



# **BALTIC DEFENSE LINE**

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# BALTIC DEFENSE LINE

Edited by **Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik**



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# INTRODUCTION. FROM BORDER MANAGEMENT TO BORDER SECURITISATION IN THE BALTIC STATES

Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik

Following the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine in 2014, and the subsequent migration crisis on EU borders triggered by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime in 2021, EU Member States bordering Russia and Belarus have intensified their efforts to strengthen border security systems, which also serve as the EU's external borders.

In Lithuania, construction of a physical barrier on the border with Russia (Königsberg District) began in 2017 with the building of a 45 km long, two-metre-high metal fence from the border tripoint in Vištyti. As most of the Lithuanian-Russian border runs alongside the Neman River (109 km), the focus was on strengthening border protection through investments in monitoring systems rather than the construction of physical barriers. While monitoring covered 69% of the border with Russia at the beginning of 2019, this figure had increased to over 80% by the end of the year. Then, in August 2021, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the installation of a physical barrier on the border with Belarus due to a surge in illegal migration. The main works on installing the fence, which is about 550 km long, were completed in 2022 as planned. The total length of the Lithuanian border with Belarus is 679 km, of which

more than 100 km runs along the banks of rivers and lakes. A physical barrier has not been installed here, and the fence will not be built in nature reserves, forested wetlands, or other places that are impassable due to difficult natural conditions and act as a natural barrier. The fence is 4 metres high and consists of barbed wire or a steel barrier topped with barbed wire<sup>1</sup>.

The first preparatory work to strengthen the Russian-Latvian border began in Latvia in 2011, but decisive steps were only taken in 2015 due to concerns about the country's security following Russia's annexation of Crimea. At the end of 2016, an agreement was also reached on the construction of a fence on the border with Belarus. A breakthrough came in 2021 when migration pressure from Alexander Lukashenka's regime led to further measures being taken to protect the borders with Russia and Belarus<sup>2</sup>.

However, projects implemented since 2015 have revealed a number of irregularities. An audit report published in 2020 revealed that approximately 7.5 million EUR had been misused in the implementation of the project on the Latvian-Russian border. In some places, the border strip was expanded beyond the scope of the project, resulting in the expropriation of property and losses to the state. Additionally, construction works caused ecological damage to the Gulbju un Platpirovas purvs nature reserve. This resulted in the arrest of the head of the border guard and the owner of the company implementing the investment, as well as the initiation of court cases against them. Consequently, construction of infrastructure on this section was completely suspended between 2019 and 2021. At the end of 2021, responsibility for the construction was transferred from the

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<sup>1</sup> A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, D. Szacawa, J. Bornio, *Infrastruktura graniczna na północno-wschodnim odcinku Unii Europejskiej: Litwa, Polska*, "Komentarze IeŚ" 2023, no. 951.

<sup>2</sup> A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, *Litwa i Łotwa pod presją migracyjną ze strony Białorusi*, "Komentarze IeŚ" 2022, no. 730.



Ministry of the Interior to a state-owned company (Latvian: Valsts nekustamie īpašumi)<sup>3</sup>.

In the case of Estonia, the country shares a 294 km land border with Russia, which runs through Lake Peipsi. Following the kidnapping of Estonian Security Service (KAPO) officer Eston Kohver by the Russian FSB in 2014, discussions about building border infrastructure intensified. At the time, it was pointed out that the Estonian-Russian border was poorly protected. In 2015, Taavi Rõivas's government announced plans to build a 115 km-long, 2.5 m-high barrier along the eastern border with Russia. Construction began in 2018, but subsequent governments reduced investment and spending. Plans for modern monitoring systems and drones were also abandoned. It also transpired that the costs had been miscalculated, suggesting that the cost of building infrastructure on the Estonian-Russian border would be 2.5 times higher than originally anticipated. By 2021, a 65 km section had been completed, however, due to migration pressure from Belarus, the construction of border infrastructure was significantly accelerated. Between 2021 and 2022, a barbed wire fence was erected and a modern monitoring system was installed to combat smugglers and migrants attempting to enter the country illegally. The next stage of construction of the physical barrier will focus on building it near towns, close to roads, tracks, and paths, on sections of the border at high risk, and in the immediate vicinity of border crossings. In places where many illegal border crossings have been recorded, a two-metre-wide strip of sand is to be laid to make it easier to detect footprints. An animal barrier and lighting will also be installed.

For many years, the prevailing belief in Estonia was that construction of border infrastructure could only begin after the border treaty between Russia and Estonia was ratified.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, D. Szacawa, J. Bornio, *Infrastruktura graniczna na północno-wschodnim odcinku Unii Europejskiej: Finlandia, Estonia, Łotwa*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2023, no. 950.

However, in recent years, the construction of physical barriers along the border has accelerated significantly, and work is progressing according to plan. However, delays may occur due to the economic situation in the region caused by the pandemic and high inflation. Additionally, competition in the regional construction sector caused by similar infrastructure projects being implemented by Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia has made accessing materials difficult.

In order to intensify border security, the Baltic states work together with Poland on many levels. The experiences of recent years – related to uncontrolled migration flows, the pandemic, and current challenges posed by threats of war – highlight the need for coordinated and concrete actions to ensure public safety. These countries implement joint and complementary measures to strengthen their partnership, adopt new technologies, and introduce organisational solutions. They also experience hybrid operations from Belarus and Russia and, in particular, attempts to destabilise the external borders of the Schengen zone. Close cooperation, at every level, allows effective countering and combating of these threats. Poland cooperating closely with Lithuania in protecting the integrity of the borders with Belarus is particularly important. For instance, both countries are also concerned with investments in border areas, including, in particular, civil protection infrastructure and the improvement of road connections between the countries. Moreover, on 15 May 2025, Lithuania and Poland launched five strategic cross-border projects under the Interreg Lithuania–Poland 2021–2027 programme, backed by over 30 million EUR in EU funding. These initiatives aim to enhance civil security, transport connectivity, and regional development in areas bordering Belarus and Russia, reflecting a commitment to European solidarity amid ongoing geopolitical tensions<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission, *Lithuania and Poland Strengthen Cross-Border Resilience to Bolster EU Security*, 20 May 2025.

Moreover, “Shield East” is a project planned for 2024–2028 that aims to bolster Poland’s resilience against attacks and hybrid warfare. Created in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine, it draws on the experience of that war<sup>5</sup>. This is a multi-year plan covering the aforementioned period for strengthening security and resilience. The programme is part of a broader effort to build a comprehensive regional defence infrastructure in cooperation with the Baltic states to counter threats to NATO’s eastern flank. Poland is ready to collaborate with its NATO and EU partners and connect the “Shield East” with the “Baltic Defence Line”, which is one of the joint security and defence initiatives currently being implemented.

\* \* \*

This report provides a thorough analysis of the Baltic Defence Line initiative in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, examining its strategic, political, and social aspects. Launched in January 2024, the aim of this initiative is to protect the borders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia and to build defence installations in border areas in light of the deteriorating security situation in the Baltic Sea region following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Baltic states agree that defence structures along the border are necessary to defend their territory. The initiative aims to strengthen the Baltic states’ military border protection capabilities and delay or prevent a potential adversary from conducting rapid military operations. Construction of the installations is also in line with NATO’s defence plans.

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<sup>5</sup> A. Zyguta, B. Piskorska, *East Shield – a mechanism for strengthening the security and resilience of Central and Eastern European countries using the example of Poland’s eastern border*, “Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej” 2024, vol. 22, issue 2, pp. 183–197, DOI: 10.36874/RIESW.2024.2.10.

The report, prepared by distinguished experts from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, addresses the geopolitical context, the political consensus underlying the initiative, and international cooperation, as well as the complex interplay with public opinion and environmental considerations. Firstly, Justinas Juozaitis from General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania, examines Lithuania's approach to the Baltic Defence Line in terms of rationale, equipment, organisation, funding, and timeline. Next, Olevs Nikers from the Baltic Security Foundation elaborates on defence border structures and fortifications in Latvia. Finally, Marek Kohv from the International Centre for Defence and Security details Estonia's current border infrastructure, recent investments, and the planned implementation of the defence zone, including fortification types, funding mechanisms, and integration with NATO's collective defence concepts. They summarise that although significant progress has been made in strengthening border security and military preparedness, challenges remain.

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Zyguła A., Piskorska B., *East Shield – a mechanism for strengthening the security and resilience of Central and Eastern European countries using the example of Poland's eastern border*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2024, vol. 22, issue 2, pp. 183–197, DOI: 10.36874/RIESW.2024.2.10.

# FROM HEDGEHOGS TO TRENCHES: THE LITHUANIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE BALTIC DEFENCE LINE

Justinas Juozaitis

## Summary

- Public debates about the role of fortifications in Lithuania's defence began after Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022. At that time, Lithuania was building a metal fence with concertina wire to protect itself from illegal migration flows facilitated by Lukashenko's regime. The ongoing construction of "the wall" to curb illegal migration helped to facilitate a debate on military defences because building physical barriers became an integral element of Lithuanian public discourse.
- Although lessons from Russia's war against Ukraine clearly demonstrated the utility of fortifications on modern battlefields, initial Lithuanian ideas on border defences were focused on developing counter-mobility measures, not on erecting permanent fortifications. As such, Lithuania designed its counter-mobility project as a gradual effort which includes the procurement of

obstacles, mines and other explosives, electronic warfare, and anti-UAV systems, with an expected budget of 1.1 billion EUR over the next decade.

- Following this conceptual framework, Lithuania started from establishing a dispersed system for storing obstacles(hedgehogs, concrete blocks, razor wire, etc.) near Russia and Belarus. In turn, Lithuanian Armed Forces prepared to deploy the bulk of their counter-mobility equipment at predetermined locations based on intelligence reports, while only certain undisclosed areas were meant to be fortified permanently.
- On 14 August 2025, however, the Lithuanian MOD announced that individual counter-mobility measures will be integrated into a unified three-echelon defence line, which will also include defence strongpoints, trenches, and anti-tank ditches. Given other immediate Lithuanian defence policy priorities, such as ensuring proper host nation support for the German 45th Panzer Brigade and reaching operational capability for the Lithuanian 1st Division as quickly as possible, the development tempo of the Lithuanian defence line will depend on availability of funding, whereas the EU's potential financial contributions in the form of loans or grants could facilitate or delay the Lithuanian fortification effort.

