Beefing up the Baltics

The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are increasing their defence budgets and beefing up their armed forces in response to the Russian threat, but still rely on their NATO allies for vital capabilities. Nicholas Fiorenza reports on how the three countries are improving their military effectiveness and how the NATO enhanced Forward Presence strategy is aiding this effort.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are upping their defence spending in line with the NATO mandated target of 2% of GDP. Estonia has been among the only NATO alliance member states to spend 2% of GDP on defence, committing itself to do so in 2012 and achieving it in 2015, according to NATO figures. The country has actually exceeded this level and its government has pledged to not spend less than the current 2.2%. When Estonia made the commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence, Latvian and Lithuanian spending was at among the lowest levels in the alliance, below 1%, but the two countries pledged to reach 2% of GDP by the end of this decade and are expected to achieve it two years ahead of schedule in 2018.

Estonian conscripts march in formation during their graduation ceremony in Tallinn, Estonia, on 5 September 2016. Estonian Defence Force conscripts undergo three months of basic training before conducting another 7-8 months of leadership and military occupational specialty training. (US Army/Spc Rachel Diehm)
Lithuania has been steadily increasing defence spending from 0.77% of GDP in 2013 to 1.8% in 2017, according to the Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence (MND). The ministry plans to increase the defence budget by 21% from EUR723.8 million (USD807.7 million) in 2017 to EUR873 million in 2018 to reach 2.07% of GDP.

The three countries have also made great strides in reaching the NATO guideline of spending 20% of their defence budgets on major equipment and related research and development (R&D). Estonia achieved 22.15% in 2014, after which it fell and fluctuated, but it is now at about 19%. Lithuania reached 21.55% in 2015, rising to 30% in 2016 and 32% this year, which its Ministry of Defence (MoD) claims is the highest level in NATO. Latvia is also expected to exceed 20% this year.

Latvia and Lithuania have been spending more than half their defence budgets on military and civilian personnel, including pensions, with Lithuania exceeding 65% until the middle of the decade. Both countries have brought this down to just more than 40%, while Estonia has not exceeded that level in the same period and is now at 35%.

Of the three states, Lithuania spends the lowest percentage on infrastructure, but has surpassed 5% of defence spending this year. Latvia’s spending on infrastructure has fluctuated considerably during the past 10 years, starting at 5.78% of the defence budget in 2010 and estimated at 13.56% this year. Estonia’s infrastructure spending has also slightly fluctuated, averaging 10% of GDP and reaching an estimated 11.25% this year.

Estonia spends the largest percentage of its defence budget on other items, including operations, maintenance, and other R&D, reaching a high of 47.71% in 2012 and an estimated 34.5% in 2017. Latvia and Lithuania’s percentage of spending on other items has generally been in the twenties, reaching an estimated 25.73% and 21.31% respectively this year.

Estonia

Estonia has a defence establishment similar to that of Finland and conducts joint procurement of certain capabilities with the Finns, as General Riho Terras, commander of the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF), told Jane’s. The country has 3,400 regular soldiers, from which officers and trainers are drawn, along with an annual intake of 3,500 conscripts. Plans call for the armed forces to be able to mobilise to a level of 21,000 soldiers within 48 hours. The number of regulars is to increase to 3,800, the annual input of conscripts to 4,000, and Estonia plans to be able to mobilise to a level of 25,000 troops by 2026.

Under the Estonian MoD’s national Defence Development Plan 2013–22 all reservists who have received training from the EDF as part of their compulsory military service will be included in Estonia’s 60,000-strong primary readiness and supplemental reserves. Under the plan the number of reserves will grow to 90,000 by 2022.
The first dozen CV90 infantry fighting vehicles for Estonia were delivered from the Netherlands in October 2016, with final deliveries expected by 2019. (Estonian MoD)

The EDF is also building up the capabilities of its two infantry brigades. The 1st Infantry Brigade is being developed as an armoured manoeuvre unit and will receive new small arms by 2021. The brigade's professional Scouts Battalion will receive 44 CV90 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) by 2019, while the other manoeuvre battalions will be equipped with armoured personnel carriers (APCs). The firepower and rapid response capabilities of the 2nd Infantry Brigade will be developed by 2022.

The second-hand South Korean K9 155 mm self-propelled howitzers (SPHs) Estonia is acquiring jointly with Finland are expected to arrive in 2021. Anti-tank missile systems will be acquired for both brigades. The entire EDF force is receiving splinter- and bullet-proof jackets and a night-vision capability is being developed.

**Latvia**

Latvia has 6,500 professional soldiers, as well as 8,000 Zemessardze (national guard) personnel and 3,000 reservists. Since early 2007 the regular army has consisted only of professional soldiers on contract. Meanwhile, reserve soldiers can be called up for training to develop their skills and capabilities so that they can be fully integrated into armed forces units.

