the *Strategy for Training Citizens for Civil Resistance*, mandating national preparedness for aggression and security threats (Jurčenkaitė 2022). In March 2022 Lithuania's Ministry of National Defence published an updated practical guide, *What We Need to Know About Preparing for Emergencies and Wartime*, that combined civil resistance and emergency preparedness with engaging illustrations (Aleksa 2022). Civil preparedness was also prioritised in the 2023 National Defence Plan, integrating citizens, NGOs, businesses and civil servants into defence efforts while safeguarding critical infrastructure and essential services. In September 2024 the ministry released *If Crisis or War: How to Act?* a concise public guide outlining crisis readiness and roles in national defence (KAM 2024a).

Lithuania has rapidly expanded its shelter network, with 4,438 shelters operational by August 2024, up from 1,835 in 2022. *The Law on Crisis Management and Civil Protection* mandates shelters in new public buildings and high-rise apartments that can accommodate 60% of occupants and must meet strict operational requirements. While progress has been made, many shelters remain upgraded Soviet-era structures, and rural areas face gaps in coverage. Ongoing initiatives include modernising the siren warning system and enhancing evacuation plans, underscoring Lithuania's commitment to civil protection amidst growing regional threats (BNN 2024). By 2024, 31% of Lithuania's population had access to nearby shelters, with plans to expand coverage to 50% by utilising schools and municipal buildings. Preparedness

officers in all 50 municipalities oversee shelters, evacuation plans, and responses to military and hybrid threats. In March Lithuania allocated €25 million from the State Defence Fund to enhance civil protection, directing €18.9 million to shelter expansion, €4.5 million to crisis management, and €1.6 million to healthcare resilience. The funds will support at least 300 new shelters, emergency equipment, and housing for 20,000 evacuees (KAM 2025b).

The Ministry of the Interior conducts regular drills to test evacuation readiness and enhance resilience (tv3 2024). To coordinate these broader efforts, a National Defence Coordination Council was established, ensuring collaboration across state, municipal, and private sectors (Morwinsky, Clobes and Šimaitytė 2024). Public campaigns like *'We Are a Team – We Have a Plan'* promote hands-on civil safety training for high school students (LT72 2023), while the curriculum for fifth to eighth graders includes lessons on evacuation, siren signals and makeshift protective measures. In 2023 Lithuania expanded its three-day defence skills course for ninth graders, coordinated regionally by the Riflemen's Union, emphasising civic awareness and security preparedness (Gutauskaitė 2024). On 10 March 2025 Lithuania launched the LT72 mobile app to enhance civil preparedness for emergencies. Developed by the Ministry of the Interior, LT72 provides real-time alerts, evacuation points, shelter locations and interactive safety resources (LT72 2025).

Public perception of security threats plays a critical role in societal resilience. Survey data from 2022–24 highlights that Lithuanians consistently view Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a significant threat to national and EU security. Although high, concern has slightly declined over time, from 91% in April–May 2022 to 83% in October–November 2024 (Eurobarometer 2024). This enduring awareness underpins Lithuania's civil preparedness efforts, emphasising the importance of fostering a vigilant and informed public to strengthen national defence initiatives and societal resilience to potential crises.

Latvian National Armed Forces with flag of Latvia and emblem of Support Command on a soldier uniform, NATO force integration unit, 2022. Photo: Michele Ursi / Alamy Stock Photo.

LATVIA

After fifty years of Soviet occupation, Latvia reinstated independence on 21 August 1991. Recognising the need for a formal defence structure following confrontations with Soviet Interior Ministry forces earlier that year, Latvia laid the foundations for its ministry of defence and armed forces during the pivotal months of 1991. However, achieving full democratic control over the military has been an incremental process.

Economic outlook

Latvia's post-independence economic transition involved a deep recession, with GDP dropping to 52.6% of its 1990 level and inflation surging to 951.2% due to energy costs (Brīvers 2008, 18–19; Grennes 1997, 17). Stabilisation from 1993 to 1999 enabled growth in the early 2000s, with inflation reduced to 2–3% annually. Despite significant setbacks during the 2008 (-3.25%), 2009 (-14.26%), and 2021 (-3.51%) crises (Brīvers 2008; Statista 2024), Latvia's GDP per capita increased tenfold over three decades. By 2024, Latvia's GDP reached €40.2 billion, marking progress in closing the income gap relative to the EU average and enabling increased investment in military modernisation (LSM+ English 2025a; European Union 2024).

MILITARY FORCES: FORMATION, STRUCTURE AND ENHANCEMENTS

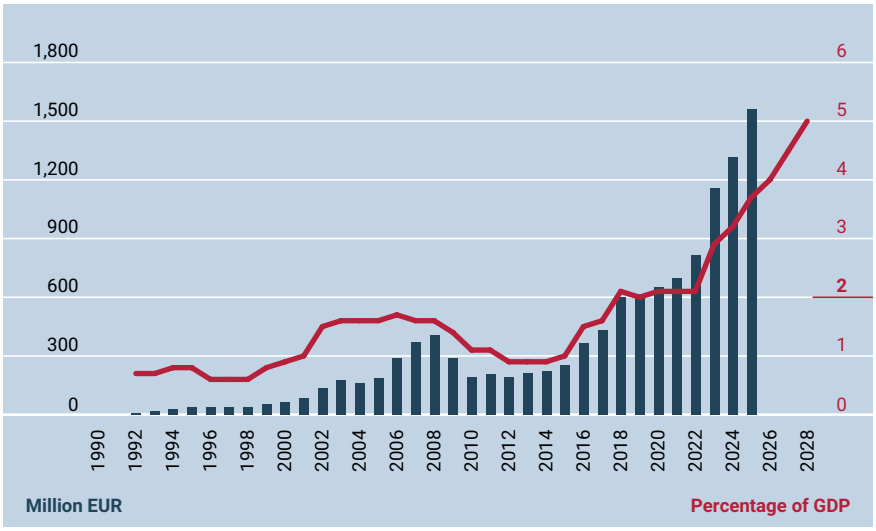
Following the restoration of independence Latvia enacted the *Law on the Home Guard*, establishing the foundations for citizen-based territorial defence on 23 August 1991 (Viksne 1995). In September the government created the Department of Public Security to develop a national self-defence framework and voluntary police units. The *Law on Compulsory National Military Service* passed the same year mandated service for all male citizens aged 19 to 50 (NBS 2024). By the year's end, the Ministry of Defence replaced the Department of Public Security, formalising the defence troops and home guard (Viksne 2002).

