

BOLSTERING BALTIC DEFENSE

Deterrence Through International Support

**Llewellyn Hunt
September 2018**



Center *for*
European Policy
Analysis

All opinions are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the position or views of the institutions they represent or the Center for European Policy Analysis.

About CEPA

The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) is a 501(c)(3), non-profit, non-partisan, public policy research institute. Our mission is to promote an economically vibrant, strategically secure, and politically free Europe with close and enduring ties to the United States. Our analytical team consists of the world's leading experts on Central East Europe, Russia, and its neighbors. Through cutting-edge research, analysis, and programs we provide fresh insight on energy, security, and defense to government officials and agencies; we help transatlantic businesses navigate changing strategic landscapes; and we build networks of future Atlanticist leaders.

© 2018 by the Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington, DC. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without permission in writing from the Center for European Policy Analysis, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in news articles, critical articles or reviews.

Center for European Policy Analysis
1275 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20004
E-mail: info@cepa.org
www.cepa.org

Cover image: "IRON LIGHT" by Sgt. Kirstin Merrimarahajara / U.S. Department of Defense.

BOLSTERING BALTIC DEFENSE

Deterrence Through International Support

Llewellyn Hunt

2018 Title VIII CEE Area Studies Fellow

September 2018



Center *for*
European Policy
Analysis

The Issue

Although exercise Saber Strike 18 was successful in demonstrating the strength and unity that underpins NATO's deterrence strategy to secure the independence of the Baltic states, conventional Russian forces still outweigh U.S. and European forces in the region. This poses an existential threat to the security and sovereignty of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia that must be countered. How could the Alliance shift the conventional balance and thus support NATO's mission in the region?

INTRODUCTION

The exercise on display for military observers and diplomats for Saber Strike 18, held on June 11, 2018 at Pabradė Training Area, Lithuania, sent a clear message to NATO's enemies. It opened with a Special Operations raid on an adversary Surface-to-Air Missile site and culminated with an armada of tanks, armored vehicles, and aircraft thundering in to support a swarm of Lithuanian active and reservist

“The Baltic states are up against an immense *Russian conventional force that must be countered.*”

soldiers clearing a mock city. The strength and unity that was on display is the very heart of the deterrent strategy to preserve the independence of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

Due to an extensive modernization effort, conventional Russian forces in the region vastly outweigh U.S. and European forces in the area. The Baltic defensive concept rests upon the total mobilization of all three countries, as well as a unified and coherent NATO response to

any existential threat. Yet, after years of neglect, the ability of the Baltic countries to create the conditions for a successful insurgency has been degraded.¹ NATO is doing much to provide for territorial defense, but the ability of Baltic armies to invest in these expensive and complicated projects is limited as they focus on reconstruction.

The Baltic states are up against an immense Russian conventional force that must be countered. This paper assesses the Russian threat, and compares it to the capabilities of the Baltic armies and other NATO assets in the region. With these in mind, the proposed recommendations will aid in fielding capital-intensive capabilities that change the conventional balance and the Russian calculus, and support NATO's mission in the region.

THE IMBALANCE IN THE BALTIC

The Russian Threat

The Russian threat to the Baltic states is very real. The Zapad 2018 Russian military exercises both demonstrated how Russia is able to move large numbers of soldiers and material in a short period of time. There is a danger that, should Russia exert military force against the Baltic countries, NATO will simply be too distant to effectively respond, too politically or organizationally fractured to do so coherently, and will lack the resolve to assure security. Though Russia may seem in some regards to be a waning power with a crumbling economy, it still possesses capabilities that Europe has been unable to maintain.² For example, a single Russian Tank Guards Division has more heavy armor than all of Germany.³ Two of these