Latvia's chief of defence staff, General Leonids Kalnins, told Jane's in June that the extra spending resulting from increasing defence spending to 2% of GDP would be invested in infrastructure, personnel, and equipment. The Latvian army's light infantry brigade is being converted into a mechanised brigade by the end of 2018. Latvia uses upgraded CVR(T) (Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance-Tracked) vehicles acquired from the United Kingdom, some of which are being armed with Spike anti-tank missiles. One of Latvia's largest procurement programmes is the acquisition of 47 second-hand M109A5Oe 155 mm SPHs from Austria under an MoD agreement between the two countries.
Lithuania

In 2015 Lithuania became the first country in Europe to reintroduce conscription, having abolished it in 2008. The annual intake of conscripts is growing from 3,000 to 3,500 this year and to 4,000 in 2018. Conscripts are used to man operational units and provide a pool for professional service, for the volunteer home guard, and for reserve forces, according to the Lithuanian MoD. About 20% of conscripts became professional soldiers in 2016.

The number of Lithuanian military personnel has grown from 12,700 in 2009 to 16,500 in 2016 and will reach 19,740 in 2018, according to the MoD. The number of professional soldiers increased by 515 to 8,660 in 2016.

Lithuania created a national rapid reaction force in 2014, consisting of two battalion-sized battlegroups capable of being ready in 2–24 hours. The force holds annual large-scale live exercises.

Under Lithuania’s new defence concept the country’s land forces have a new structure that more closely aligns peacetime and wartime structures to increase readiness, according to the MoD. The army is becoming increasingly mechanised, with the ‘Iron Wolf’ mechanised brigade having grown from three infantry battalions to four mounted in M113 APCs, as well as an artillery battalion with Panzerhaubitze (PzH) 2000 155 mm SPHs. Two of the brigade’s infantry battalions — Grand Duke Algirdas and Grand Duchess Birute Uhlans — will receive Boxer multirole armoured vehicles and their M113s will be transferred to the ‘Žemaitija’ motorised infantry brigade, which was stood up in western Lithuania in January 2016, and consists of two infantry battalions and an artillery battalion with towed guns. The MoD foresees the third ‘Aukstaitija’ infantry brigade formed of institutional units and reserves.

Lithuanian Army M113 APCs. Two of the Lithuanian ‘Iron Wolf’ mechanised brigade’s infantry battalions are to receive Boxer multirole armoured vehicles, with their M113s transferred to the ‘Žemaitija’ motorised infantry brigade. (Lithuanian Ministry of Defence)

Lithuania plans to spend more than EUR2.5 billion on the modernisation of its armed forces. The acquisition of Boxer armoured vehicles is Lithuania’s largest military procurement programme to date, with its order for 88 vehicles placed through the Organisation for Joint Armament Co-operation (OCCAR) in August 2016 worth nearly EUR390 million. The Lithuanian Boxer IFVs will
be armed with Orbital ATK Armament Systems’ MK44 30 mm cannons, 7.62 mm machine guns, and Spike LR anti-tank missiles installed in Rafael Advanced Defense Systems Samson Mk II remote weapon stations, costing a further EUR4.38 million, according to the Lithuanian MoD.

Lithuania is the only country so far buying the IFV version of the Boxer, which is already in service with the German and Dutch armies in other configurations. Lithuania will receive Boxers with IFV squad, platoon, company commander, and command post modules, plus three training versions. Two driver trainer versions will be delivered by the end of the year, IFV deliveries will begin in 2019, and final deliveries are expected in 2021. In Lithuanian service the Boxer IFV will be known as the Vilkas (Wolf).

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The first photograph released of the Lithuanian Boxer 8x8 in the IFV role and fitted with an Elbit UT-30 Mk 2 turret. (Rheinmetall)

Naval focus on mine countermeasures

The Baltic states’ small navies are largely focused on mine clearing, with mine countermeasures vessels (MCMVs) having been acquired second-hand from NATO allies. Estonia and Lithuania have MCMVs from the United Kingdom, while Latvia has Tripartite minehunters from the Netherlands.
The Latvian Navy’s five Tripartite-class minehunters have been acquired from the Netherlands. (Bruno De Groote)

The Estonian Navy is upgrading its three Sandown-class MCMVs under a February 2016 contract with Thales, including the installation of new sonars, to extend their lifetime to 2030.

The Estonian Navy minehunter Admiral Cowan (ex-Sandown) is one of three Sandown-class minehunters acquired from the UK Royal Navy. (Estonian MoD)

While Lithuania has a coastal patrol capability and Latvia also has a limited capability in this area, Estonia has given up plans to replace its retired coastal patrol boats, despite its Sandown-class MCMVs having a limited capability with their 23 mm guns.