Securing Latvia's sovereignty was challenging, with 10,000 Russian troops stationed in the country until 1994 compared to just 2,000 Latvian soldiers. Their withdrawal required international pressure from the UN, EU and US, bolstered by President Clinton's 1994 visit and financial incentives such as resettlement vouchers (up to €23,000) redeemable in Russia (Rudzitis 1999, 161–62). Under pressure from the East, Latvia permitted 22,320 retired Russian personnel to remain – a figure potentially rising to 75,000–100,000 with families (Austers et al. 2016, 171). This contributed to Latvia having the OSCE's highest statelessness rate at 12% (Latvian Human Rights Committee, 2014), while ethnic Russians comprise over a quarter of the population in Latvia ('Russians in Latvia' 2025). The minority situation remains a key pretext for Russian 'concern' over Latvia.

In November 1994 Latvia enacted the *Law on State Defence*, followed by a 1995 national security concept addressing non-military threats, particularly foreign destabilisation (Runcis 1999, 9). Latvia's strategy integrated theory into policy more effectively than its Baltic neighbours, yet financial constraints and military implementation gaps remained, despite advisory support from Sweden (Lawrence and Jermalavičius 2013, 22; Rudzitis 1999, 168). Joining NATO's 'Partnership for Peace' in 1994, Latvia aimed to advance towards full membership and began contributing to NATO-led peacekeeping missions in the former Yugoslavia by 1996 (Kyrychenko 2021, 78). In 1995 NATO supported the creation of the Baltic Battalion in Ādaži, Latvia, followed by BALTRON and BALTNET. At NATO's 1999 Washington Summit, the Alliance adopted a new strategic concept and endorsed Baltic defence cooperation (Kyrychenko 2021, 79).

Latvia's armed forces faced two primary challenges in their development: limited military equipment and recruitment difficulties. A US arms embargo on the Baltics initially forced reliance on small-scale arms purchases from the Czech Republic and Israel, while low enlistment rates among young Latvians exacerbated the issue. A retired US military officer described Baltic military capabilities as '1 on a 1–10 scale' (Banka 2019). The embargo was lifted in 1994, with the US providing fiscal incentives to encourage arms purchases from American manufacturers (Rudzitis 1999, 166). Demographic challenges further complicated defence efforts, as ethnic Latvians comprised only 54% of the population, with ethnic Russians making up one-third (Viksne 1995) and Latvians a minority in urban areas at just 36% of city populations (Rudzitis 1999, 164). To boost participation the government enacted the *Law on Conscript Service* in February 1997. Latvia's defence strategy prioritised total territorial defence, rapid mobilisation of 50,000 personnel, and NATO alignment (Viksne 2002, 96). Plans for a NATO-compliant rapid reaction force by 2002 required €18.4 million – half the defence budget – but funding shortfalls and a 25% budget cut in 1998 left Latvia with Europe's lowest defence spending as a share of GDP (0.067%) (see Figure 5). Despite these constraints, Latvian forces grew to 20,000 by 1998, though economic hardships persisted, with 80% of the population living below the poverty line (Rudzitis 1999, 169).

Figure 5. Defence spending in million EUR and as a percentage of GDP



Source: Dataset compiled by Slakaityte 2025c.

The US–Baltic Charter of Partnership, signed on 16 January 1998, solidified US support for Latvia and its neighbours in their NATO and EU accession efforts. It provided direct military aid, including training, and an €16.6 million congressional package to modernise Baltic defence forces to NATO standards (Rudzitis 1999, 167). Between 1998 and 2004 Latvia allocated €18.4 million to replace Soviet-era communications with NATO-compliant systems from the US-based Harris Corporation (Adamowski 2015). Early efforts to rebuild armoured capabilities included receiving eight T-55AM tanks in 1999–2000 as donations – five from Poland and three from the Czech Republic – primarily for training purposes (Defense and Aviation 2024).

The 1995 and 1998 elections reaffirmed Latvia's commitment to NATO and EU membership, driving reforms to enhance defence capabilities, align with NATO standards, and target 2% GDP defence spending by 2003[2] (Viksne 2002, 98). Ahead of NATO's 2002 Prague Summit, the Baltic States – encouraged by the US – presented strategic plans that secured their invitations to join the Alliance (Lawrence and Jermalavičius 2013, 23). Latvia's 2003 State Defence Concept marked a shift to professional armed forces, phasing out conscription by 2006. It emphasised NATO's collective defence, international readiness, and it restructured ground forces into a single infantry brigade and national guard, prioritising command, training, logistics, air defence and host nation support (Lawrence and Jermalavičius 2013, 25).

Latvia's 2004 NATO and EU accession marked its transformation from a former Soviet state to a Western defence partner (Lawrence and Jermalavičius 2013, 30). Public opinion remained divided, with Latvian speakers largely favouring the West and Russian speakers leaning toward closer ties with the East (Austers et al. 2016, 152). Despite tensions, including Russian polls in 2005–6 identifying Latvia as a top perceived enemy, Latvia fully embraced NATO's collective defence principle (King and McNabb 2009, 37; Lawrence and Jermalavičius 2013, 29).

In 2006 Riga hosted the 20th NATO Summit, highlighting Latvia's growing strategic role. The Ministry of Defence proposed €46 million of modernisation projects including force upgrades and a NATO maritime outpost in Liepaja[3] (Kyrychenko 2021, 83–84). While external threats were minimal, Russia's 2007 suspension of the *Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces* heightened European security uncertainty. That year Latvia transitioned to professional armed forces, supported by a volunteer-based national guard, and abolished compulsory military service (Eurotopics 2022). The 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia amplified regional security concerns (King and McNabb 2009, 29), leading Latvia to focus on collective defence, host nation support and international operations. By 2012 the armed forces maintained 20,000 personnel, including 5,800 professional soldiers and national guard volunteers, while its defence strategy recognised a low but credible risk of military conflict on Latvian territory (Lawrence and Jermalavičius 2013, 33–34).

Rising tensions in 2013 led NATO to commit to long-term Baltic air policing, allocating Latvia €29 million for projects like Lielvārde Air Base (Sargs.lv 2014). Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea escalated regional insecurity, with Latvia citing Moscow's military buildup near its borders, including over 100 attack helicopters at Ostrov, and calling for increased NATO troop rotations (Brooke 2014). In response, Latvia acquired 123 UK armoured vehicles (€45.7 million) and participated in US-led Operation Northern Strike to enhance air support and reconnaissance (gov.uk 2014; Air Force 2014). At the Wales NATO Summit Latvia advocated for a continuous Allied presence, pre-positioned equipment, and expanded exercises to deter Russian aggression (Benitez 2014). That year Latvia established NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and launched the Mechanized Infantry Brigade project, set for completion by 2027 (Sargs.lv 2014; MOD 2014). NATO's rotational presence in Latvia began with the deployment of the 173rd Airborne Brigade in April 2014 (Rostoks 2022, 94).