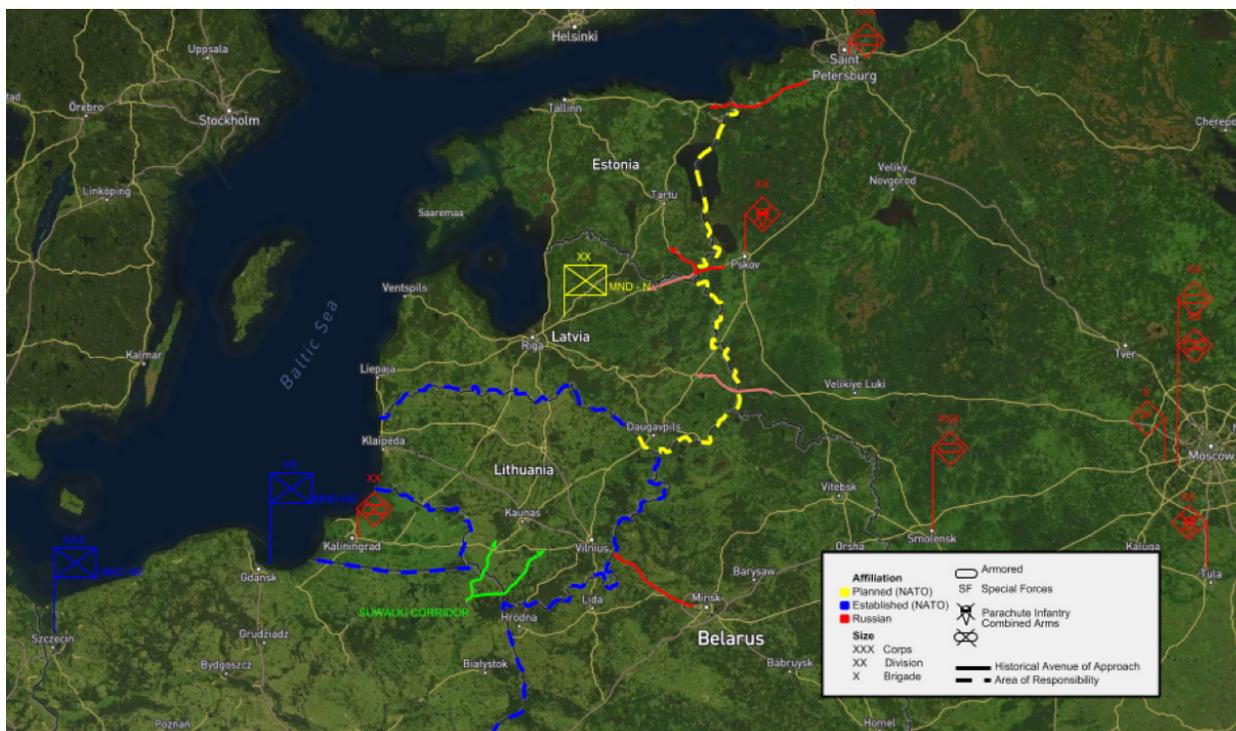


Figure 1: Map of the regional planned NATO command structure, major ground commands in the Western Military District of the Russian Federation, and historically used avenues of approach. The yellow region represents the proposed area of responsibility for the MND-N at the time of publication. Note: the entirety of this map is under Russian air defense coverage and within range of Russian land-based strike.⁴ © Mapbox.

Divisions comprise a “Guards Army,” of which Russia has two. This is still only part of the picture when comparing land forces and does not account for independent airborne divisions and other tactical groups which could provide reinforcements in a crisis. The Russian defense industrial base has invested substantially in a constellation of technologies: mobile RADARs, surface-to-air missile systems, long-range artillery and missiles, jammers, signals intelligence devices of all sizes, and cyber warfare tools. In warfare, these technologies would provide a blanket under which Russian troops, aircraft, and ships could operate. In contrast, NATO has badly neglected these same capabilities over the course of military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan and must relearn to use them. While NATO might maintain overall numerical and qualitative

superiority, a fast-moving crisis, leveraging geography and surprise, would mitigate these advantages.⁵

Infrastructure and geographic features benefit the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and must be considered in any crisis. Kaliningrad Oblast, located between Lithuania and Poland, permits Russia to expand its RADAR and missile coverage to encompass the entire Baltic Region, the Baltic Sea, and part of Poland. Russian possession of this citadel also allows them to harass and disrupt any NATO movement from the West through a chokepoint between Belarus and Kaliningrad, called the Suwałki Corridor.⁶ Poorly developed rail and road networks throughout the region will delay any NATO forces attempting to liberate or reinforce the Baltic region. The

question today is not if there would be disruption or an attack on NATO's rear areas, but rather to what extent.