## 1. Introduction

The paper examines Lithuania's approach to the Baltic Defence Line in terms of rationale, equipment, organisation, funding, and the timeline. It first explains why the issue of defences became an integral part of Lithuanian political discourse only in 2022, not after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Next, the paper explores how the Lithuanian approach evolved over time, covering developments both before and after the joint statement by the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian defence ministers regarding the Baltic Defence Line on 19 January 2024. In the final section, the

study presents the achievements, issues, and further prospects for Lithuania's contribution to the Baltic Defence Line. The paper argues that Lithuania perceives border fortifications as a long-term supporting effort in the overall attempt to strengthen national defence, which is primarily focused on achieving the operational capability of the recently re-established Lithuanian 1st Division as quickly as possible and ensuring timely host nation support for a German brigade.

## **2. Procuring armaments first, thinking about defences later**

Initial ideas about erecting fortifications along the Lithuanian border with Russia and Belarus were floated by several security experts after the first Russian military operations against Ukraine in 2014–2015. Since Ukraine eventually began fortifying Donbass to prevent further Russian land grabs and incursions, some argued that such measures could also benefit Lithuania in its preparations to defend against potential Russian military aggression. Lithuanian decision makers, however, maintained that the Lithuanian Armed Forces faced more pressing issues, leaving the question of border defences without proper public appraisal at that time.

The lack of attention to defence installations was not surprising given the difficult state of the Lithuanian Armed Forces in 2014 – it was underfunded, underequipped, and understrength. Despite joining NATO in 2004, Lithuania's defence spending had been decreasing steadily since 2002, and by 2013, Lithuania was spending only 0.76% of its GDP on defence<sup>1</sup>. To make matters worse, Lithuania joined NATO at a time when it viewed Russia as a partner and the Alliance shifted its focus from collective defence to out-of-area

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<sup>1</sup> Lithuania Military Spending/Defence Budget 1992–2025, Macro-trends, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/LTU/lithuania/military-spending-defense-budget>.

operations. Lithuania adapted the structure of its forces accordingly, prioritising the development of a smaller, professional army focused on participation in international missions and operations, rather than building a larger and heavier force better suited for territorial defence<sup>2</sup>.

The lack of defence funding and out-of-area focus facilitated the decline of military personnel serving in the Lithuanian Armed Forces, while the suspension of mandatory military service in 2008 further accelerated the negative trend<sup>3</sup>. In his recently published memoir, former Chief of Defence Lieutenant General Jonas Vytautas Žukas describes in great detail how these processes and decisions affected the combat readiness of the Lithuanian Armed Forces: “Mechanized Infantry Brigade «Iron Wolf» was composed of six battalions at that time and, oh dear, just one – Lithuanian Grand Duke Algirdas – had 62% of its authorised strength, others had less than 40%, while two battalions – Dragoon and Vaidotas – had only a handful of soldiers”<sup>4</sup>. After visiting numerous military units, he noted that “Everywhere obvious shortages caught my eye: equipment was old and worn-out, there was a lack of spare parts, especially – ammunition for combat training [...]”<sup>5</sup>. In the end, the Lithuanian Armed Forces, unlike many of their NATO allies, were not equipped with modern heavy weapon platforms by the time Russia seized Crimea.

It goes without saying that the first round of Russian military operations in Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea initiated an uncomfortable self-reflection process. Why did Lithuania – a country that so vigorously raised alarms among its fellow NATO and EU members about

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<sup>2</sup> G. Česnakas, *Shielding the Nation. The emerging total defence in Lithuania*, [in:] G. Forfang Rongved (ed.), *European Total Defence: Past, Present and Future* (1st ed.), Routledge 2025, DOI: 10.4324/9781003497370.

<sup>3</sup> See Faktai ir skaičiai, Lietuvos Respublikos krašto apsaugos ministerija, <https://kam.lt/faktai-ir-skaiciai/>.

<sup>4</sup> J.V. Žukas, *Be užuolankų II*, Vox Altera, 2025, p. 127.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 139.



security threats emanating from Russia, so much so that it was repeatedly criticised as a “one-question state”<sup>6</sup> – neglect its own defence to such an embarrassing extent?<sup>7</sup> Given the glaring discrepancy between official rhetoric and the “facts on the ground”, subsequent Lithuanian efforts first and foremost sought to address the serious shortcomings described in the previous paragraph.

To properly equip the Lithuanian Armed Forces, parliamentary political parties pledged in 2014 to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2020. Increased spending was directed toward modernising and strengthening combat units by acquiring anti-tank weapons, short and mid-range air defence systems, infantry fighting vehicles, and other advanced weapon platforms<sup>8</sup>. Aiming to mitigate shortages in active military personnel and replenish reserves, Lithuania hastily reintroduced mandatory military service in 2015. In parallel, Lithuania sought to attract NATO “boots on the ground” to complement national efforts (until 2014, NATO’s presence in the Baltic states was limited to four combat aircraft deployed on a rotational air policing mission). Since Lithuania had a shortage of military infrastructure necessary for hosting allied troops, as well as accommodating and training new Lithuanian draftees, it was also necessary to invest in the expansion of barracks and training areas.

The procurement of modern heavy weapon platforms, the reintroduction of mandatory military service, and the improvement of host nation support arrangements emerged as the main defence policy priorities, consuming the bulk of Lithuania’s growing defence spending and attracting

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<sup>6</sup> D. Šlekys, *Lithuanian Military Transformation and Changing Efficiency of Defence*, [in:] G. Česnakas, N. Statkus (eds.), *Lithuania in the Global Context: National Security and Defence Dilemmas*, General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania, 2020, p. 309.

<sup>7</sup> For one explanation, see G. Česnakas, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> *Lietuvos Respublikos Seime atstovaujamų politinių partijų susitarimas dėl 2014–2020 metų Lietuvos Respublikos užsienio saugumo ir gynybos politikos strateginių gairių*, 29 March 2014.

the most attention from experts and the public. In contrast, defences were present neither in Lithuanian strategic thought – national strategic documents such as the National Security Strategy<sup>9</sup>, Military Strategy<sup>10</sup>, Military Doctrine<sup>11</sup>, and the White Book on Lithuanian Defence Policy<sup>12</sup>, issued between 2014 and 2021, had nothing to say about fortifications – nor was anything allocated in the Lithuanian defence budget. Given the state of the Lithuanian Armed Forces in 2014, it is fair to say that strengthening their combat readiness was a more immediate priority than erecting defensive works.

### 3. Build the wall!

The first serious impetus for building a comprehensive system of physical barriers along the national border emerged during the migration crisis orchestrated by Belarus. After Alexander Lukashenko re-elected himself on 9 August 2020, Lithuania did not recognise him as the legitimate President of Belarus and became one of the most enthusiastic supporters of sanctions against his regime<sup>13</sup>. In an attempt to break its diplomatic isolation, Lukashenko's regime ignited a migration crisis in Lithuania by facilitating the illegal movement of Iraqi, Afghan, Syrian, and other nationals toward the Lithuanian border beginning in May 2021<sup>14</sup>. Belarus also took similar measures against Latvia and Poland in August, when the Lithuanian State Border

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<sup>9</sup> Nacionalinio saugumo strategija, 2021; Nacionalinio saugumo strategija, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Lietuvos karinė strategija, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Lietuvos gynybos baltoji knyga, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Lietuvos karinė doktrina, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, *Resolution on Illegitimate Union imposed by Russia on Belarus*, 10 September 2020; I. Jačauskas, *Lithuanian president calls for transition of power in Belarus at UN*, LRT, 23 September 2020.

<sup>14</sup> V. Denisenko, *Elements of Information Warfare During Migration Crisis on Belarus-EU border*, Civic Resilience Initiative, 2021.

Guard Service was given the authority to turn back illegal migrants, significantly restricting their ability to cross the Lithuanian border illegally<sup>15</sup>.

Migration suddenly shifted from being a non-issue in Lithuanian politics<sup>16</sup> to a major national security threat, leaving state authorities ill-prepared to manage the large influx of illegal migrants. For example, the Lithuanian border with Belarus is 679 km long, but only 71.5 km had a simple, old fence, which was built in 1999–2000<sup>17</sup>. Surveillance measures were also inadequate, covering only 260 km, or roughly 40% of the border's length by the end of 2020<sup>18</sup>. In response to the instrumentalization of migration, Lithuania declared a state of emergency for the very first time in November 2021 and began building a physical barrier along its extensive border with Belarus to curb further illegal migration flows.

Consisting of a metal fence and concertina wire, Lithuania's physical barrier on its border with Belarus was completed in 2022 for approximately 150 million EUR. Lithuania constructed 453 km of new fence segments and upgraded fences built before the crisis, while more than 100 km of the border, consisting of riverbanks, lakes, or marshy areas,

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<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, *Lithuania will seek for the accountability of the Belarusian regime for migrants smuggling*, 6 April 2023, <https://vrm.lrv.lt/en/news/lithuania-will-seek-for-the-accountability-of-the-belarusian-regime-for-migrants-smuggling/>.

<sup>16</sup> Not because migration was deliberately neglected by the authorities but because irregular migration flows were minimal until 2021. For example, the Lithuanian Ministry of Interior provides the following numbers: "74 irregular migrants arrived in Lithuania in 2019, 37 in 2020, 8106 attempts to cross the border illegally were recorded in 2021, and, in 2022, there were as many as 10,599 of such attempts". See Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, op. cit. At that time, smuggling was a far more significant issue on the national border.

<sup>17</sup> C. Dumbrava, *Walls and fences at EU borders*, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Valstybės kontrolė, *Valstybinio audito ataskaita valstybės sienos apsaugos stiprinimas*, Vilnius, 26 March 2024.

was not reinforced with “the wall”<sup>19</sup>. The physical barrier was supplemented by other measures such as enhanced surveillance – including cameras, motion detectors, UAVs, etc.<sup>20</sup> Today, the whole of Lithuania’s border with Belarus is covered by constant surveillance<sup>21</sup>. Since a significant number of illegal migrants did not intend to stay in Lithuania but rather to travel westward, the Lithuanian government expected financial contributions from the EU. However, the European Commission refused to fund the construction of the physical barrier itself<sup>22</sup> but allocated funding for surveillance and some other measures.