Amid rising tensions, Latvia initiated a 2015–18 modernisation plan for the home guard (LSM 2014), including increased funding, expanded reserves, decentralised

arms storage, and extended training to 20 days annually for rapid response units. By 2015, €7.7 million was allocated to develop the Territorial Defence Forces, aiming for 12,000 members by 2020 (OSW 2015). Latvia enhanced air surveillance and NATO interoperability with a €20.66 million investment in Thales Raytheon Sentinel AN/MPQ-64F1 radars (Adamowski 2015) and acquired 800 Carl Gustav anti-tank weapons, 50 Scania trucks and 50 Mercedes-Benz armoured vehicles for €4 million (LSM 2014). In 2017 Latvia secured 47 M109A5 self-propelled howitzers from Austria, delivered by 2018 at €60,000–€140,000 per unit. This upgrade – Latvia's first modern indirect fire support system – extended artillery ranges up to 30 km with advanced ammunition, significantly boosting NATO integration and training (Global Defence News 2018).

Since 2018 Latvia has consistently met NATO's 2% GDP defence spending target. Major acquisitions included €11 million for BRP 'Outlander MAX 650XT Military Version' 6x6 vehicles delivered in 2019 (LSM 2018a) and 130 Polaris tactical vehicles under a €6.4 million US Foreign Military Sales contract to enhance rapid deployment (Malyasov 2018). A €108 million deal with Israel's Rafael secured Spike anti-tank missiles, compatible with CVR(T) vehicles, with deliveries ongoing through 2023 (LSM 2018b). In 2018 the US approved a €186 million purchase of four UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters with advanced navigation and night vision systems (Kelly 2018). Latvia also invested €7.3 million in Finland's 6x6 Patria armoured vehicle project, with plans to deploy several hundred units across the Mechanized Infantry Brigade and National Guard over the next decade (Saab 2020). In 2019, over 300 U.S. military assets were delivered through the Port of Riga under Atlantic Resolve, strengthening Latvia's role in NATO logistics and deterrence operations. In 2020, Latvia enhanced military readiness with the installation of a SPIKE Team Trainer for advanced missile simulations (Joint Forces News 2020; Earl 2019). In 2021 Latvia faced heightened security challenges, including Russia's Zapad military exercises near EU borders and the weaponisation of migrants on the Belarusian border as hybrid warfare tactics (Surwillo and Slakaityte 2022; Euractiv 2021). In response, Latvia deployed national armed forces to bolster the state border guard, constructed a border fence, and intensified joint exercises and patrols, enhancing security and deterring provocations (BNN 2021). The coordinated migrant influx also triggered rapid fortification, including fencing, surveillance systems and expanded patrol infrastructure along the border of Belarus.

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine served as a powerful catalyst, dramatically intensifying Latvia's existing efforts to strengthen its defence posture. Defence Minister Pabriks acknowledged the military system's limitations, calling for an

expansion to 50,000 personnel including 7,500 active soldiers, National Guardsmen, and 1,500 NATO troops (AFP and Euronews 2022). Latvia's defence budget rose from €255 million in 2015 to €987 million (2.25% of GDP) in 2023. In 2023 Latvia and Estonia signed a €693 million contract for up to 3,000 military vehicles, including Volvo FMX trucks (Manuel 2023). Latvia also plans to replace its CVR(T) platforms with advanced infantry fighting vehicles featuring Level III protection by 2028, with options including the Otokar Tulpar, GDELS ASCOD 2, and Hanwha K21 (Miller 2023). In November 2024 Latvia finalised a €60 million agreement with Patria to acquire 56 additional 6×6 armoured command and control vehicles as part of the Common Armoured Vehicle System programme. Production will utilise local industry capabilities – including Patria's Valmiera facility, opened in May 2024. Deliveries will begin in 2025 and continue through 2029, significantly enhancing Latvia's operational capabilities and supporting the development of its defence industry, according to Defence Minister Andris Sprūds (Patria 2024).

Latvia reinstated conscription in 2023, requiring men aged 18–27 to serve in military or civilian roles, with public support rising from 45% in 2022 to 61% in 2023 (Andžāns 2023). By 2023 Latvia had 6,600 active soldiers, 15,500 reservists, three main battle tanks, 112 artillery units and two helicopters (Polyakova et al. 2023). Defence spending will further increase from €1.1 billion in 2024 to €1.4 billion by 2027, with €1 billion dedicated to air defence and expanded infrastructure (Skujins 2024). Plans aim to conscript 1,040 recruits in 2024, rising to 2,800 by 2027, with potential mandatory service for women by 2028 (Kayali 2024). Being a NATO member plays a significant role in bolstering public confidence, with 61.2% feeling secure and fear of foreign invasion dropping from 62.2% in 2022 to 43.5% in 2024 (Kantar 2024).

NATO's Canada-led eFP battlegroup has bolstered security in Latvia since 2017, with the 2022 Madrid Summit initiating its expansion to brigade size (Rostoks 2022, 95). In late 2023 Canada deployed fifteen Leopard 2 tanks to Latvia, its largest overseas mission since Afghanistan (Government of Canada 2023). Latvia received €207.4 million in 2024 through the Baltic Security Initiative (BSI), with a proposed *Baltic Defence and Deterrence Act* aiming to authorise €227.5 million annually from 2023 to 2027 (Salerno-Garthwaite 2024). The Danish-led Multinational Division North at Ādaži Base achieved full operational capability in 2024, with Denmark and Sweden deploying combat battalions to enhance the eFP (Danish Defence 2024; MOD 2024). In January 2025, 550 Swedish troops arrived in Latvia as part of an ePF brigade at Ādaži. The battalion, escorted by Swedish air and naval forces, strengthens NATO's deterrence along its eastern flank, with Commander Lieutenant Colonel Henrik Rosdahl describing the mission as 'historic' (Bellamy 2025). Latvia

also inaugurated a €7 million NATO Multinational Brigade Centre in 2024, co-funded by Canada and Spain, with full combat readiness expected by 2026 (Manuel 2024b). The 'Namejs-2024' exercise mobilised 11,000 troops, testing mobilisation, counter-mobility and border security (news.az 2024). As part of the Baltic Defence Line launched in January 2024, Latvia began constructing layered fortifications along its borders with Russia and Belarus. Simultaneously, the Valmiera facility commenced production of 6×6 armoured vehicles under the Common Armoured Vehicle System programme, marking a key step in national defence industrial capability (NDR 2024).