General Conditions of the Armies of the Baltic Countries

Following the independence of the Baltic countries from the Soviet Union in 1991, Baltic armies strove to integrate with Europe and NATO. As part of an ambitious campaign to purge the Soviet legacy from public institutions, the armed forces of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were completely de-constructed and re-constituted in a structure that complied with NATO standards, eventually joining in 2004. This required immense foreign support and significant investment in equipment, planning, and training. But with small economies, their maximum expenditure even at NATO's agreed 2% threshold remains small in absolute terms compared to many others in the Alliance.

A major reduction in defense investment occurred during the global financial crisis, as GDP strongly contracted. Estonia maintained spending at a near 2% threshold, while Latvia and Lithuania decreased allocations well below this target.⁷ The result was a long-term atrophy of readiness, the exhaustion of equipment, and delay of necessary investments. Today, modernization efforts are still beset by significant constraints. The Baltic countries strive to rebuild their armies in response to an urgent threat by acquiring the largest amount of equipment at the lowest possible price, as fast as possible. It is, in practice, an impossible feat to combine all three efficiencies.⁸

Compounding the issue of small absolute defense expenditures is the issue of total potential military mass.⁹ The Baltic armed forces face a significant constraint on the maximum size of their standing formations in peacetime and war. Latvia and Estonia in particular face



"Review of troops, held after Vostok 2018 military manoeuvres" by the Kremlin under CC BY 4.0.

crippling shortages in manpower due to their small, shrinking populations. This leads to an ever-smaller tax base and recruiting pool. The maximum size maintainable has to be balanced with remuneration and equipping costs. In the case of Estonia, more resources must be devoted to recruiting and retention. No capability growth will be possible without more soldiers.

“A major reduction in defense investment occurred during the Global Financial Crisis, as GDP strongly contracted.”

Looking to the future, all Baltic investments through 2025 and beyond will focus on meeting NATO’s mandated capability requirements or acquiring basic equipment on different timetables. For the present, all three states will have to surge defense allocations to slowly

fill the investment gap.¹⁰ The extent to which increased defense spending is necessary and the speed in which this can be accomplished varies greatly between Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. However, in the words of one NATO official, “2% of ‘nothing’ is still ‘nothing.’”¹¹ What can be individually or even collectively accomplished is complicated by divergent needs in modernization, little ability to surge spending, and the complicated and capital intensive nature of projects that will change the conventional balance.

NATO Preparedness

Cold War NATO defense planning was extensively developed and regularly exercised with well-defined roles for units. With the end of the Cold War, NATO downsized significantly. Enlargement of the Alliance generated new security problems, yet the means available continued to shrink. The lack of planning for territorial defense persisted and was viewed as tolerable considering the lack of a perceived threat from Russia and the focus on Afghanistan. Following the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and invasion of Ukraine in 2014, NATO was shocked into reevaluating its role. A greater concentration on territorial defense was clearly needed with a re-configuration away from light, deployable forces to those that might be able to assure Allies on Europe’s frontline.

At the Warsaw Summit of 2016, to reassure the Baltic countries (and Poland), NATO stationed four enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) Battalions in the region. These forces are to serve as tripwires. In the event of a crisis, the battalions would ensure that not only local troops would be fighting, but also that those from the UK, United States, Germany, Canada, and other contributing nations would