Looking at the other side of the border, Lithuania finds itself in a more advantageous position. Lithuania’s border with Kaliningrad is 270 km long, but the bulk of its length is formed by natural water obstacles such as rivers and lakes. For example, the largest Lithuanian river, Nemunas, separates Lithuania from Kaliningrad for 116 km, while only around 100 km consists of land border. In 2017, a “45-km-long, two-metre-high fence was put up; it was equipped with an electronic monitoring system, which was then extended to cover the areas along the river Neman marking

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<sup>19</sup> Lithuanian Government, *Government takes decision to install a physical barrier on the border with Belarus, to be built by EPSO-G*, 23 August 2023, <https://lrv.lt/en/news/government-takes-decision-to-install-a-physical-barrier-on-the-border-with-belarus-to-be-built-by-epso-g/>.

<sup>20</sup> Vidaus reikalų ministerija, *Fizinis barjeras bus įrenginėjamas ir pelkėtose valstybės sienos su Baltarusija ir Rusija ruožuose*, 27 September 2023, <https://vrm.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/fizinis-barjeras-bus-irenginemas-ir-pelketose-valstybes-sienos-su-baltarusija-ir-rusija-ruozuose/>.

<sup>21</sup> LRT.lt, *Lithuania-Belarus border now 100 percent surveilled – ministry*, 21 July 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1946371/lithuania-belarus-border-now-100-percent-surveilled-ministry?srltid=AfmBOorPaNEXni1VeZe2ObA7bQvS1UBw8tHHviQk1FzF-H4KOpSHF5zXj>.

<sup>22</sup> European Parliament, *Answer given by Ms Johansson on behalf of the European Commission*, 21 January 2022, Parliamentary question | Answer for question E-005077/21 | E-005077/2021(ASW) | European Parliament.

the border”<sup>23</sup>. Another 4 km were constructed by 2022, and Lithuania plans to build an additional 68 km of physical barrier in the future<sup>24</sup>. All of Lithuania’s external border along Kaliningrad and Belarus is monitored by various surveillance equipment<sup>25</sup>.

Even though the physical barrier was built to prevent illegal migration, it also provides limited military utility by adding a layer of surveillance. At the same time, the construction of “the wall” to curb illegal migration helped facilitate discussions on military defences, as building physical barriers became an integral element of national public discourse, while governmental agencies and state-owned companies gained valuable experience in organising the construction effort on such a scale.

#### 4. From Lithuanian national defences to the Baltic Defence Line

The idea of fortifying at least certain sections of the national borders with Russia and Belarus for military purposes was seriously considered only after Russia launched its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In response to growing military threats from Russia, Lithuanian parliamentary political parties signed an agreement on immediate measures to strengthen national security and defence on July 15th<sup>26</sup>. Among other measures listed in the text, Lithuanian parliamentarians pledged to strengthen the security of the Suwalki corridor by procuring and setting up

<sup>23</sup> B. Chmielewski, J. Tarociński, *The Baltic states and Finland: fencing themselves off from Russia and Belarus*, “OSW Commentary” 2023, no. 494.

<sup>24</sup> Lietuvos Respublikos vidaus reikalų ministerija, *Plėtros programos pažangos priemonės pagrindimo aprašas*, 2024, [https://vrm.lrv.lt/public/canonical/1730103148/8473/PP\\_Sien%C5%B3+apsauga\\_+pagrindimas+2024.pdf](https://vrm.lrv.lt/public/canonical/1730103148/8473/PP_Sien%C5%B3+apsauga_+pagrindimas+2024.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Valstybės kontrolė, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Farmers and the Greens, an opposition party taking 32 out of 141 seats in the Lithuanian Parliament, have not signed the agreement.

the “most modern technical and physical-engineering-fortification counter mobility measures and coordinate plans to strengthen the Suwalki corridor with NATO and Poland”<sup>27</sup>.

The inclusion of “physical-engineering-fortification counter-mobility measures” in the agreement of Lithuanian political parties has brought the issue onto the political agenda, but it initially received only limited attention from the Lithuanian Government led by the Homeland Union and the Christian Democrats (TS-LKD). Lithuania’s defence policy priorities remained largely unchanged because, despite substantial improvements since 2014, the combat readiness of the Lithuanian Armed Forces once again seemed unsatisfactory in early 2022, given the heightened military threat posed by Russia. Consequentially, most intellectual and financial resources continued to be devoted to procuring more heavy weapon platforms, enlarging the Lithuanian Armed Forces, and expanding NATO’s military footprint on Lithuanian soil, while the question of defences remained in the background<sup>28</sup>. Lithuania was quick to announce new military acquisitions (for specific examples, please see the next section), the US commitment to maintain a battalion deployed in the country until 2026 (on rotational basis)<sup>29</sup>, and the expected growth of the German military presence in the country from a battalion to a brigade<sup>30</sup>, but was rather slow to clarify its plans for defences and communicate them to the public.

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<sup>27</sup> *Lietuvos Respublikos Seime atstovaujamų politinių partijų susitarimas dėl Lietuvos nacionalinio saugumo artimiausio laikotarpio sustiprinimo*, 15 July 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Minister of National Defence, Arvydas Anušauskas: ‘*Putin’s invasion of Ukraine did not dramatically change the Lithuanian defence policy course. It only has proved that we are on the right track*’, Press release, 29 May 2022.

<sup>29</sup> LRT, *Oficialu: JAV batalionas bus Lietuvoje mažiausiai iki 2026-ųjų*, 14 October 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Joint communiqué by the President of the Republic of Lithuania and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, 7 June 2022.

Approximately one year after Russia began its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, the Chairman of the Lithuanian National Security and Defence Committee, Laurynas Kasčiūnas (Homeland Union), concluded that the development of defensive measures proposed in the agreement among parliamentary political parties had not received “much institutional support”<sup>31</sup> and pledged to facilitate the process. Naturally, such a statement could be interpreted as criticism of his fellow party member Arvydas Anušauskas, who was serving as the Minister of Defence at the time. Following mounting questions regarding the role of fortifications in Lithuania’s defence, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) issued a press release on 16 March 2023, outlining the broad strokes of its thoughts on the matter. On the one hand, the press release made clear that Lithuania does not intend to build a comprehensive defensive line consisting of fixed fortifications on its border with Belarus and Russia. Among other things, the MOD argued that such an endeavour would yield a very poor cost-benefit ratio. Indeed, the Lithuanian Armed Forces are simply too small to man all defensive positions along their nearly 1,000-km-long border with Kaliningrad and Belarus simultaneously, and the fortifications are useless if not covered by direct or indirect fire. The MOD also argued that the advantages of fixed defensive positions diminish over time as their locations become known<sup>32</sup>.

On the other hand, the MOD has not dismissed the utility of fortifications in its entirety, advocating for a combined approach. It argued that in certain unspecified areas, permanent defence installations could play a part. That being said, however, the MOD emphasised the employment of

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<sup>31</sup> Charter 97, *Lithuania To Build Anti-Tank Barriers On Border With Belarus*, 27 February 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Teisingi strateginiai sprendimai – viena svarbiausių Lietuvos gynybos plano dalių*, 16 March 2023, <https://kam.lt/teisingi-strateginiai-sprendimai-viena-svarbiausiu-lietuvos-gynybos-plano-daliu/>.

flexible counter mobility measures, such as hedgehogs, dragoon's teeth, barbed wire, and mines, and exploitation of natural obstacles (forests, swamps, rivers, lakes, etc.). Accordingly, the MOD announced its plans to procure the aforementioned counter-mobility measures, establish decentralised storage areas for them, and involve local businesses in the process whenever possible<sup>33</sup>.

One day later, the National Security and Defence Committee organised a discussion "On the implementation of physical-engineering-fortification counter mobility measures in Lithuania". After the meeting, the Chairman provided more information by announcing plans to "[...] establish counter-mobility parks, i.e., places where fortification equipment will be housed, and they will include [anti-tank] hedgehogs, and also other physical barriers restricting the potential enemy's movement"<sup>34</sup>. It became clear that Lithuania intends to spend 18 million EUR for the construction of 18 such facilities by the Summer of 2024<sup>35</sup>, and the initial milestone in this regard was the opening of the first counter-mobility storage area near Vilnius in September 2023<sup>36</sup>. In a following statement, the Lithuanian MOD revealed its plans to form tree alleys near key transport infrastructure and deepen melioration ditches to make use of them as anti-tank barriers<sup>37</sup>. Hence, stockpiling deployable counter-mobility means in decentralised storage areas as well as instrumentalising terrain and infrastructure for defence defined Lithuania's approach regarding its defences for the time being.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> LRT, *Lithuania to prep military fortifications*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1940665/lithuania-to-prep-military-fortifications?srsId=AfmBOor4Qfodp2nG9QpJdIKA-loKjVJ-yvDLcvle7H5PXtVAdpYMYAQcD>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> LRT, *First countermobility park opens in Lithuania*, 29 September 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2088637/first-countermobility-park-opens-in-lithuania?srsId=AfmBOooNrBgTbdXQHRZzcQ-13JMzALRaWanjbV6PzLjIVhT9ojV8eMnHL>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



Lithuanian conceptual focus on deployable counter-mobility measures was generally unchanged by subsequent regional initiatives. On 19 January 2024, Lithuania agreed to coordinate the development of its defences with Latvia and Estonia under the conceptual framework of the Baltic Defence Line. Despite the multilateral nature of the project, the Lithuanian emphasis on flexibility, prioritising deployable counter-mobility solutions and smart utilisation of terrain features favourable to defence over building fixed defensive structures was not changed by its agreement with Latvia and Estonia. Shortly after the agreement was announced, the Lithuanian MOD clarified that each country would take measures in developing defences according to specific national needs, while the utility of the Baltic Defence Line emerges from coordination of national approaches<sup>38</sup>. To effectively plan and implement its defensive arrangements, Lithuania must be aware of respective Estonian and Latvian efforts and *vice-versa*. For example, Lithuanian territory might be attacked through the northern approaches if Latvian defences are breached in the vicinity of Daugavpils.