In January 2025, President Edgars Rinkēvičs announced plans to increase Latvia's defence spending to 4% of GDP, and later confirmed a target of 5% by 2028 in response to the Russian threat and the changing dynamics with the US (LSM+ 2025). In February 2025, the Cabinet of Ministers formally approved the 4% allocation for 2026, with Defence Minister Andris Sprūds outlining priorities across land, sea, air, logistics and cyberspace, including air and coastal defence, increased firepower, infantry fighting vehicles, ammunition production and drone warfare capabilities (Defence Industry Europe 2025). Despite already outspending many NATO Allies, Latvia remains committed to meeting NATO capability targets, in spite of the financial and personnel burden. At the 2025 Munich Security Conference, the president urged faster weapons production, noting that defence spending alone is not enough without capabilities. In March 2025 Latvia spent 3.73% of GDP on defence (KAM 2025a), prioritising border infrastructure, military modernisation and defence industry growth (LETA 2025). The *National Armed Forces' Development Plan* (2025–36) outlines an expansion to 61,000 personnel, including a 30,000-strong crisis reserve, to strengthen national defence capabilities. Over twelve years, €7 billion will be invested in combat readiness, firepower and operational capacity, with €1 billion dedicated to infrastructure to enhance military mobility, fortifications and logistics (Aizsardzības ministrija 2025). On 18 March the Cabinet of Ministers approved the *Defence Industry and Innovation Support Strategy* (2025–36), increasing domestic procurement for the National Armed Forces to 20% by 2028 and 30% by 2036. Key measures include a 'Green Corridor' to accelerate defence production, a security of supply policy ensuring Latvian firms secure 30% of major military contracts, and innovation funding rising to 1.5% of the defence budget by 2028 and 3% by 2036. The Ministry of Defence will publish four-year procurement plans to enhance industry coordination. The strategy aligns with the National Defence Concept and the *Armed Forces Long-Term Development Plan* (2025–28), with quadrennial reviews (LSM+ English 2025b).

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Latvia's 2023 National Security Concept highlights societal resilience and self-sufficiency as pillars of comprehensive defence. In 2024 the Ministry of Defence updated its crisis readiness materials, including the 'How to Deal with a Crisis' booklet and guides like 'What to Do in Case of War' (Aizsardzības Ministrija 2024), and provided military cooperation guidelines to the Association of Latvian Municipalities (LSM 2024). A national defence curriculum equips secondary students with situational awareness, leadership skills and basic military training (Braw 2020). The public benefits from extensive resources on sargs.lv, including booklets, videos and podcasts, enhancing societal preparedness ('72 stundas' 2024). Furthermore, the Latvian National Guard (*Zemessardze* in Latvian) – a voluntary territorial defence force of over 10,000 members supporting Latvia's total defence concept – enhances societal resilience by training civilians in crisis response, integrating local communities into national security planning, and maintaining rapid mobilisation capacity in the event of hybrid or conventional threats (Zemessardze 2025).

Recognising Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a persistent threat – concerns peaked at 81% in 2023 and stood at 77% in late 2024 (Eurobarometer 2024) – Latvia has focused on improving its civil defence infrastructure. A 2024 survey identified 1,562 shelters capable of protecting 533,000 people, roughly 28% of the population. Riga, with 400 identified shelters, allocated €1.5 million for renovations in 2024 and introduced tax incentives and co-financing plans to encourage private shelter construction. However, significant gaps remain, particularly in privately-owned spaces, requiring legislative reforms to ensure broader coverage. The new '112 Latvija' app provides real-time shelter information, a key step towards improving public access during emergencies (LSM+ English et al. 2025; 112 2025). While existing coverage supports temporary refuge for over half a million people, ongoing investments are essential for long-term resilience.

Flag of Estonia on soldier's arm (collage), 2018.
Photo: Bumble Dee / Alamy Stock Photo.

ESTONIA

On 20 August 1991, in the midst of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia restored its independence. The Estonian Supreme Council's declaration was the pinnacle of the peaceful *Singing Revolution* of the late 1980s (ERR News 2024). Following independence, Estonia prioritised sovereignty and security in response to persistent Russian threats, navigating a complex path toward full democratic and institutional consolidation.

Economic outlook

Transitioning from a planned socialist to a capitalist economy, Estonia underwent a 'shock therapy', including privatisation of state assets, currency reform, and lifting of price controls (Hoag and Kasoff 1999, 919). Inflation surged to 525% in 1991 and exceeded 1,000% in 1992 before stabilising at 10–20% annually as prices aligned with global levels (Hoag and Kasoff 1999, 922, 929). Despite an initial 21.1% GDP contraction, Estonia experienced remarkable growth, with per capita GDP rising by 777% from 1991 to 2023 (Country Economics 2024). Meanwhile, its defence budget surged from €11 million in 1991 to €1.3 billion by 2023 – a hundredfold increase (Peets 2024, 234).

MILITARY FORCES: FORMATION, STRUCTURE AND ENHANCEMENTS

Given Estonia's proximity to Russia, defence became an immediate national priority following independence. In October 1991, 23,000–25,000 Russian troops remained stationed in Estonia with heavy machinery (163 aircraft, 10 helicopters, 153 tanks) and nuclear-capable weaponry, while Estonia's forces comprised just 1,000 soldiers and limited equipment. By September 1993, 26,000 hectares of Estonian territory were still under Russian control, with 3,000 troops. This decreased to 2,000 soldiers and 24 tanks by July 1994 (Jauhiainen 1997, 122). Russia framed its presence as 'peacekeeping', citing protection of Russian-speaking minorities, with support from figures like British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd (Kaldas 2005, 18). Resolving the issue required UN, EU and US intervention, highlighted by President Clinton's pivotal 1994 visit to Latvia. Ultimately, an agreement between Presidents Lennart Meri and Boris Yeltsin ensured the final withdrawal, completed in August 1994 (Rudzitis 1999, 161–62).

With limited funds and no international aid, Estonia began self-armament in 1992, acquiring Romanian AK rifles and securing contracts with China and Israel (Nõmm 2014, 207). Defence spending throughout the 1990s remained at 1% of GDP and focused on infrastructure renovation. This changed after 1997, as Estonia received substantial international aid: M16 and M14 rifles from the US, 105-mm howitzers from Finland, MG3 machine guns from Germany, engineering equipment from Switzerland and Denmark and mortars from Norway. From 1999 to 2002 Sweden

further bolstered Estonia's capabilities with rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers and ammunition (Nõmm 2014, 213).