**Air defences**

NATO has discouraged the Baltic states from acquiring combat aircraft and has instead been policing their airspace since they became alliance members at the end of March 2004. NATO’s air-policing mission began from that point with four-month rotations, alternating among air forces of different alliance countries and operating out of Siauliai Air Base in Lithuania. After the Russian annexation of Crimea and the beginning of fighting in eastern Ukraine, NATO air policing over the Baltics was expanded in terms of the number of aircraft committed and with the addition of Ämari Air Base in Estonia. The Baltic states provide air surveillance for NATO air policing with radars through the Baltic Air Surveillance Network (BALTNET).
The Estonian Air Force’s sole remaining An-2 transport aircraft is being replaced by two PZL Mielec M28 Skytruck aircraft gifted by the United States. (Jamie Hunter)

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Siauliai and Āmari are both being expanded, not only to base NATO air policing aircraft but also so that they can receive C-17 and C-5 airlifters. Estonia and Lithuania depend on NATO for long-range air transport in the form of the three C-17s of the alliance’s Strategic Airlift Capability programme.

For shorter ranges Lithuania has three C-27J Spartan transports. The United States is donating two mothballed PZL Mielec M28 Skytruck aircraft to Estonia to replace its single An-2 transport aircraft.

All three countries are participating in NATO’s Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS) programme, based around the RQ-4B Global Hawk Block 40 high-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial system (UAS).

NATO’s first Northrop Grumman RQ-4B Block 40 Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicle for the Allied Ground Surveillance (AGS) programme, in which the Baltic states are participants. (Northrop Grumman)

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All three also have plans to renew their rotary-wing fleets, which consist mainly of Russian-built helicopters.

Latvia has identified a requirement for medium-range air-defence systems in addition to its current RBS 70 and planned Stinger manportable air-defence systems, while Lithuania is acquiring the Norwegian Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS), which will be delivered by 2020.

Enhanced Forward Presence

The land forces of all three Baltic states have been reinforced this year by NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battalions, which the alliance declared fully operational at the end of August. Each battalion is integrated into a brigade of the host nation's army.

The Estonian 1st Mechanised Brigade hosts the British-led battalion, which also includes French and Hungarian contingents. The Canadian-led battalion, which consists of Albanian, Italian, Polish, Slovenian, and Spanish troops, is hosted by the Latvian Land Forces Infantry Brigade. The German-led battalion includes troops from Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway, and is hosted by the Lithuanian 'Iron Wolf' Mechanised Infantry Brigade.
An armoured column conducting a river crossing near Rukla in Lithuania on 20 June during Exercise ‘Iron Wolf 2017’. (IHS Markit/Nicholas Fiorenza)

The eFP battalions bring with them the main battle tanks (MBTs) the Baltic states lack and other equipment to bolster their capabilities. The United Kingdom brought Challenger 2 MBTs and France contributed Leclerc MBTs to Estonia; Spain came to Latvia with the latest version of the Leopard 2E MBT and Poland with PT-91 tanks; while German Leopard 2A6s and Norwegian Leopard 2A4s were deployed to Lithuania. In addition the United Kingdom deployed AS90 SPHs to Estonia and Germany deployed PzH 2000s to Lithuania. Given that the latter are systems being acquired by Lithuania, the eFP deployments allowed German and Lithuanian PzH 2000s to exercise together, including conducting live firing.

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**Baltic multinational participation**

In addition to hosting multinational forces Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania also participate in multinational units of their NATO and EU allies and among themselves. The Baltic Battalion, consisting of companies from all three Baltic states, has been offered to the NATO Response Force (NRF) and could participate in the alliance’s follow-on forces or operations. All three countries have participated in NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the ‘Resolute Support’ training mission that replaced it in Afghanistan. MCMVs from all three countries participate in NATO’s Standing Naval MCM Group One (SNMCMG1).

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Facing hybrid and cyber threats

Estonia hosts NATO’s Co-operative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. Pictured is a photograph from the centre’s ‘Locked Shields’ exercise. (NATO CCD COE)

The three Baltic states are preparing for cyber and hybrid threats as well as conventional military ones. Estonia hosts NATO’s Co-operative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn and, as holder of the European Union’s rotating six-month presidency until the end of this year, organised the first ever cyber training exercise, ‘EU CYBRID 2017’, for European defence ministers in September, which tested how they would deal with a major cyber attack. One of the focuses of ‘EU CYBRID 2017’ was strategic communication, which is one of the activities of NATO’s Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence hosted by Latvia in Riga.

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Estonian special forces personnel undergoing training: an activity that has become more vital in recent years in light of the perceived threat from Russia. (Estonian Ministry of Defence)

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