Even though the agreement on the Baltic Defence Line did not change the overall national vision regarding defence at that time, the internationalisation of this issue elevated its importance in Lithuanian defence policy. This shift also coincided with a change in leadership at the Lithuanian MOD. Arvydas Anušauskas resigned from his position as Minister of Defence in March 2024 and was succeeded by Laurynas Kasčiūnas, who had been active in raising the question of defences in his previous role as Chairman of the Lithuanian National Security and Defence Committee.

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<sup>38</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Ministras A. Anušauskas su Jungtinės Karalystės ambasadoriumi aptarė Baltijos šalių gynybos liniją*, 6 February 2024; Ministry of Defence, *Baltijos šalys kuria bendrą gynybos liniją: pasirašyti susitarimai dėl kontrmobility priemonių ir HIMARS pajėgumų vystymo*, 19 January 2024.

As a case in point, the Lithuanian Government approved a short (yet precise) Resolution on the Implementation of Military Counter-Mobility Measures on 31 July 2024. Approved just two and a half months before the Lithuanian Parliamentary elections, the resolution provided more clarity on Lithuania's approach to defensive arrangements by formulating objectives regarding specific counter-mobility measures, assigning institutional responsibilities, and setting deadlines for implementation. The first objective is to establish storage areas for counter-mobility measures designated by the Lithuanian Armed Forces until April 2025. According to the Lithuanian Minister of Defence, Lithuania intends to establish 27 such areas in a dispersed manner to store concrete blocks, dragon's teeth, hedgehogs, *cheval de frise*, concertina wire, etc.<sup>39</sup> (only 18 areas were announced in 2023). The second objective consists of installing reserve obstacles on key roads, bridges, and engineering structures for attaching explosives to bridges whenever necessary and should be implemented by the end of 2025. The third objective deals with the Lithuanian melioration system and calls for deepening drainage ditches and regulated streams located in the territory of Šakiai, Vilkaviškis, and Marijampolė municipalities (they are located south of the river Nemunas, close to the Lithuanian land border with Kaliningrad). Finally, Lithuania will form strips of trees along roads designated by the Lithuanian Armed Forces. The last two objectives must be implemented by the end of 2027<sup>40</sup> (for a summary of objectives, deadlines, and institutional frameworks, please see the table below).

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<sup>39</sup> V. Narkūnas, *27 kontrmobilumo priemonių parkai ir lietuviškos minos? Pristatyta Lietuvos gynybos linija*, LRT, 29 July 2024, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2328366/27-kontrmobilumo-priemoniu-parkai-ir-lietuviskos-minos-pristatyta-lietuvos-gynybos-linija?srltid=AfmBOoo5wfWYZu752gcKs1pRgiTHYCzZCmMlbfGZKRBYwynjTKh-ZVF1>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

**Table 1. The Implementation of the Baltic Defence Line in Lithuania by deadline, objective, and institutional framework**

Deadline	Objective	Institutional framework
1 April 2025	Establish storage areas for engineering counter-mobility measures at locations designated by the Lithuanian Armed Forces on state land near the borders with Belarus and Kaliningrad	Ministry of National Defence (organisation and coordination), Lithuanian Armed Forces (implementation)
31 December 2025	Install reserve obstacles on national roads, under bridges, and engineering structures for attaching explosives on bridges, as specified by the Lithuanian Armed Forces	Ministry of Transport and Communications (organisation and coordination), Ministry of National Defence (coordination), companies owned by Lithuanian State
31 December 2027	Design and restore melioration ditches and regulated streams in Šakiai, Vilkaviškis, and Marijampolė district municipalities to original technical parameters	Administrations of Šakiai, Vilkaviškis, and Marijampolė district municipalities
31 December 2027	Establish strips of trees and install necessary engineering traffic safety measures on designated national road sections	Ministry of Transport and Communications (organisation and coordination), Ministry of Environment (organisation and coordination)

Source: Government of the Republic of Lithuania<sup>41</sup>.

Supplementing the governmental resolution, Lithuanian ministers representing the coalition led by the Homeland Union announced plans to prohibit tree-cutting within a 20 km radius from the national borders to increase the density of forests. In addition, they announced that Lithuania will procure anti-tank mines and stockpile other explosives. Mines, explosives, and other counter-mobility measures will be deployed in pre-determined areas once

<sup>41</sup> Government of the Republic of Lithuania, *Resolution on the Implementation of Military Counter-Mobility Measures*, 31 July 2024.

intelligence gives a signal to do so. In certain instances, the Government communicated its willingness to deploy permanent fortifications near undisclosed predetermined areas, including river crossings and bridges<sup>42</sup>. All in all, the previous Lithuanian Government expected to spend 600 million EUR over the course of 10 years for strengthening the Lithuanian section of the Baltic Defence Line, while anti-tank mines were identified as the top expenditure<sup>43</sup>. In relation to the efforts described above, the Lithuanian Parliament voted in favour of withdrawing from the Oslo Convention on Cluster Munitions in July 2024. The Government also initiated talks regarding withdrawal from the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (hereinafter referred to as the Ottawa Convention), but had not formalised the withdrawal by the end of its term.

After the Homeland Union lost the parliamentary elections held in October 2024, the Social Democrats formed the new Lithuanian Government together with the Democratic Union 'For Lithuania' and the Dawn of Nemunas. There was some debate as to whether the Social Democrats and their coalition partners would stick to the course set by the Homeland Union or redefine Lithuania's approach to the Baltic Defence Line. Initial documents produced by the new Lithuanian Government have not provided much clarity on the matter. For example, the Government's Programme pledged to strengthen the defence of external EU and NATO borders together with other Baltic states and Poland<sup>44</sup>, while a subsequent implementation plan briefly mentioned procurement of engineering means in a broader

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<sup>42</sup> V. Narkūnas, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> Ministry of Defence, *The Baltic Defence Line and the East Shield Initiative are a clear message to the adversary, says Minister of National Defence L. Kasčiūnas after meeting with the Polish Minister of National Defence*, 3 July 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, *Nutarimas dėl devynioliktosios Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės Programos*, 12 December 2024.

context of providing the Lithuanian Armed Forces with necessary capabilities<sup>45</sup>.

It quickly became evident that the new Government does not intend to make major conceptual changes in Lithuania's focus on counter-mobility and will implement the objectives raised by the previous one (establishing 27 storage areas, deepening melioration ditches, preventing deforestation, preparing bridges, fortifying river crossings, etc.). On 5 May 2025, the Lithuanian MOD under the new leadership of Dovilė Šakalienė (Social Democrats) announced that Lithuania will enlarge its arsenal of counter-mobility means by spending 1.1 billion EUR over the next 10 years (110 million EUR each year on average), a sharp increase from the 600 million EUR pledged last year. Most of the funds (800 million EUR) were intended to be spent on the procurement of anti-tank mines and systems. Since the Lithuanian Parliament voted in favour of withdrawing from the Ottawa Convention on May 8th (no one opposed the withdrawal, three parliamentarians abstained), procurement and, perhaps, local manufacturing of anti-personnel mines will become an integral part of Lithuania's contribution to the Baltic Defence Line. In addition to the deployable counter-mobility means mentioned previously, the MOD will procure electronic warfare capabilities, anti-UAV systems, and strengthen surveillance and early warning systems<sup>46</sup>.

Thus, despite an implicit association of the Baltic Defence Line with bunkers, trenches, tunnels, and other fixed positions, Lithuania's initial approach to the joint Baltic project was best described as a counter-mobility effort. The counter-mobility operations "[...] use or enhance the effects of natural and manmade obstacles, to deny the enemy's

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<sup>45</sup> Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, *Dėl Devynioliktosios Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės programos nuostatų įgyvendinimo plano patvirtinimo*, 12 March 2025.

<sup>46</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Lietuva stiprina kontrmobilumo arsenalą: per 10 metų skirs virš milijardo eurų*, 5 May 2025.

freedom of movement and manoeuvre. The main purpose of counter-mobility is to slow down or divert the enemy, in order to improve the target acquisition time and increase weapon effectiveness<sup>47</sup>. Previously presented information closely relates to the description provided above, as Lithuania intended to exploit terrain and stockpile and deploy various engineering equipment, mines, and explosives in predetermined areas. For example, the Lithuanian MOD explained that the Lithuanian contribution to the Baltic Defence Line “relies on anti-mobility measures that take advantage of natural obstacles such as wetlands, rivers, and dense forests, which render much of the border unsuitable for military movement [...] Additional steps have also been taken to disrupt enemy movement along roads, difficult terrain, forests, and open areas”<sup>48</sup>. All in all, the counter-mobility project resembles a gradual (10-year timeline) and complementary effort to enhance Lithuania’s capability to defend itself. Interestingly, the Homeland Union, a political party which led the Lithuanian MOD in 2020-2024 and promoted deployable counter-mobility measures during its term, was the first one to call for integrating such measures to a permanent system of defensive structures. In Spring 2025, it proposed building the so-called Vytautas Magnus Defence Line, named after the most distinguished Lithuanian Grand Duke, for 1 billion EUR over the next few years. The project envisages pre-deploying most of the aforementioned obstacles to selected areas near the Lithuanian border and building fixed positions composed of trenches, tunnels, and anti-tank ditches<sup>49</sup>. To promote such an idea,

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<sup>47</sup> A.R. Gheorghe, *Mobility-Counter-mobility Correlation in Military Engineering*, “Bulletin of “Carol I” National Defence University” 2020, p. 133.

<sup>48</sup> The Baltic Times, *Estonia lags behind other Baltic states in defence zone construction*, 25 March 2025, [https://www.baltictimes.com/estonia\\_lags\\_behind\\_other\\_baltic\\_states\\_in\\_defense\\_zone\\_construction/](https://www.baltictimes.com/estonia_lags_behind_other_baltic_states_in_defense_zone_construction/).