Estonia's foundational defence structures were established between 1991 and 1993, with its first national defence strategy finalised in 1996 (Veebel 2018, 7). In 1992 Estonia initiated unilateral defence cooperation with Finland, which trained Estonian officers and regarded Estonia as its southern flank. This collaboration expanded through the Estonian Project (1996–2003), funded by €2.5 million from Finland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project trained 1,200 Estonian personnel, including 250 cadets and officers, and provided expertise in operational planning, logistics and equipment. This bilateral cooperation continued after the project, formalised by a 2003 Memorandum of Understanding (Kaldas 2005, 23–24).

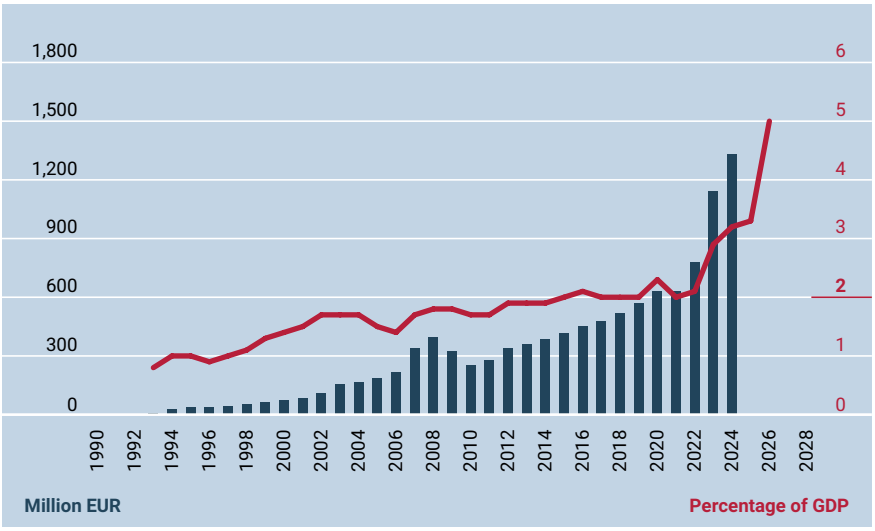
Estonia adopted Finland's total defence concept as the cornerstone of its security strategy. However, with NATO membership as the ultimate objective, the strategy underwent a significant revision. By the mid-1990s Finnish advisers were joined by US and UK experts to align Estonia's approach with NATO principles (Kaldas 2005, 27). Major reforms between 1997 and 2002 included downsizing wartime forces from 86,000 to 23,500, reducing brigades from six to one, and improving efficiency and readiness. Key milestones included establishing a modern military education system, developing a reservist army, implementing conscription for students, and creating deployable forces, for example the Scouts Battalion, a mine-sweeping flotilla, and the 1st Infantry Brigade (Veebel 2018, 7). The 2001 and 2004 National Security Concepts prioritised equipment modernisation, including German artillery, Milan anti-tank missiles, 1,300 vehicles, Sandown-class mine hunters (2007–09), TPS-117 radars (2003) and Pasi armoured personnel carriers (XA-180s, 2004–2005; XA-188s, 2010) (Ibid., 59). By 2005, collective defence had replaced total defence as the strategic priority, fully aligning Estonia with NATO standards (Kaldas 2005, 26).

Baltic military cooperation began in 1992, focusing on Russian troop withdrawal, coordination and joint planning. Formalised in 1995, it emphasised regional security through joint exercises, education, armament standardisation and NATO integration. Key initiatives launched in 1998 included the Baltic Naval Squadron (mine countermeasures), Baltic Air Surveillance Network (regional air surveillance), and Baltic Defence College (officer education at strategic and operational levels) (Kaldas 2005, 29–31). Estonia deployed over 2,000 personnel on foreign missions, starting in 1995 (Veebel 2018, 17). The 1997 Forum of Baltic Security Assistance modernised Baltic forces to Western standards (Vaiksnoras 2002, 12–13). NATO endorsed these efforts at the 1999 Washington Summit, paving the way for Estonia and its

neighbours to join the Alliance at the 2002 Prague Summit (Kaldas 2005, 34; Kyrychenko 2021, 79).

Upon joining the EU and NATO in 2004 Estonia shifted its security policy toward collective security, focusing on international missions and niche capabilities like minesweeping and cybersecurity. That year the Baltic States sought NATO Centre of Excellence status for the Baltic Defence College's Higher Command Studies Course and initiated the German-led Baltic Command, Control, and Information System. Operational by 2005, this system aimed to modernise command structures and integrate data processing across Baltic armed forces (Kaldas 2005, 31). At the time, Russia was viewed as a strategic partner, but the 2007 Bronze Soldier riots and subsequent cyberattacks from Russia shifted this perception (Juurvee 2021, 39). These events deepened tensions between ethnic Estonian majority and its Russian-speaking minority, which makes up about a quarter of the population – a divide that remains significant in Estonian politics today. Tensions only grew with the 2008 Georgian–Russian war that framed Russia as a growing threat to regional stability, though most NATO and EU allies were less aligned with this view (Veebel 2018, 8). In response, Estonia prioritised cyberdefence, becoming a founding nation and host of NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn in 2008, a key hub for Allied cyber expertise (Ibid., 74). The 2014 annexation of Crimea further heightened Estonia's security concerns, prompting the establishment of the 2nd Infantry Brigade, which included infantry, artillery, air defence and combat support. NATO also deployed air policing fighters and 150 US troops to bolster Estonia's defences (Ibid., 14). Estonia faced defence readiness gaps from 2009–12, due to weak procurement planning (Ibid., 43). Therefore, post-2014 efforts focused on advanced technologies, joint procurements and efficiency, resulting in acquisitions such as 14 GM403 radars (2009–10), CV90 IFVs (2014), and K9 'Thunder' howitzers (2017) (Ibid., 59). These changes, along with improved readiness planning, helped Estonia consistently meet NATO's 2% defence spending benchmark from 2015 onward (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Defence spending in million EUR and as a percentage of GDP



Source: Dataset compiled by Slakaityte 2025d.