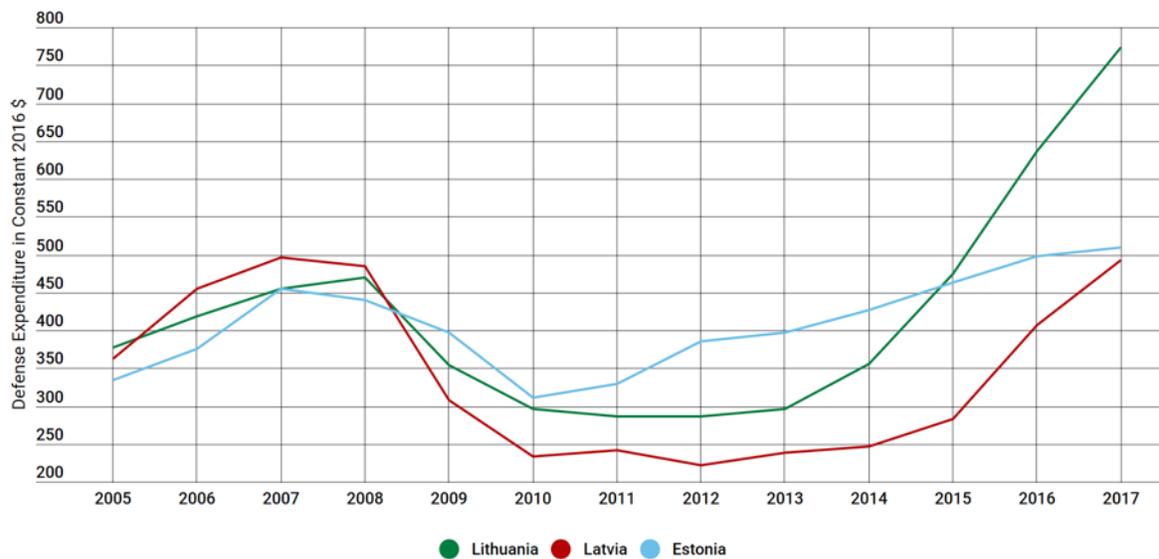


Figure 2: Defense Expenditures over time in the Baltic Region. Much of the defense reductions were due to the Global Financial Crisis. While Latvia and Lithuania sharply reduced spending to ~1% of GDP, Estonia maintained spending at or near 2%. Allocations remained small and contracted nonetheless. Data pulled from “Military Expenditure Database,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*.

be engaged. This implied that these countries would be forced to broaden their involvement. At the Warsaw Summit of 2016, NATO accepted the creation of a Multinational Division - North East (MND-NE). To provide clearer Command and Control, MND-NE was made subordinate to the existing regional command, Multinational Corps North East (MNC-NE). These headquarters are intended to function as a command, control, and communication framework under which regional and NATO units of smaller size can “plug into” for training or combat.

These actions, however, did not entirely address the problem of improving command, control, and communication in the region. At the 2018 Brussels Summit, Denmark, Latvia, and Estonia concluded an agreement to establish Multinational Division - North (MND - N), a complement to MND-NE and a subordinate organization to MNC-NE.¹² This move represented a leap forward in establishing a cogent, structured defense plan for the Baltic

region. Despite this highly commendable step toward a more coherent regional defense that will serve as a conduit through which NATO support might be organized, more must be accomplished.

DEFENDING LITHUANIA, LATVIA, AND ESTONIA

Understanding the Russian overmatch in resources and capabilities, the Baltic countries’ deterrence strategy is to delay any Russian advance through a punishing insurgency. They project that a constant and brutal resistance with standing orders to never surrender will survive until reinforcement. The deterrent value of this strategy is in the Russian Army’s memory of the insurgency in Chechnya, a campaign marked by an extremely destructive insurgency that swamped Russian forces, despite their overwhelming advantage in numbers and firepower. However, with the

integrated systems that Russia has in place—an air defense network, ground-based missiles, and an electronic warfare blanket—the Baltic countries can neither be certain of NATO reinforcement, nor their ability to sustain an effective insurgency in the Baltic region through

“Though Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia may have unified political messaging on the international stage, they will need external aid and pressure to work together.”

resupply. Electronic Warfare systems could jam or intercept radio transmissions, or even provide detailed information on unit locations. Air Defense Networks would deny air support, while ground-based strike would allow the destruction of depots, headquarters, and rail or road junctions. Simply put, the overmatch in numbers between NATO and Russia in the

Baltic region is so great that ammunition stocks could be wholly exhausted without effectively delaying an advance. Should Russian forces reach the Suwałki Corridor, any operation to resupply or liberate becomes more difficult. These factors directly undermine the deterrent value of insurgency and complicates any potential post-crisis settlement.

Though MND-N is coming into operation, the scope of its authority remains undefined. In addition, MND-NE has only just achieved its Initial Operational Capability (IOC) this year. The effort towards a comprehensive structure for defense in the Baltic region will take a considerable amount of time. Many of these elements will likely be defined in the coming months and years. Nevertheless, the needs of the Baltic countries and the nature of NATO support in the region will have to be tailored to address this problem set.

Though Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia may have unified political messaging on the international stage, they will need external aid and pressure to work together. An appetite for cooperation exists, yet defense planners in the Baltic countries consider cooperation an option to pursue only after more critical needs are met or after the pressure of resource constraints is relieved. While military necessity lumps these countries together, external aid will help to foster new levels of cooperation.