<sup>49</sup> *Vytauto Didžiojo gynybos linija*, <https://tsajunga.lt/aktualijos/vytauto-didziojo-gynybos-linija/>.

the Homeland Union launched a petition calling for building the Vytautas Magnus Defence Line<sup>50</sup> and its representatives began touring Lithuanian towns and cities in order to mobilise popular support

Initially, the Social Democrats did not endorse the suggestion of their political rivals and continued focusing on counter-mobility<sup>51</sup>. For example, following the meeting of Baltic states' ministers of defence on 22–23 May 2025, the Lithuanian MOD did not announce any changes to the objectives outlined previously. However, it was clarified that the Baltic states plan to sign a concept note with Poland, integrating the Baltic Defence Line and the Polish East Shield initiative, in which the Baltic states aim to increase their chances to secure funds from the EU by jointly applying with Poland<sup>52</sup>.

However, the Lithuanian MOD made a somewhat unexpected announcement on 14 August, claiming that counter-mobility measures are developed sufficiently to start integrating them into an organised system of fortifications. During a short press briefing, Vice-Minister for Defence, Tomas Godliauskas, stated that Lithuania will organise defences of a depth up to 50 km which will be divided into three layers. According to the limited information provided, the first defensive layer is planned to be 5 km deep and will feature an anti-tank ditch situated behind the border fence, followed by other anti-tank obstacles, minefields, and two lines of strongpoints with trenches. The second and the

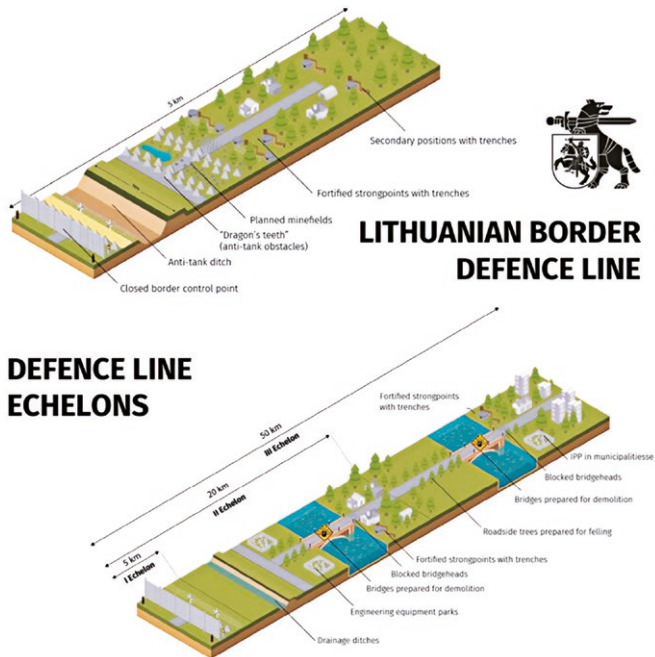
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<sup>50</sup> TS-LKD Taryba davė startą Vytauto Didžiojo gynybos linijos projektui: bus renkami parašai Lietuvos miestuose ir miesteliuose, 16 June 2025, <https://tsajunga.lt/aktualijos/ts-lkd-taryba-dave-starta-vytauto-didziojo-gynybos-linijos-projektui-bus-renkami-parasai-lietuvos-miestuose-ir-miesteliuose/>.

<sup>51</sup> M. Vasiliauskas, *Konservatorių noras įtvirtinti pasienį su Rusija ir Baltarusija erzina Palucką: "Ką jie čia mėgina įrodyti, aš nežinau"*, tv3.lt, 11 May 2025, <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/lietuva/konservatoriu-noras-itvirtinti-pasieni-su-rusija-ir-baltarusija-erzina-palucka-ka-jie-cia-megina-irodyti-as-nezinau-n1417903>.

<sup>52</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Lietuva stiprina...*

Figure 1. The concept of the Lithuanian border defence line



Source: The Lithuanian MOD.

third layers (20 and 50 km from the border, respectively) integrate previous counter-mobility efforts and supplement them with fixed defensive structures. The former will be composed of storage areas for counter-mobility equipment, drainage ditches, blocked bridgeheads, bridges prepared for demolition and additional strongpoints with trenches. The latter will also consist of the said storage areas, bridges rigged with explosives, and roadside strips of trees prepared for felling<sup>53</sup> (please see figure 1). The length of the defence line was not disclosed, however, it will not cover the entirety of the Lithuanian border with Russia and Belarus, only those areas determined by the Lithuanian Armed

<sup>53</sup> *Pristatyta Krašto apsaugos ministerijos vystoma Lietuvos gynybos linija*, 14 August 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjf5xPpsz2E>.



Forces. Since the defence line concept focuses on delaying the advance of Russian armoured columns<sup>54</sup>, one can expect that the bulk defences will be built on the terrain most favourable to mechanised warfare.

Even the official information is somewhat sparse at the moment of writing, it seems that the shift in Lithuania's approach to fortifications was initiated by two factors. The first one was the example of Lithuania's neighbours (especially Poland), who paid more attention to permanent defence structures than Lithuania. The second one is military advice. The layered defence is compatible with NATO's plans to strengthen its presence in the east and buy more time for the arrival of reinforcements<sup>55</sup>.

## **5. Instead of conclusions: achievements, issues, and the road ahead**

The paper shows that Lithuania's approach to its defences evolved slowly. The first Russian military operations against Ukraine failed to initiate a broader discussion on defences because arming the Lithuanian Armed Forces, reintroducing the military draft, and hosting allied soldiers on Lithuanian territory consumed most of the resources and public attention. The Lithuanian public and politicians became more familiar with the utility of physical barriers after Belarus instigated a migration crisis on its border, while Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine at a time when the border fence was being built. As prepared defensive positions proved to be effective in stopping Russian advances in Ukraine, they became an integral part of Lithuanian political discourse. Eventually, the Lithuanian Government clarified

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<sup>54</sup> *Defence Industry Europe, Lithuania publishes plans for three-layer defence line on border with Russia*, <https://defence-industry.eu/lithuania-publishes-plans-for-three-layer-defence-line-on-border-with-russia/>.

<sup>55</sup> *Defence Matters, Lithuania Builds Multi-Layered Defensive Line Against Russia and Belarus Threats*, 17 August 2025, <https://defencematters.eu/lithuania-builds-multi-layered-defensive-line/>.

that it perceives defences in terms of countermobility, utilising favourable terrain features, procuring necessary means, and dispersing them across 27 storage areas as well as establishing permanent fortifications in only a few undisclosed areas. Most recently, however, Lithuania announced plans to broaden its counter-mobility effort by integrating them into a three-layered system of fortifications, including trenches, strongpoints, and minefields.

So far, Lithuania's achievements are rather moderate. Much time was spent developing the counter-mobility concept, while concrete objectives with deadlines were assigned to specific institutions only in late July 2024. However, some of the preparations were completed before then. For example, the first pilot storage area for counter-mobility equipment was opened in September 2023. More storage areas were established later, and the first batches of counter-mobility means (including mines) were procured<sup>56</sup>. Some counter-mobility equipment was showcased on bridges linking Kaliningrad with Lithuania in September–October 2024<sup>57</sup>. According to the timeline defined by the previous government, 27 counter-mobility storage areas were supposed to be finished by April 2025, while the Lithuanian MOD announced on 14 August 2025 that counter-mobility measures reached “initial capability”<sup>58</sup>. It remains unclear, however, when Lithuania will complete its three-layered defence line, even if blocking border crossing points, roads, and erecting defensive strongpoints with anti-tank ditches will be a priority. As things currently stand, the implementation tempo of the Lithuanian defence line first and foremost depends on the availability of funding for defence. On the one hand, Lithuanian defence spending

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<sup>56</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Lithuania buys engineering countermobility means worth EUR 4 million to develop the defence line*, 27 June 2024.

<sup>57</sup> LRT, *Pagėgiuose pristatyta Rusijos pasienio fortifikacija, ant tilto įtvirtinimai liks*, 5 September 2024; LRT, *Žiniasklaida: fortifikuotas antrasis tiltas per Nemuną į Kaliningrado sritį*, 8 October 2025.

<sup>58</sup> *Pristatyta Krašto apsaugos ministerijos...*

has increased substantially over the last decade and is expected to grow significantly next year. Specifically, Lithuanian defence spending grew from roughly 260 million EUR in 2013 (0.76% of GDP) to 2.5 billion EUR in 2025, and Lithuania plans to borrow an additional 800 million EUR this year, reaching the 4% benchmark<sup>59</sup>. Furthermore, the State Defence Council announced Lithuania's plans to spend between 5% and 6% of GDP on defence from 2026 to 2030 (adding 10–12 billion EUR in total), setting the necessary conditions for sourcing Lithuanian defence projects<sup>60</sup>. By the end of July 2025, Lithuania submitted a request to borrow between 5–8.76 billion EUR through the SAFE mechanism<sup>61</sup>.

On the other hand, the demand for defence funding is equally massive, while certain initiatives seem more important and immediate than fortifying the border. For example, Lithuania committed itself to prepare the necessary military infrastructure for hosting a German brigade by the end of 2027. Among other things, this means that Lithuania must quickly build a new military base near Rūdininkai for German soldiers serving in the 45th Panzer Brigade, develop additional military facilities in Rukla, prepare many other military infrastructure objects in Ukmergė and Zapalskiai for logistical purposes, etc.<sup>62</sup> The base in Rūdininkai alone has an approximate 1.8 billion EUR price tag. The deployment of 4,800 German soldiers and their equipment, taken together with the projected growth of the Lithuanian Armed

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Gynybos biudžetas*, <https://kam.lt/faktai-ir-skaiciai/gynybos-biudzetas/>.

<sup>60</sup> Ž. Abromaitis, „Patriot“ ir dvigubai daugiau HIMARS: ką Lietuvai reikėtų 5–6 proc. BVP gynybos biudžetas?, LRT, 17 January 2025.

<sup>61</sup> LRT, *Lithuania seeks up to €8.76 bn in EU defence loans*, 30 July 2025, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2628375/lithuania-seeks-up-to-eur8-76-bn-in-eu-defence-loans?srsId=AfmBOoLbcH40-AVdT2bQXQqi8d68ggf2vh-1jc7BV5Y36X0kmsztDX33>.

<sup>62</sup> Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, *Dėl Devynioliktosios Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės programos nuostatų įgyvendinimo plano patvirtinimo*, 12 March 2025.