Estonia's defence model enjoys 81% public support (Veebel 2018, 9), with 91% backing conscription (93% among ethnic Estonians, 83% among non-Estonians) and 64–68% approval among draft-age youth (Lillemäe, Kasearu and Ben-Ari 2024, 914; Lawrence 2023, 23). Unlike its Baltic neighbours, Estonia retained conscription after joining NATO. Compulsory military service for men aged 18–27, with voluntary participation for women since 2013, provides wartime training before conscripts join the reserves. Approximately 3,300 individuals enter service annually, with the National Defence Development Plan (2017–26) targeting 4,000 (Veebel 2018, 11). By 2015 Estonia's active-duty armed forces totalled 3,200 personnel, half of whom were conscripts, within a peacetime force of 6,500. The Scouts Battalion, the largest active-duty unit, serves as a rapid response force. The reservist army remains central, with 270,800 registered members in 2015, including over 16,000 active members of the National Defence League (*Kaitseliit* in Estonian), which expands to 25,000 with sub-organisations. Estonia's wartime force is planned at 21,000 personnel, scaling to 60,000 with full mobilisation, including a high-readiness reserve of 25,000 (Veebel 2018, 11).

In 2016 NATO approved its eFP, with Allied troops arriving in Estonia by spring 2017 (Juurvee 2021, 39). By April 2017 the presence expanded from 750 to 1,650 troops. The UK-led battlegroup included the 5th Battalion the Rifles, which increased from

210 to 900 personnel, and France's 2nd Marine Infantry Regiment, which grew from 50 to 300. A Danish company joined in 2018, complemented by around 200 US soldiers. Germany contributed air policing missions with Eurofighter Typhoons and 130 personnel. Estonia also hosted 400 units of Allied military equipment, including Challenger 2, Leclerc, and M1A2 Abrams tanks, Warrior and Bradley IFVs and AS-90 artillery (Veebel 2018, 74–75). France deployed 300 troops and 12 Leclerc tanks in 2017, 2019 and 2021 as part of NATO's battalion rotations. By 2022, NATO's eFP in Estonia grew to 1,700 troops, predominantly British (ERR 2022).

The 2017 establishment of the Estonian Centre for Defence Investment centralised procurement, improving oversight and aligning capabilities with strategic priorities (Peets 2024, 234). Whole-of-society defence planning optimises resources amid rising regional tensions (Ibid., 236). Furthermore, Estonia adopted advanced frameworks like the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System and the Planning, Programming, Budgeting and Execution process to build a modern, adaptable and operationally ready defence force (Ibid., 254). In 2018 legislative amendments allowed domestic companies to manufacture, maintain, import and export military equipment, significantly advancing Estonia's defence industry (Adamowski 2018).

In 2021, amid rising regional tensions, Estonia prioritised modernising its defence capabilities. Key initiatives included acquiring multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), air and coastal missile defence systems, and expanding cyber and unmanned defence capacities. Estonia, in coordination with Latvia and Lithuania, announced joint MLRS acquisitions and plans to procure NASAMS air defence systems. The country also launched projects for unmanned ground vehicles and naval vessels, aiming to deploy its first unmanned vessel by 2026 (LRT 2021).

The war in Ukraine has driven significant militarisation in Estonia. The 2022 Madrid Summit spurred the development of a NATO-aligned divisional structure to lead ground operations and coordinate Baltic defence efforts. The war has also significantly influenced Estonia's defence priorities, prompting rapid procurement of advanced weaponry, increased Allied presence, and expanded infrastructure. Key investments include HIMARS rocket systems for precision strikes up to 300 km, medium-range air defence systems, increased ammunition stockpiles, and mechanised armoured units. Simultaneously, military infrastructure at Nursipalu, Tapa and Ämari is being upgraded to support Allied forces. The EU's Strategic Compass, adopted in 2022, further reinforces Estonia's defence initiatives, focusing on crisis response and partnerships. Public readiness to participate in national

defence rose sharply to 81% in 2022, supported by increased recruitment and reservist training, underscoring robust national commitment to security (Kaitseministri 2023). Prime Minister Kallas called for 20,000–25,000 NATO troops per Baltic State to ensure immediate defence (Ploom and Murumets 2023, 77). By 2023, 64% of Estonians expressed readiness to participate in defence, with 37,000 rapid response personnel, 40,000 trained reservists, and a total mobilisation potential of 230,000, roughly 20% of the population. The Estonian Defence League, with 18,000 members and 29,000 volunteers, has achieved a 79% snap mobilisation rate (Śliwa 2023, 84–85).

In 2023 Estonia bolstered regional defences with the Baltic States, planning a joint defence line along the Russian and Belarusian borders, featuring fortifications, pre-positioned materials, and rapid deployment bunkers. Annual investments of €3 million for barriers enhance readiness (Tapinienė 2024). On 18 July Estonia approved its 2024–27 defence plan, aligned with NATO goals and the 2021–31 strategy. Over 50% of the budget will fund key acquisitions, including medium-range artillery, air defence systems, six M142 HIMARS, and anti-ship missiles. The Estonian Defence League will receive €300 million, including €65 million for territorial defence. Personnel will grow from 26,700 to 43,700, supported by a British-led NATO brigade. Defence spending is set to reach 3.2% of GDP by 2024, with total investments exceeding €5.6 billion by 2027 (Clobes, Morwinsky and Šimaitytė 2024, 3–4). From August to October 2023, Estonia conducted its largest-ever military exercise, Parseltongue (Ussisõnad), mobilising 10,000 reservists and doubling its territorial defence forces to 20,000. The exercise included joint training with police, border guards, and NATO Allies, honing defensive and hybrid warfare capabilities and strengthening interoperability (NATO 2023a). In 2023 Estonia had 7,200 active soldiers, 17,500 reservists, 44 infantry fighting vehicles, 168 artillery units and two surface vessels (Polyakova et al. 2023).

By 2024 Estonia had advanced its land forces with CV90 infantry fighting vehicles, K9 howitzers, and planned acquisitions of Turkish Otokar and Nurol armoured vehicles by 2025, focusing on modernising its 1st and 2nd Infantry Brigades. Plans for a third brigade and main battle tank units depend on increasing the defence budget to 5% of GDP (Valpolini 2024). As part of the Baltic Defence Line launched in January 2024, Estonia also began constructing layered fortifications along its border with Russia (Ryan 2024). In September 2024, Estonia inaugurated Camp Reedo, its first military base since 1991, located 30 km from the Russian border. Aligned with NATO's 2023 deterrence strategy, the base hosts a US Army unit, fully deployed on rotation since February 2025 (Hoorman and Vincent 2024; ERR 2025).

