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Lithuanian-German military cooperation

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Germany is an important partner of Lithuania in the field of security and defence. It also serves as Lithuania's strategic ally both within NATO and the European Union. At the same time, Germany has made a significant contribution to regional security by investing in military infrastructure in Lithuania and supporting the modernisation of the Lithuanian army. Currently, the biggest challenge in terms of mutual cooperation is the implementation of a bilateral agreement on increasing the presence of the Bundeswehr forces in Lithuania. However, this raises controversies that stem not only from the differing interests of the two countries but also tensions within the Lithuanian political scene.

Lithuania cooperates with Germany in the military sphere. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Lithuania increased its defence spending to 2.5% of GDP and thus significantly accelerated the process of modernising the national defence system. Acquiring armaments and military equipment, it cooperates mainly with Germany and the United States. Over the past few years, the Lithuanian army has made significant purchases from these countries: almost EUR 1 billion worth of equipment from Germany, including "Wolf" armoured vehicles, self-propelled howitzers and trucks, and EUR 0.5 billion worth from the US, including Switchblade drones, HIMARS systems and helicopters. Further purchases exceeding EUR 1 billion from each of these countries are planned through 2027. Above all, manoeuvrability, mobility, air defence, anti-tank defence, military intelligence, logistics capabilities, military-medical potential and cybersecurity are being strengthened. In addition, in 2022, the German companies Rheinmetall and Krauss-Maffei Wegmann, the largest European manufacturers of military equipment supplying weapons to many NATO countries, opened a military equipment service centre in Jonava, Lithuania.

From Lithuania's point of view, it is also important that Germany should be an active participant in the Baltic Air Policing mission, and its contingents have been stationed at the base located in Šiauliai several times since 2012. In October 2022, Lithuania also joined the German-initiated European Sky Shield Initiative, the main goal of which is the cooperation of NATO countries under a common air defence system and increasing interoperability. Collaboration with Germany also takes place through participation in international operations (e.g. UN MINUSMA in Mali – Lithuanian soldiers are part of the German contingent; after Germany announced the withdrawal of troops from Mali in 2024, the Lithuanian Ministry of Defence also made such a decision). Germany has also committed to deploying a Patriot long-range air defence system in Lithuania to enhance security during the NATO summit in Vilnius in July 2023.

Lithuania is seeking the permanent presence of a German brigade. Currently, a German-led battalion of NATO forces is stationed in Rukla, Lithuania, deployed as part of NATO Enhanced Forward Presence. The battalion has about 1.6 thousand soldiers, of which over a thousand belong to the Bundeswehr (in addition to Germans, soldiers from Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg and Iceland also serve there). Germany has been leading the battalion since its creation in 2017. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, during the NATO summit in Madrid, the Transatlantic Alliance decided to additionally strengthen NATO's eastern flank. In line with this decision, NATO forces in Lithuania were to be increased by approximately 5,000 additional soldiers. This was confirmed by the joint communiqué of the Lithuanian and German leaders on the deployment of a German brigade in Lithuania, issued in June 2022.

Controversies surrounding the deployment of a German brigade in Lithuania. The implementation of this decision sparked a number of controversies, affecting not only bilateral relations but also Lithuania's domestic

policy. Firstly, increasing the number of German forces in Lithuania requires the design of new, or the modernisation of existing, military infrastructure. Lithuania has already started the construction of a new military training ground in *Rūdninkai*, with an area of approximately 17,000,000 sqm., the cost of which was estimated at EUR 260 million. The process of increasing the number of the Bundeswehr forces was to take place gradually. Therefore, the German authorities decided that in the current situation, only the command will be stationed in Lithuania, while the rest of the forces will be stationed in Germany and can be deployed to Lithuania within 10 days if necessary. Secondly, the date of deployment of the brigade has not been specified yet. While President Gitanas Nausėda claimed that the details of the deployment of the brigade had been agreed (a standing brigade is expected to arrive in Lithuania by 2026), Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis expressed concerns about meeting this deadline, pointing out that it was not clear what exactly the Lithuanian and German leaders agreed during their meeting in June 2022. Thirdly, the discussion was revived by a statement from German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius in March 2023, in which he suggested that instead of increasing the size of the Alliance's forces, other solutions should be sought to strengthen NATO's eastern flank. Pistorius also suggested that the possibility of deploying the brigade may depend on a NATO decision at the Vilnius Summit, which would mean transferring responsibility for the implementation of the decision to the international level and, as a result, postponing the decision. Commenting on the statement of the German Ministry of National Defence, Gabrielius Landsbergis suggested that if Germany fails to fulfil the agreement, Lithuania will be forced to look for "new strategic partners".

Conclusions. Germany's contribution to NATO's collective defence, including in the Baltic region, is significant, and Lithuanian-German military cooperation has so far been effective and has been developing without major obstacles. Currently, the countries are focusing on the issues of strengthening air defence and collaboration in the field of cyber security. Nevertheless, Lithuania expects Germany to take a more decisive and active role in strengthening security in the region. However, despite the declaration of a turn in its defence policy (*Zeitenwende*) by German President Olaf Scholz, Germany's political position has not changed radically. Currently, German political elites show no interest in increasing the international role of the country, which is why this scenario is unlikely.

The consequence of the differences in approach between the Lithuanian and German authorities as to the role of the latter in the region is a discrepancy regarding the planned deployment of a brigade in Lithuania. Germany's decision relies on the construction of infrastructure in Lithuania, which is why Lithuania will be most interested in the timely completion of projects in this area.

The state of bilateral relations is also the result of internal disputes in Lithuania. The lack of a clear message from the Lithuanian side regarding the deployment of additional German forces is a consequence of numerous misunderstandings between the president and the government and between the government and the opposition. These disputes do not bring Lithuania closer to the goal of strengthening its security. In addition, contradictory statements made by politicians may weaken the confidence of strategic partners as to Lithuania's actual military interests.

In Lithuania, many claim that Germany is refusing to fulfil its commitment to increase the Bundeswehr forces in Lithuania. Recently, analysts from the German Council for International Relations (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik*) also pointed out that in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the participation of the Alliance forces in ensuring security on the eastern flank is extremely important. Thus, they criticised the Germans for postponing the decision to send troops to Lithuania.

Even though the upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius will be largely devoted to issues pertaining to Ukraine – the prospects of its membership in the Alliance and possible guarantees of its security, Lithuania hopes that decisions favourable to it regarding the permanent presence of a German brigade on its territory will also be taken.