Forces, means that Lithuania will need to build an additional major training area (brigade level) and find money for it<sup>63</sup>.

Speaking of growth, the Lithuanian Armed Forces is adopting a divisional structure, and the State Defence Council has made it clear that the increase in defence spending is primarily intended for reaching the operational capability of the 1st Lithuanian Division more quickly, i.e., in 2030, not 2035 as communicated previously. In practice, reaching such a capability so hastily requires procuring more heavy weapon platforms or receiving them more quickly than previously planned. Since 2022, Lithuania has gone on a shopping spree, announcing purchases of HIMARS systems, Caesar MK II SPGs, Leopard A8 MBTs, CV 90 IFVs, Boxers, JLTVs, NASAMS air-defence systems, Switchblade 300 and 600 UAVs, anti-tank and anti-air weapons, mines, and other items. In turn, Lithuania is open to spending more on certain weapons platforms if they could be delivered faster than agreed previously. On top of that, more soldiers are needed as new battalions are being formed, while air-defence, engineering, and artillery battalions are being upgraded to regiments<sup>64</sup>. All of these reforms require additional manpower and Lithuania will enlarge the number of draftees and professional soldiers serving in the Lithuanian Armed Forces, further increasing the strain on the Lithuanian defence budget.

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<sup>63</sup> Lietuvos Respublikos Krašto apsaugos ministerija, *Krašto apsaugos ministerija Seimui pristatys teisės aktų projektus, kurie stiprins Lietuvos gynybą ir saugumą*, 20 August 2025, <https://kam.lt/krasto-apsaugos-ministerija-seimui-pristatys-septynis-svarbius-gynybos-projektus/>.

<sup>64</sup> Lietuvos Respublikos principinės kariuomenės struktūros, karių ir Lietuvos kariuomenės darbuotojų, dirbančių pagal darbo sutartis ir gaunančių darbo užmokestį iš valstybės biudžeto ir valstybės pinigų fondų (išskyrus darbuotojus, gaunančius darbo užmokestį iš Europos Sąjungos struktūrinės, kitos Europos Sąjungos finansinės paramos ir tarptautinės finansinės paramos lėšų (išskyrus techninės paramos lėšas), ribinio skaičiaus patvirtinimo įstatymo Nr. XIII-2709 pakeitimo įstatymas, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/83d73593427911efb121d2fe3a0eff27?jfwid=-gk8f53re>.

Going forward, the implementation of the Lithuanian border fortification project will not only depend on the availability of national funds for defence but also on the support from the European Union and agreement among political parties. Speaking of the former, Lithuania, in concert with the Baltic states and Poland, is interested in financial support from the European Union given its ambitions to play a more significant role in defence as specified in the “ReARM Europe” and “Readiness 2030” initiatives. At the time of writing, however, it remains unclear what might be financed by European Union funds and to what extent. Previously, the EU refused to support the construction of a physical barrier on Lithuania’s border with Belarus, yet it provided financial assistance for surveillance equipment. Looking at the latter, it seems that Lithuanian major political parties now support the construction of fixed fortifications, integrating counter-mobility measures to a layered defence line. The new National Security Strategy, which is currently in preparation and requires parliamentary approval, will offer more clarity on the Lithuanian defences. At the present time, however, Lithuanian contribution to the Baltic Defence Line evolves from hedgehogs to trenches.

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# THE BALTIC DEFENCE LINE IN LATVIA

Olevs Nikers

## Summary

- Since January 2024, when the Baltic defence ministers signed the agreement on the creation of the Baltic Defence Line, the situation of the Eastern border security of Latvia has changed remarkably towards a positive direction.
- In 2024, 25 million EUR were allocated for military strengthening and anti-mobility measures on the border, and temporary engineering resource depots have been established on the Russian-Belarusian border in Latgale. Tens of thousands of anti-mobility structural elements have been placed – concrete blocks, “dragon’s teeth”, “anti-tank hedgehogs”, and other elements produced by Latvian companies.
- At the same time, Latvia is planning and working on the implementation of various types of warning systems in order to notice the enemy in time and record its movement. Latvian entrepreneurs have provided at least 75% of the procurement of structures necessary for strengthening the border. In the coming years, the defence of the Baltic States will be expensive, and they will need extensive support from NATO allies as well.
- Overall, the construction of the Latvian part of the Baltic Defence Line will cost approximately 303 million EUR

by the year 2029, when it is planned to end the phase of major work, but the border will continue to be improved at least until 2034.

## 1. Introduction

The Baltic states are considered to be NATO's weakest point, and similarly, the Suwalki Corridor is called the alliance's Achilles' heel, where the troops of the aggressor states could try to cut off the Baltic states' land access to other NATO members and repeat historical events.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Sweden joined NATO, which makes the Baltic Sea a kind of lake for the alliance; however, this alone is not enough to protect the Baltic states. The experience of the Ukrainian war shows that the construction of physical fortifications is a successful way to, if not stop, then at least slow down the enemy's advance. That is why the Baltic states and Poland have also begun militarily fortifying their borders, in order not only to stop illegal migration but also to stop a possible invasion by neighbouring countries at the first centimetre.

As foreseen in the recently approved National Armed Forces (NAF) Development Plan for 2025–2036, the creation of a defence line along the Russian-Belarusian border will include support points for NAF units, the creation of anti-tank ditches using various obstacles, as well as ammunition and mine depots.

Unlike Estonia, the implementation of border fortification plans in Latvia somehow went ahead more quickly. Border strengthening in Latvia began with the excavation of existing roads, creating temporary anti-tank ditches that will be converted into permanent anti-tank ditches later. Drainage ditches located along the border are also present. The placement of obstacles will be adapted to the terrain, also using natural obstacles – swamps, forests, and other natural objects.

The Baltic Defence Line is a kind of successfully materialised Baltic defence cooperation concept. The need to strengthen mutual cooperation is indeed strongly related to the fact that Russia is and will be a direct threat that will not disappear anytime soon. Historically, politically, and geopolitically, as well as by using available resources more effectively, Latvia's political-military cooperation with Lithuania and Estonia is one of the priorities of Latvia's defence policy.

Defence cooperation between the Baltic states is an important factor for the security, stability, and threat reduction in the region. Since the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014, the Baltic states have been implementing a close and intensive political and expert-level dialogue between civilian and military personnel of the defence sector, creating unified positions among the Baltic states within NATO and the EU, as well as other international cooperation formats. In 2013, a new framework document for military cooperation between the Baltic states was signed, which specifies the formats of military cooperation between the Baltic states, their functions and responsibilities, and their organisational and operational principles.

As early as 1991, the Baltic Council adopted a resolution on the development of a common security concept for the Baltic states, and in 1992, in Pärnu, Estonia, the Baltic defence ministers signed a protocol of agreement on cooperation between the defence ministries of the Baltic states in the field of common security. This cooperation allows for the development of national defence structures, promotes more effective development and use of capabilities, interoperability with allies, and ensures more successful cooperation in peacekeeping and crisis management operations.

In January 2024, the Baltic defence ministers signed an agreement on the creation of the Baltic Defence Line, which is intended to strengthen the eastern border of the Baltic states and NATO. In order to deter and block any potential military aggression against the Baltic states by an aggressor

state, it was declared that a plan would be developed to deploy various anti-mobility measures at the external borders of NATO and the European Union in the future. This initiative will significantly strengthen the military capabilities of the three Baltic countries to protect their borders, ensuring delays and blocking of the movement of any potential adversary. This is a joint project of the Baltic states and will also help within the framework of NATO defence plans<sup>1</sup>.

The purpose of the Baltic Defence Line is to strengthen the eastern border of the Baltic states. The initiative envisages early planning and partial implementation of counter-mobility measures that would, in the event of an invasion, help the armed forces of the Baltic states, as well as other NATO allied forces, to block a military invasion of the Baltic states by Russia, and do so as close to the border as possible, which would increase the possibility that Russia would be deterred from launching such aggression. The Baltic Defence Line will contain well-deployed military defence positions as well as early warning systems and pre-prepared ammunition depots.

Strengthening and protecting the Baltic Defence Line is a shared task with NATO and EU allies. The defence line of the Baltic states is also the defence line of NATO and the European Union. Its protection is a shared responsibility for the three Baltic countries. The priority set by the Latvian government is to invest in its military capabilities and strengthen its armament capabilities together with its NATO allies. The growing hybrid attacks, as well as the recent damage to critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, indicate that cooperation among the Baltic countries must be even closer and more operational both on land, in the air, at sea,

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<sup>1</sup> S. Puķe, *Baltijas valstis uz ārējām robežām veidos aizsardzības līniju, vienojas ministri*, 19 January 2024, <https://www.delfi.lv/193/politics/56280830/baltijas-valstis-uz-arejam-robezam-veida-os-aizsardzibas-liniju-vienojas-ministri>.

and in cyberspace, jointly protecting the territories of the three Baltic countries.

## 2. Border security failure

Only in 2015, after the first act of aggression was committed against Ukraine by Russia, did the Latvian government take the issue of border security much more seriously. However, the fact is that strengthening of the Eastern border is going too slowly, and this was publicly admitted several times by politicians and analysts in 2021<sup>2</sup>. In 2020, the Latvian authorities were observing that border violators are also following the rapid development of technologies today, and so it was no longer possible to effectively stop them by building only physical barriers. By then, the installation of physical obstacles on the border was not a priority, but the technologies that were integrated into the modernisation of the eastern border were designed to significantly strengthen Latvia's defence capabilities.

Certainly, active work has been underway for several years to strengthen Latvia's external border, the main task of which was to make the border observable, improve communications and the use of technology, as well as strengthen the information space.

Latvia's eastern border with Russia and Belarus is the external border of both the EU and NATO. Strengthening these borders as well as improving their monitoring methods in accordance with modern forms of threat is an essential part of the protection of both Latvia and other allied countries.