A new military academy in Tartu, opened in October 2024, now trains 570 personnel, enhancing officer and non-commissioned officer readiness (Manuel 2024a). The UK further strengthened Estonia's defence posture, with its 4th Light Mechanised Brigade Combat Team achieving high readiness for deployment within ten days by mid-2025, complementing 1,000 British troops already stationed in Estonia. Future plans include deploying Challenger 3 tanks and Boxer vehicles, reinforcing NATO's interoperability and deterrence on its eastern flank (Forces News 2024). To bolster territorial defence, Estonia plans to construct 600 concrete bunkers along its eastern border, designed to delay potential aggression and protect troops. Each bunker will accommodate ten soldiers, withstand 152-mm shell impacts, and integrate defences like dragon's teeth and barbed wire. This €60 million project underlines Estonia's commitment to forward defence and deterrence (Militarnyi 2024).

In January 2025, Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal endorsed increasing Estonia's defence spending to 5% of GDP, aligning with US President Donald Trump's push for higher NATO contributions. Estonia's budget was originally set to reach 3.7% by 2026, with further increases requiring accelerated investments. In March, the government formally approved the 5% target for 2026. Michal ruled out tax increases, advocating a mix of EU funding, internal budget cuts, and borrowing. He emphasised that Estonia, like Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, must continue strengthening its defence capabilities in response to the ongoing Russian threat (Ojakivi and Müller 2025; Tammik 2025).

Estonia's defence posture has evolved from urgent self-armament to a highly integrated NATO force backed by advanced national capabilities, with the domestic defence industry playing an increasingly central role in sustaining this progress. The Estonian Defence Industry Association, comprising 130 companies and over 10,000 employees, drives innovation and enhances national defence capabilities (Veebel 2018, 52; Defence Estonia 2024). Estonia hosts Milrem Robotics, a key developer of unmanned ground vehicles (Milrem Robotics 2025). Acquired by the EDGE Group in 2023, Milrem produces advanced 8×8 robotic platforms, enhancing NATO's autonomous warfare and force multiplication capabilities (Valpolini and Novichkov 2025). With sustained investment, strategic alignment, and broad public support, Estonia has positioned itself as a credible front-line contributor to European and transatlantic security.

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Estonia integrates societal resilience into defence through education, collaboration and industry, leading the Baltics in defence readiness, with 60% of its population prepared to engage during an attack. The Estonian Defence League further reinforces civilian readiness through local training and rapid mobilisation capacity (Kaitseliit 2025). Compulsory high school defence classes and youth programmes prepare conscripts, while cyber conscription bridges the IT sector and military to strengthen cyber capabilities (Lillemäe, Kasearu and Ben-Ari 2024, 913–21; Kikas 2023). Public initiatives like the 'Ready Together' platform and multilingual crisis guides improve community preparedness (Estonian Rescue Board 2024).

Estonia has strengthened its crisis preparedness through key publications and action plans: *The Code of Conduct for Crisis Situations* (2018) provided initial guidance on self-protection during emergencies. In 2022, the Estonian Rescue Board released *Be Prepared: What to Do in a Crisis Situation* (Päästeamet 2022), expanding public awareness on crisis response. In February 2024 the government approved a civil defence framework and action plan, prioritising evacuation capabilities, shelter development, emergency warning systems and crisis medicine (ERR News 2024a). Since 2022 Estonia has initiated the construction of a bunker network, and raised defence spending to over 3.38% of GDP (KAM 2025a). These measures are funded primarily by national budget allocations, with a focus on civilian protection and resilience (Torralba 2024; NATO PA 2024). By 2024 over 210 public shelters accommodating 160,000 people had been established, with plans for further expansion and the introduction of shelter mapping apps. A 2024 draft law requires new buildings over 1,200 m^2 to include shelters, reflecting and inspired by Finnish practices to address regional security threats (ERR News 2024b; Tallinn 2022).

Nevertheless, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is consistently seen as a threat to Estonia's security, with concern peaking at 77% in mid-2022 and stabilising between 70% and 73% from mid-2023 to late 2024, highlighting sustained regional unease (Eurobarometer 2024).

CONCLUSION: REGIONAL DYNAMICS OF THE NORTH-EASTERN FLANK

NATO's north-eastern flank has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a post-Soviet frontier into a key component of the Alliance's collective defence strategy. This shift has been driven by substantial military modernisation, increased societal resilience and deeper integration into NATO's deterrence frameworks. These efforts strengthen the region's capacity to address conventional and hybrid threats and provide a critical layer of defence against Russia's evolving military posture and ambitions. The cases discussed here of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia also point to some key regional dynamics.

Unlike other countries in the Baltic Sea region (see *'Northern horizon: strengthening security in the Baltic Sea region'*) which primarily focused on demilitarisation and military downsizing in the post-Cold War period, the four countries addressed in this report faced the challenge of building their armed forces and defence institutions while also confronting the legacy of Soviet era. The Baltic States had to construct their military frameworks from the ground up while simultaneously establishing new legal systems, managing profound market liberalisation, navigating hyperinflation, and negotiating the withdrawal of Russian troops from their sovereign territories. Poland – though not starting from zero – also underwent a radical transformation, transitioning from a socialist regime and planned economy to adopting Western governance, economic norms and military standards. For all four countries, NATO and EU memberships were identified as indispensable pillars of national sovereignty and security. Poland secured NATO membership in 1999, while the Baltic States joined the Alliance in 2004, marking their full integration into the Western security architecture. The process culminated in all four nations becoming EU members in 2004, solidifying their alignment with the Euro-Atlantic community. The shared

historical experiences and enduring geopolitical reality of proximity to Russia continued to impact a unified strategic outlook in the region. The shared perception of Russian threat effectively galvanised political will in all four states, enabling swift reforms and cohesive regional strategies once the security situation in the Eastern Neighbourhood escalated.

The four states have integrated NATO forces and command structures, epitomising the Alliance's commitment to deterrence-by-denial. This approach was significantly strengthened following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. A key outcome of the NATO Summit in Warsaw in June 2016 was the establishment of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States and Poland from 2017 onward. These eFP battlegroups, along with permanent US deployments and multinational command structures such as Multinational Division North, form a layered and dynamic defence posture designed to deter any potential aggression. Strategic infrastructure upgrades across the region have also bolstered NATO's north-eastern defence. Poland's development as a logistical hub includes permanent US V Corps Forward Command facilities and extensive pre-positioning of NATO equipment. Latvia's Ādaži base has become the operational heart of NATO's Multinational Division North, while Estonia's newly established Camp Reedo near the Russian border strengthens forward defence capabilities. In Lithuania, enhanced training facilities and logistical support infrastructure enable the integration of the Allied battlegroups. These developments, along with pre-positioned assets and seamless interoperability, reinforce NATO's capacity for rapid response and deterrence in the region.

