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Baltic States' solidarity with Ukraine

In recent weeks, and particularly after Russia's attack on Ukraine, issues concerning security in the region have become a priority in the public debate over the Baltic States. In response to the Russian aggression, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia expressed solidarity and readiness to help Ukraine and made an attempt to strengthen their own security. The Baltic States may also be threatened by Russia, being vulnerable to cyberattacks, disinformation activities, and limitations in the supply of energy resources.

Immediate reaction. The tense situation in the region due to the deployment of additional forces of the Russian army in the vicinity of the Russian-Ukrainian border and in Belarus, and then Russia's aggression against Ukraine on February 24 (Komentarze IEŚ no. 530) significantly influenced the security perception in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The state leaders' reaction was immediate. At an extraordinary meeting carried out in the Lithuanian Seimas on February 24, representatives of parliament adopted a resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Politicians called on NATO and the EU to grant EU candidate status to Ukraine and to offer the NATO Membership Action Plan to Ukraine. They expressed their readiness to provide Ukraine with military, economic, political, humanitarian, and legal support. A state of emergency was also announced in Lithuania until March 10, which meant, inter alia, reinforcement of state border protection, inspection of vehicles, people, and luggage in the border area as well as the possibility of using the Lithuanian Armed Forces for special security measures. Likewise, the Latvian Saeima stated that "Russia's invasion of Ukrainian territory is a gross violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and Russia's international obligations". Riga City Council made a decision to transfer 500 thousand euros as financial aid to Ukraine. Lithuania and Latvia have suspended the issuing of visas for Russian citizens. Estonia, which celebrated its Independence Day on February 24, also condemned the aggression and expressed its support for broad sanctions against Russia, including restrictions against regions recognized by Russia as independent. In Latvia and Estonia, the transmission of Russian TV channels was suspended due to media bias and disinformation about the situation in Ukraine. On the same day, foreign ministers of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia traveled to Kyiv to express their support for Ukraine. Another gesture of solidarity was a meeting between the President of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda, and the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda with Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv, within the formula of the Lublin Triangle (Komentarze IEŚ, no. 488).

Work to strengthen security. The governments of the Baltic States are ready to further expand defense spending. Estonia announced that in 2022, defense spending will increase to 2.3% of GDP or 748 million euros. Similarly, in Latvia and Lithuania, there is political agreement to gradually increase the defense budget to 2.5% of GDP. According to the Lithuanian Chief of Defense, Valdemaras Rupšys, additional funds should also be allocated to artillery systems, modern ammunition, and military training. The Baltic States are also preparing for various conflict scenarios, including the flow of refugees. Lithuania would be ready to accept 30-40 thousand asylum seekers, Latvia – 10 thousand, and Estonia – 2 thousand individuals. The plans are to prepare accommodation centers for refugees and methods for their registration, to verify their health status, and to provide other forms of assistance (basic needs, vaccination against COVID-19). In Latvia, additional training for rescue services and fire brigades is planned in the near future. Lithuanian businesses also reacted to Russia's aggression. The Lithuanian companies Norfa and Maxima have informed of their intention to suspend the selling of goods manufactured in Russia and Belarus and to stop importing from these countries. The Latvian hotel industry has expressed its readiness to accommodate refugees from Ukraine. The Estonian Postimees Grupp unilaterally terminated the agreement according to which advertising on Russian TV channels broadcast to Estonian audience viewers was sold.

Possible consequences for the Baltic States. Due to Russia's military operations against Ukraine, the Baltic States are preparing for numerous possible scenarios; Belarus has continued to send migrants from the Middle East to the borders of Lithuania and Latvia. Moreover, it is possible that there will be non-military challenges including an increase in cyberattacks and disinformation activities. Energy security is a sensitive area as well. Lithuania is one of the most energy-dependent countries among the EU members (energy dependency rate is 75%, Eurostat 2020). The necessity to limit the import of energy resources from Russia will, therefore, dynamize a green transformation and will strengthen investments for nuclear energy development. The Latvian government has already ordered the delivery of additional gas supplies to the Inčukalna facility via an LNG terminal in Klaipėda to reduce the risk of a shortage of gas supplies in the long term. In addition, economic restrictions will affect transit, therefore, it will be important for the Baltic companies to diversify their directions and to search for new partners. Lithuania's current economic tensions with China (Komentarze IEŚ no. 499) and Belarus (Komentarze IEŚ no. 527) hinder the development of the logistics and transport sector and it is unlikely that the situation can return to normal in the coming years.

Conclusions and forecasts:

1. The Baltic States accept that their security is closely related to the stability in Eastern Europe. Therefore, so far, they have supported Ukraine when implementing its political and economic reforms, have provided Ukraine with humanitarian and development aid, and have raised the issue of Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity at the NATO, EU, OSCE, and UN forum (see Komentarze IEŚ no. 33). They also actively supported a democratization process in Belarus (ICE Commentaries no. 247). Unity within NATO and solidarity with Ukraine are no longer debatable in the Baltic States.

2. Although the Baltic States are not currently threatened by direct military attack, the situation in the region affects their security perception. It can also pose numerous challenges. The Russia-Ukraine war may deepen social division in the Baltic States. Due to the large Russian-speaking minority, the effectiveness of the government's actions will result from national unity and social cohesion in the countries as well as citizens' trust in the government. None of the Baltic States' political elites enjoy much support, and trust towards political representatives is very low. Additionally, the hitherto tension within the government coalitions means that, under the current circumstances, it is extremely difficult to maintain consensus. This will certainly hinder the dialogue between the authorities and society. Especially in Latvia, the greatest security concerns are related to the low trust towards political parties and the lack of strategic communication of the government towards its population, including the possibility to disseminate accurate information to the whole public and the ability of local authorities to counteract hybrid threats.

3. Crisis situations may be used by radical social movements and populist parties aiming at inducing political divisions, especially in the pre-election period (parliamentary elections in Latvia are scheduled for October this year). These types of activities, involving both criticism against the government and debating less important topics, are observed among members of EKRE in Estonia. This may deepen distrust among the citizens as well as the sense of disunity in the face of the crisis. On the other hand, effective actions may influence an increase of support for the government, which may be seen as an individual political success for the ruling party. This was the case for the Reform Party in Estonia when its active support for Ukraine during the political crisis in 2014 and the party's criticism against the Russian annexation of Crimea brought it to victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections.

4. Russian pressure on Ukraine and on the European security system will probably continue for some time. From the long-term perspective, such a situation may weaken the vigilance of the governments and societies. Currently, there are domestic issues that attract more of the attention of the audience, rather than international politics which are not always so well understood by them. It is, therefore, more important to inform citizens about the scale of the threats as well as to explain to them the governments' strategies. The aim should be to strengthen Russian-speaking media, for example, ETV+.