For example, at the beginning of 2020, new broadcast-ing masts were built in the Viļaka and Krāslava regions to strengthen the availability of information spaces and public media. The masts were also intended to be connected

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<sup>2</sup> Broadcast XTV, *Austrumu robežas stiprināšana – kāpēc tik ilgi?*, XTV, 29 September 2021, [https://xtv.lv/rigatv24/video/L3N8319DpOn-austrumu\\_robezas\\_stiprinasana\\_kapec\\_tik\\_ilgi](https://xtv.lv/rigatv24/video/L3N8319DpOn-austrumu_robezas_stiprinasana_kapec_tik_ilgi).

to the broadband optical network built throughout Latvia and are also available to mobile operators who want to improve the quality of their services in the region<sup>3</sup>.

Another important task set by the Latvian government back in 2015 was the construction of the fence along the Eastern border<sup>4</sup>. This project was followed by corruption scandals and basically it was a major failure – overall, it took more than 10 years from the point when the plan was set in motion by the politicians until the fence across the border was actually in place. Due to the full scale war in Ukraine and the migration crisis from Belarus, which were a rising concern for Latvian authorities for the past several years, the construction of the Latvian-Belarusian border fence (173 km), and Latvian-Russian border fence (283 km), along almost the entire length, excluding bodies of water, was only completed at the end of 2024.

### 3. Building the defence line

Various types of obstacles are already in place to strengthen the Eastern border of Latvia. An example of one of these – anti-tank ditches – is reinforced with concrete blocks and structures such as the so-called “dragon’s teeth” and anti-tank mines. It should be mentioned that in the initial months, the National armed forces had already deployed almost 20 temporary engineer resource parks in Latgale, which were stocked with anti-mobility obstacles.

Another example of this was the National Guard from the 3rd Latgale Brigade Engineer Company fully strengthening the Opuļi Border Guard Division base with “Hesco”

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<sup>3</sup> Latvian Ministry of Interior, *Norisinājās valsts austrumu robežas apmeklējums*, 6 July 2020, <https://www.iem.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/norisinajas-valsts-austrumu-robezas-apeklejums>.

<sup>4</sup> O. Nikers, *Security Regime on Latvia's Eastern Border Needs Substantial Investment*, The Jamestown Foundation, 19 February 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/security-regime-on-latvias-eastern-border-needs-substantial-investment/>.

bastions. It is planned that in the event of war, an anti-tank minefield will be created behind these fortifications, and barbed wire barriers will be deployed, creating groups of obstacles that will gradually be accumulated in storage facilities at the border<sup>5</sup>.

This is only a very small part of the overall border defence. At the same time, Latvia is planning and working on the implementation of various types of warning systems in order to notice the enemy in time and record its movement. Plans will also be developed to prepare the most important transport arteries – roads, railways, and bridges – for quick and effective disruption in order to delay the possible advance of the enemy.

The goal of constructing the defensive line is to block, divert, and destroy a potential invader, and everything is currently being done so that the armed forces can defend the country and its inhabitants immediately. In 2024, anti-mobility barriers were purchased and partially deployed, but this year, it is planned to purchase mines and sensor systems. Of the funds earmarked for the implementation of the Eastern Border Military Strengthening and Anti-mobility Plan this year, 10 million EUR were already allocated to the Border Guard in order to strengthen border surveillance and security now.

Lands along the border will be expropriated for the Baltic Defence Line. In order to strengthen Latvia's border and create a strong defensive line, the National Armed Forces must not only deploy obstacles along the border itself; infrastructure must also be created for storing weapons deeper inland. However, the places where this is possible mostly belong to private owners. Therefore, the Ministry of Defence

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<sup>5</sup> E. Blumberga, “Sargs.lv” pēta: kā izskatīsies Baltijas valstu un Polijas aizsardzības līnija uz robežas ar Krieviju un Baltkrieviju, Sargs.lv, 24 September 2024, <https://www.sargs.lv/lv/nato/2024-09-24/sarg-slv-peta-ka-izskatisies-baltijas-valstu-un-polijas-aizsardzibas-linija-uz>.

has prepared a draft law that will allow the expropriation of lands in territories up to 30 km from the border<sup>6</sup>.

The defence sector has developed a draft law for the more effective creation of the Latvian section of the Baltic Defence Line. Last year, the plan for military strengthening and counter-mobility of the Eastern border was approved. Latvia is moving forward with the goal of blocking, diverting, and destroying any adversary from the first centimetre of invasion<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, the defence industry leadership have emphasized the need to urgently adopt the “Law on the Establishment of Infrastructure Necessary for Counter-Mobility and Mobility Measures”, which will allow the land areas to be expropriated for the creation of the Baltic Defence Line to be assigned the status of an object of national interest, as well as simplify the process of placing and constructing obstacles. Latvia is already working with NATO allies to ensure that all obstacles, positions, and fortifications are aligned with their operational plans. This is not just a Latvian project – it is the backbone of NATO’s eastern flank defence, and it is being designed so that our allies can take over combat positions without delay if the need arises.

Last year, 25 million EUR were allocated for the implementation of the plan for military strengthening and anti-mobility of the border. With these funds, temporary engineering resource depots have been established on the Russian-Belarusian border in Latgale, where tens of thousands of anti-mobility structural elements are located – concrete

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<sup>6</sup> L. Zute-Vītola, *Baltijas aizsardzības līnijai atsavinās zemes pierobežā*, Lsm.lv, 24 April 2025, <https://replay.lsm.lv/lv/skaties/ieraksts/ltv/354282/baltijas-aizsardzibas-linijai-atsavinas-zemes-pierobeza>.

<sup>7</sup> *Aizsardzības nozare izstrādājusi likumprojektu Baltijas aizsardzības līnijai Latvijas posma efektīvākai izveidei*, 24 April 2025, <https://lvportals.lv/dienaskartiba/375403-aizsardzibas-nozare-izstradajusi-likumprojektu-baltijas-aizsardzibas-linijas-latvijas-posma-efektivakakai-izvei-dei-2025>.



blocks, “dragon’s teeth”, “anti-tank hedgehogs”, and other elements produced by Latvian enterprises.

In 2024, Latvian entrepreneurs provided 75% of the procurement of structures necessary for strengthening the border. These were mainly concrete and metal structural materials.

In order to limit or block transport movement with anti-mobility structures, if required, the necessary materials were deployed in strategically important locations last year. At the same time, the already closed border crossing points and border control points were blocked with anti-mobility structures. Also, to limit transport movement in the border area, border roads and forest trails were blocked.

This year, 45 million EUR have been allocated for the military strengthening of the eastern border, emphasising the importance of preparing sensors, mines, artillery, and road infrastructure. In parallel, permanent resource depots and fortification points are being created. The construction of the Latvian section of the Baltic Defence Line is planned for five years – from 2024 to 2028, investing 303 million EUR. Strengthening the border will be a continuous task that will exceed the limits of the five-year plan<sup>8</sup>.

The construction of these defensive structures is only a small part of the plan to strengthen the eastern border, on which it is planned to spend more than 300 million EUR over the next five years. In addition to various obstacles, it is also planned to build ammunition depots in Latgale. The armed forces, however, continue to emphasise that mining the border in peacetime is not being considered.

Also, there are several levels for the potential storage of mines intended to block a potential adversary near the border. Some of the mines are already in the army’s arsenal, but additional purchases will be made this year. Mines and ammunition are being placed in army warehouses, but if

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

there are signs of the need to act more decisively, the mines will be placed in fortified shelters. These shelters will be built in the border area in the near future.

Taking into account the creation of obstacles, shelters, and other infrastructure in the border area, it is necessary to think about preventing counterintelligence risks; therefore, limited information is provided publicly about specific plans.

This year, it is planned to purchase anti-mobility obstacles, sensors, artillery systems, and mine-laying equipment, as well as provide support to the State Border Guard. Engineer resource depots will also be built in the eastern Vidzeme region. The Ministry of Defence promises that the purchase of anti-mobility construction materials from local entrepreneurs will continue. Currently, the work on the 400-km-long Russian-Belarusian border and the placement of obstacles continue.

#### 4. Debate

The majority (62%) of Latvian residents aged 18 to 65 have indicated that they support the plan to create a Baltic defence line to strengthen the eastern border of the Baltic states and NATO (38% – definitely yes; 24% – rather yes), while a fifth (21%) of residents are of the opposite opinion (9% – rather no; 12% – definitely no). 17% of residents have no specific opinion on this issue<sup>9</sup>.

Taking into account the ultimate role of municipalities within the Latvian national comprehensive defence system, the public discussion over the development of the defence line engaged heads of the regions and cities of the bordering area. Several heads of border municipalities are concerned

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<sup>9</sup> TV3, *Piektā daļa Latvijas iedzīvotāju ir pret Baltijas aizsardzības līnijas izveidi, secināts aptaujā*, 29 January 2024, <https://zinas.tv3.lv/aptaujas/piekta-dala-latvijas-iedzivotaju-ir-pret-baltijas-aizsardzibas-linijas-izveidi-secinats-aptauja/>.

about the “border zoning” published by the Ministry of Defence, which states that in the interests of national security, a 50-kilometre strip along the borders of Russia and Belarus is a “red” zone. The mayors of the regions are concerned that this will stop any kind of business and economic development in Latgale. However, these concerns have been allayed by the confirmation that wind farms higher than 100 metres will not be allowed to be built in the red zone.

“Development of the defence line will in no way limit other types of economic activity – investments, manufacturing plants, agriculture, it will not prevent planting beets, potatoes, absolutely nothing”, the president of Latvia, Mr. Edgars Rinkēvičs, is promising<sup>10</sup>.

Ludza Mayor Edgars Mekšs admits that protecting the population and the state comes first, but it is important that the region’s economy is not halted for security reasons. Therefore, border zoning clarification will be provided, and hopefully it will not affect other economic activities, because municipalities need to know clearly whether they can build a production facility, an entrepreneur can come with his construction plan to the border, or it will not be affected by specific prohibitions. Latvian authorities have promised that there will be no issue with the questions listed by the heads of municipalities.

Entrepreneurs are already engaged in the construction of the defence line. They are receiving information from the Ministry of Defence about what is required, and the MoD will continue the dialogue with entrepreneurs. In consultation with the government, mayors of the regions repeatedly emphasise how important the involvement of local governments in strengthening common defence is, and

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<sup>10</sup> M. Jakovela, *Rinkēvičs austrumu pierobežā apspriedis aizsardzības plānus un gatavību “X stundai”*, TV3, 19 April 2024, <https://zinas.tv3.lv/latvija/politika/rinkevics-austrumu-pierobeza-apspriedis-aizsardzibas-planus-un-gatavibu-x-stundai/>.

that a welcoming attitude is expected in the construction of infrastructure.