All four nations have achieved the 2014 NATO Defence Investment Pledge of allocating 2% of GDP to defence spending. Estonia and Poland reached this benchmark in 2015, followed by Latvia in 2018 and Lithuania in 2019. By March 2025, Poland (4.48%), Lithuania (3.85%), Latvia (3.73%), and Estonia (3.38%) rank among NATO's highest defence spenders. These investments have boosted operational readiness and NATO interoperability by focusing on modernising ground forces, air defence, and cyber resilience to address evolving threats.

While responses to emerging threats from Russia and Belarus appear uniform – as illustrated by a coordinated effort to fortify the EU's external border as well as the 19th of March 2025 announcement by Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia of their withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention, which bans the use of anti-personnel landmines (Stankevičius 2025) – significant gaps remain. The absence of a unified defence procurement strategy across the region – and in Europe at large – leads to the fragmentation of logistics, maintenance and training, weakening NATO's

operational effectiveness. For instance, there are 172 different weapons systems in Europe compared to just 32 in the US. This lack of standardisation inflates costs, slows deployment and weakens Europe's ability to sustain high-intensity warfare. The rapid military expansion, while reinforcing NATO's north-eastern flank, also complicates ammunition supply, spare parts availability, and interoperability, making long-term sustainment increasingly challenging. Urgent reforms in military research and development, production integration, and procurement coordination are essential to ensure Europe's defence sector can deliver the weapons needed to deter Russia and other adversaries. Streamlining production – particularly for armoured vehicles, missile systems, and air defence assets – would enhance the region's combat readiness, sustainment and resilience. Without decisive action Europe risks falling further behind, deepening reliance on external suppliers and leaving NATO's north-eastern flank dangerously exposed.

At the same time, the Baltic States maintain predominantly land-centric military structures, with limited air and naval capabilities – creating strategic vulnerabilities for NATO's force posture and operational planning. As a result, they remain heavily dependent on Allied air and maritime forces for deterrence and rapid response. This dependence underscores the need for sustained NATO air policing, potentially evolving into a more comprehensive Air Defence Mission, supplementing their Ground-Based Air Defence systems. In contrast, Poland – with significantly greater manpower, territory and total defence expenditure in absolute terms – fields a more balanced force across all domains. However, the vulnerability of critical infrastructure and military assets across all four states – driven by their proximity to mainland Russian and Belarusian forces as well as Kaliningrad's Anti-Access/Area Denial (known as A2/AD) systems, which include layered missile defences and long-range strike capabilities – further underscores the need for NATO-wide coordination to close operational gaps.

The intensified militarisation of NATO's north-eastern flank reflects not only the evolving threat from Russia but also growing uncertainty over long-term US commitment to collective defence. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have historically maintained close ties with the United States, which was instrumental in their accession to both NATO and the EU. While the region continues to value US security guarantees, these frontline states are now leading an unprecedented drive for regional security, committing to defence spending levels of 5% of GDP or higher – far exceeding NATO's current 2% benchmark. This shift signals both a drive for greater self-reliance – through expanded force structures, integrated air and missile defence, fortified borders and defence-industrial investment – and a pragmatic

response to Washington's call for increased European burden-sharing, reinforcing strategic cohesion without sacrificing regional autonomy.

In all four cases, societal resilience is increasingly recognised as a vital aspect of defence strategy. Poland's 'Train with the Army' and voluntary summer military training initiatives demonstrate the operationalisation of the 'total defence' concept, as do Lithuania's citizen resistance training programmes, Latvia's national defence curriculum and Estonia's extensive network of reservists. Public trust in the military and strong support for NATO membership remain unshaken across the region, reflecting a shared commitment to collective security. However, challenges persist, including lag in civil defence infrastructure and insufficient and uneven shelter coverage, and concerns over shelter quality – underscoring the need for sustained investment in public preparedness and crisis response capabilities.

Overall, these four case profiles of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia highlight their proactive commitment to NATO's collective defence. This is evident through their high and increasing defence budgets, ongoing military modernisation efforts, strengthened collaboration with Western Allies, and the implementation of new measures to enhance civil preparedness. As such, the north-eastern flank stands as a vital and indispensable pillar of regional and national security frameworks. However, the region's unprecedented militarisation demands not only sustained defence investments, industrial mobilisation and societal engagement but also strategic solutions to lingering issues. Key questions remain on how to integrate fragmented defence industries, secure sustainable and long-term funding, and mobilise a skilled workforce on a large scale. Without addressing these gaps, the remarkable strides made by Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in solidifying their role as a cornerstone of NATO's collective defence could be at risk. Defence spending across all NATO members must also increase to sustain modernisation efforts, support scalable logistical systems, and invest in the emerging technologies vital for maintaining a credible deterrence. Failure to act risks undermining the security achievements of the Baltic frontier and weakening NATO's cohesion.

The north-eastern flank stands at a critical juncture. As the strategic environment grows more complex, preparation is no longer optional – it is imperative. NATO's credibility rests on convincing defence, and collective readiness has never been more essential. Several areas demand deeper analysis to refine NATO's posture on its north-eastern flank. Future research should assess the long-term viability of elevated defence spending and its economic trade-offs, as well as the effectiveness of total defence strategies and civilian preparedness across varying societal

contexts. The persistent fragmentation of defence procurement and industry across the region calls for targeted studies on integration, scalability and joint capability development. Operational limitations in the air and maritime domains – particularly in relation to the expanding military capabilities based in Kaliningrad – warrant focused scenario analysis and planning. Finally, as questions emerge regarding the consistency of US strategic engagement, further attention is needed on strengthening European contributions within NATO, reinforcing Alliance cohesion, and enhancing collective readiness across all domains. Addressing these issues is essential to ensuring that NATO's north-eastern frontier remains not only a bulwark of deterrence but a credible and enduring pillar of collective defence.

NOTES

1 All values were converted using generative artificial intelligence provided by OpenAI. Exchange rates were based on publicly available information and are subject to fluctuation over time.

2 This target was reaffirmed in 2008 (Lawrence and Jermalavičius 2013, 34) but only achieved in 2018 (NDR 2024).

3 NATO plans to invest €160 million in infrastructure at the Port of Liepāja, including new berths, support facilities, and dredging. A naval base at Karosta, a historic military harbour, will span 35 hectares according to a 2020 Latvian Ministry of Defence announcement (BTJ 2024).

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