THE WAY FORWARD

If we assess that there is an imbalance and that the political conditions that might be conducive to a crisis exist now or may exist within the next decade, action must be taken now, given the time-intensive nature of military planning and acquisitions. The consequences for not having an adequate plan and ability for defense are dire and risk discrediting NATO as well as

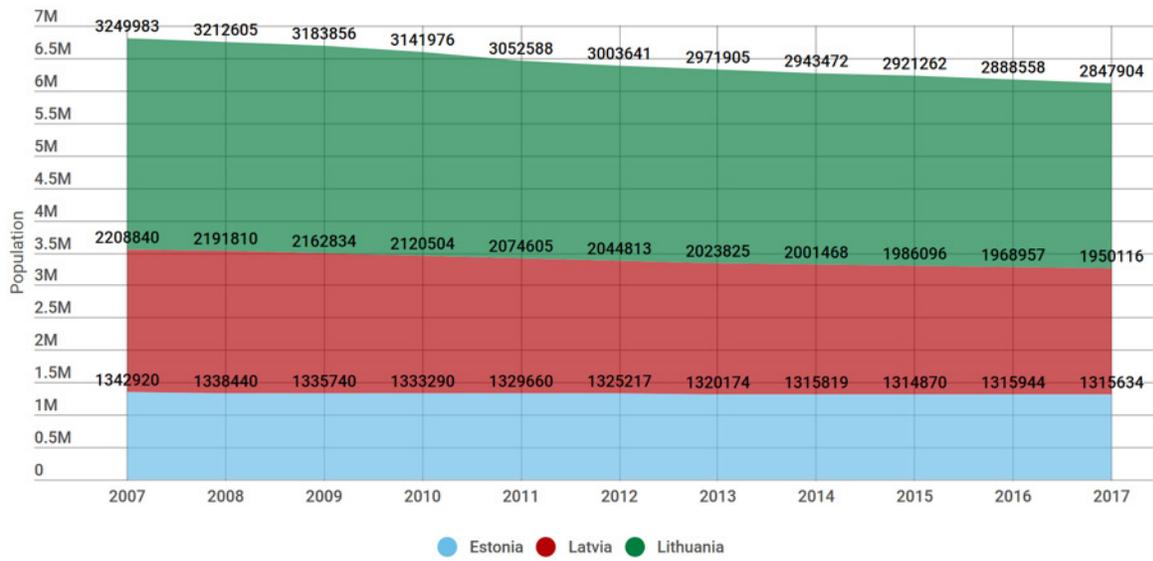


Figure 3: Overall Baltic Population. Manning problems face each Baltic State. The extent to which this is a problem for military readiness depends on the overall size of the population. Estonia faces the sharpest manning problems despite conscription. Data pulled from “Population,” *Eurostat*.

American security assurances. Producing the capabilities to shape the course of any crisis, from a limited incursion to a full conflict under the blanket of Russian force, is an expensive and complicated set of projects. Considering the current investment hole that all three states are attempting to fill, the lack of experience in managing large, complicated projects and divergent plans for defense, robust American and European aid will be required. Leveraging international organizations and arrangements will be able to coordinate across borders or provide expertise that is not readily available. Resource constraints are so tight that there is virtually no independent Baltic action that would create meaningful or necessary change.

Whether it be an integrated RADAR and Surface-to-Air Missile system, hardened infrastructure, or long-range artillery, simply giving or coordinating the common adoption of an interoperable system is not enough. The Baltic countries will have to employ these tools in the same manner, with the same level of skill,

and with similar objectives in mind. There is a precedent for intra-Baltic cooperation on these matters. The Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON), the Baltic Defense College (BALTDEFCOL), the Baltic Air Surveillance Network (BALTNET), and Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT) show there is a record of success for coordination, especially in areas where coordination is necessary, where common needs are met, and where projects require great investment. Yet, these projects required sponsorship and pressure from partner nations, which is still required. Use of a Baltic structure outside of a NATO framework may be more desirable in some cases as detailed planning on issues like targeting may be conducted. By furnishing particular equipment, resource constraints can be relieved, common projects reinvigorated, and coordination improved.

Relieving the pressure of constraints will create a “deterrence roof” over the project of the defense of the Baltic region under which more fundamental objectives may be pursued.

Capability Growth Recommendations

1) The sponsor nation will have to solicit and insist upon a common set of capability goals that lie *outside NATO obligations and what is planned*. These should concentrate on fielding

“ Only through NATO would a multinational, Baltic divisional framework *coherently fit in with a broader regional defense plan.* **”**

capabilities that create as much difficulty as possible for the Russians to freely operate in the region.

2) The sponsor nation will have to furnish equipment that meets these needs.¹³

3) Common Baltic structures will have to be worked through or established to create common procedures for use, allow for coordination, and allow for seamless interoperation.

Command, Control, and Planning

There are various avenues through which detailed planning might be pursued. Only through NATO would a multinational, Baltic divisional framework coherently fit in with a broader regional defense plan. Resource constraints both financial and human have created fundamentally different approaches to territorial defense that are likely irreconcilable on a purely multilateral level. In addition, all three states assume any incursion would be so overwhelming that national forces would have to be completely dedicated to national defense and could not function as a part of a broader mission. Though the Baltic region previously lacked a comprehensive plan for defense, NATO has Multinational Division - Northeast and Multinational Corps - Northeast, which will produce plans and provisions for the defense of Poland and Lithuania. NATO does have Force Integration Units (NFIU) in the region, but the capability to conduct concerted planning and to provide effective Command and Control is limited.

Fitting a regional command into this framework allows for a clearer organization and better communications for NATO reinforcements and political leadership. While many of the details are in the process of being implemented, MND-NE and MND-N should:

1) Provide durable C2 to maintain situational awareness of the status of host nation forces, and provide support to follow on NATO reinforcement;

2) Synchronize regional defensive concepts and coordinate planning;

3) Coordinate exercises and serve as a reservoir of knowledge for units that will have responsibility for the area;

4) Maintain a “very high” state of readiness, if not a permanent presence in the region, to provide the aforementioned on extremely short notice.

These conclusions should not be construed to be sufficient in and of themselves. The problem set faced by NATO in the Baltic Region

is extremely complex. There are any number of considerations that can and should be addressed in tandem. However, ensuring that the Baltic countries can, in the early stages of a crisis, shape the battlefield and buy time for reinforcement will render their own asymmetric resistance more effective. This is an actionable recommendation that can immediately change the military balance. These actions can buy time for follow-on preparations in the region and throughout NATO.

Endnotes

- 1 Discussion with Defense officials, May 28-30, 2018.
- 2 Donald N. Jensen and Peter B. Doran, “Chaos as a Strategy: Putin’s ‘Promethean’ Gamble,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, November 2018, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/644196_46af11fbc287466f96a9ecdfbad0fa7c.pdf.
- 3 C. Harris and F. Kagan, “Russia’s Military Posture,” *The Institute for the Study of War*, 2018.
- 4 I. Williams, “The Russia – NATO A2AD Environment,” CSIS, January 3, 2017, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/russia-nato-a2ad-environment/>. See also: “Eastern Europe - Operation Bagration - Operations 22 June - 19 August 1944” [Map], *USMA West Point - Library*, June 19, 2005.
- 5 David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics,” *RAND Corporation*, 2016, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.
- 6 LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, and Peter B. Doran, “Securing The Suwałki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence, and Defense,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 2018, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/644196_e63598001eb54f8387b10bc0b30c5873.pdf.
- 7 Raw allocations decreased as GDP strongly contracted.
- 8 Expert interview, May 5, 2018, Lithuania.
- 9 Result of CEPA Suwałki Roundtable (May 10, 2018) and conversation with NATO Defense Policy Planning (May 28, 2018).
- 10 Briefing from Lithuanian, Latvian Defense Policy Planning Divisions (May 14-18, 2018).
- 11 Discussion with NATO Defense Policy Planning Division (May 28-30, 2018).
- 12 Conversation with NIFU officers and other defense officials in region (June 12, 2018).
- 13 It should be noted that Lithuania in particular is a model partner for defense acquisitions as they have implemented a RAND-designed acquisitions system. According to a senior Lithuanian official, [it] “should ensure excellent return on deterrence.”



Center *for*
European Policy
Analysis



Center *for*
European Policy
Analysis