The Ministry of Defence considers municipalities to be the main supporters in carrying out the many tasks when building the defence line and is looking at municipalities as an extension of the defence system forces in direct contact with the public. Taking into account the security situation in the region, it was planned that all heads of municipalities and their deputies would need clearance to work with information containing state secrets.

When the concept of the Baltic Defence Line was declared, and considering that the costs of Latvia's Eastern border could be very significant, the Latvian Minister of Defence publicly declared that construction of the Baltic Defence Line could last for the next decade<sup>11</sup>. Former minister of defence, Artis Pabriks, intervened in the debate, stating that in this situation it is not possible to speculate on the time frame – the Baltic Defence Line should be developed as soon as possible. “In 10 years, there will be completely different requirements for border protection, including technologically, so to say that in 10 years, it will be ready but in 9 it won't be – I think that's just speculation”, stressed Mr. Pabriks<sup>12</sup>.

On the expense side, the project won't be cheap, admits former Commander of the Latvian National Armed Forces Raimonds Graube<sup>13</sup>. The commitment to create the Baltic De-

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<sup>11</sup> LETA, *Aizsardzības ministrs: Baltijas aizsardzības līnijas būvniecība varētu ilgt tuvāko desmitgadi*, 25 January 2024, <https://www.1188.lv/en/news/aizsardzibas-ministrs-baltijas-aizsardzibas-linijas-buvnieciba-varetu-ilgt-tuvako-desmitgadi/25304>.

<sup>12</sup> LA.LV, *Vai Baltijas aizsardzības līniju var būvēt 10 gadus? Laika skaitīšana ir spekulācija, ir vienkārši jāsāk darīt, atzīst Pabriks*, 13 January 2024, <https://www.la.lv/vai-baltijas-aizsardzibas-liniju-var-buvet-10-gadus-laika-skaitisana-ir-spekulacija-ir-vienkarsi-jasak-darit-atzist-pabriks>.

<sup>13</sup> TVNET.LV, *Baltijas Aizsardzības līnijas veidošanas projekts nebūs lēts, norāda Graube*, 22 January 2024, <https://www.tvnet.lv/7943636/baltijas-aizsardzibas-linijas-veidosanas-projekts-nebus-lets-norada-graube>.

fence Line is a very correct step. This project won't be cheap, but it will significantly hinder the advance of a potential adversary – Russia – into Latvia. Although there have been vivid examples in history of countries building strong fortification lines, such as the Maginot Line in France, Graube drew attention to the fact that the Baltic Defence Line, with such a level of defence, is not comparable. “In the case of the Baltics, it is about counter-mobility measures and how to better organise defence. How exactly this line will be built depends on many factors. The landscape is very different in Estonia and Latvia, so the bunker defence systems will differ in different places”, Graube emphasised. In Graube's opinion, a very serious and thorough study must be carried out when building the line, because the different types of engineering structures will require additional research. Reinforced concrete bunkers, machine-gun nests, or places prepared for artillery systems – all this is a complex issue. It depends on which section of the border we are talking about; no one will build engineering structures designed to stop armoured vehicles in the middle of a forest or on the edge of a swamp.

Latvia's external border will be strengthened even after the construction of the Baltic Defence Line, which is planned to be completed in 2029, states Defence Minister Andris Sprūds<sup>14</sup>.

On the regional level, leaders of the Baltic countries and Poland declared that the construction of a defence infrastructure system along the EU's external border with Russia and Belarus will address the urgent and pressing need to protect the EU against military and hybrid threats<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> LETA, *Latvijas ārējā robeža tiks stiprināta arī pēc Baltijas aizsardzības līnijas izbūves pabeigšanas*, 24 April 2024, <https://www.delfi.lv/193/politics/120070045/latvijas-areja-robeza-tiks-stiprinata-ari-pec-baltijas-aizsardzibas-linijas-izbuves-pabeigšanas>.

<sup>15</sup> TVNET.LV, *Baltija un Polija aicina izbūvēt aizsardzības līniju gar ES austrumu robežu*, 27 June 2024, <https://www.tvnet.lv/8048633/balti->

The scale and cost of these joint efforts require targeted EU action to support them both politically and financially. Extraordinary measures must be used because the EU's external border must be protected by military and civilian means. The planning and construction of a defence line on the EU's eastern border should be carried out in coordination with NATO and its military requirements. According to estimates by some EU diplomats, the construction of such a defence line along the 700-km EU border with Russia and Belarus would cost approximately 2.5 billion EUR. Latvian Prime Minister Evika Siliņa expressed her conviction on Twitter that the EU's external borders must be protected and defended by both military and civilian means. These joint efforts require special EU action. Countries in Eastern Europe can feel what it means to be EU frontline states, as well as the negative economic impact on border regions and local communities. At the same time, this has not affected the unwavering support for Ukraine.

## 5. Planning for the future

The largest funding in the history of Latvia has been allocated for defence in 2025 – 1.56 billion EUR or 3.45% of the GDP. The majority of next year's defence budget, or 42%, will be used to develop military capabilities. It should be recalled that last year the sector's budget approached 1.4 billion EUR, reaching 3.2% of GDP. Defence funding is also expected to increase in the next two years. The majority of the 2025 defence budget, or 42%, will be used to develop military capabilities. "Strengthening defence capabilities by purchasing new weapons and replenishing stocks is the only way to deter Russia from aggression

against Latvia in the long term”, emphasised Defence Minister Andris Sprūds<sup>16</sup>.

By implementing the military reinforcement and counter-mobility plan, the capabilities of the armed forces to limit the ability of enemy ground force formations to cross the state border, by creating obstacles and blocking certain roads, have already been increased.

For a more effective creation of the Baltic Defence Line, the Ministry of Defence has prepared a draft law on the establishment of the infrastructure necessary for counter-mobility and mobility measures. The draft law establishes a special legal framework for the deployment of material and technical resources necessary for counter-mobility and mobility measures, the construction of infrastructure, and the alienation of real estate in the border area.

The draft law establishes a special legal framework for the deployment of material and technical resources necessary for counter-mobility and mobility measures, construction of infrastructure, and expropriation of border real estate. The territory necessary for the creation of infrastructure will be assigned the status of an object of national interest<sup>17</sup>. It is intended that the construction of the infrastructure necessary for counter-mobility and mobility measures and the deployment of material and technical resources can also be carried out by the National Armed Forces.

The eastern border military fortification and counter-mobility plan approved by the government in March is part of the creation of the Baltic Defence Line, which will include the creation of support points for NAF units along the entire Russian-Belarusian border – defensive positions for

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<sup>16</sup> Kas 2025. gadā paredzēts valsts aizsardzības jomā, LVportāls, 30 December 2024, <https://lvportals.lv/norises/371370-kas-2025-gada-paredzets-valsts-aizsardzibas-joma-2024>.

<sup>17</sup> E. Pālens, *Efektīvākai Baltijas aizsardzības līnijas izveidei virza jaunu likumprojektu*, Diena.lv, 24 April 2025, <https://www.diena.lv/raksts/latvija/zinas/efektivakai-baltijas-aizsardzibas-linijas-izveidei-virza-jaunu-likumprojektu-14334936>.

soldiers and fortified defensive positions, various obstacles, anti-tank ditches, and ammunition and mine depots.

In order to prevent the enemy from moving, border fortification in Latvia will continue with the excavation of existing roads and creating anti-tank ditches, while later the existing drainage ditches along the border will also be transformed into anti-tank ditches.

Various types of obstacles will also be deployed, for example, anti-tank ditches will be reinforced with concrete blocks and structures, including the so-called “dragon’s teeth” and anti-tank mines. The placement of obstacles will be adapted to the terrain, also using natural obstacles – swamps, forests, and other natural objects.

The anti-tank ditch must be at least 3–4 meters wide and deep enough. Also, sand piles must be located on the side of the defence in such a way that when the enemy attacks, the sand piles do not simply get pushed into the ditch, and then they drive over it. The armed forces plan to attract private companies for the creation of anti-tank ditches in the future, so that civilian tractor drivers can also learn how to properly create such an obstacle and, possibly, within X hours, be able to do it anywhere without the involvement of the army. In addition, other tank traps will soon be placed on the border, including dragon’s teeth.

At the same time, secure storage facilities for explosives and mines, as well as engineering materials, will be identified and installed in the border zone for the rapid reinforcement of defensive positions. Plans will also be developed for the preparation of the most important transport arteries – roads, railways, bridges – for rapid and effective breaching in order to delay the possible advance of the enemy. Although the plan is currently intended for five years, in general, the strengthening of the country’s defence capabilities will take place in the long term.

Currently, there are dozens of territories that will need to be alienated to strengthen the border, but the list may be expanded as the situation changes and the armed



forces assess the need for territory to strengthen defensive capabilities<sup>18</sup>.

In the coming years, defence posts with reinforced structures and fortifications, obstacle lines and sensors, as well as ammunition and mine warehouses, will be established.

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<sup>18</sup> LETA.LV, *Latvijas austrumu robežas stiprināšanai šogad plāno iegādāties mīnas un sensoru sistēmas*, 24 April 2025, <https://www.leta.lv/home/important/O267A34A-9C4D-465F-A817-85AF1E7A68E3/>.

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# THE BALTIC DEFENCE LINE IN ESTONIA

Marek Kohv

## Summary

- Prompted by the deteriorating security situation in the Baltic Sea region following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and particularly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Estonia aims to bolster its defensive capabilities and establish credible deterrence along its 338.6-km border with Russia.
- Estonia has accelerated the border infrastructure projects, investments, and the planned implementation of the defence zone. While significant progress has been made in strengthening border security and military readiness, challenges persist regarding land acquisition, environmental impacts, and logistical bottlenecks. The successful realisation of the Baltic Defence Line is a cornerstone of Estonia's national security and a contribution to NATO's collective defence, necessitating a balanced approach to security requirements and community engagement.

## 1. Overview of the Baltic Defence Line in Estonia

### 1.1. Security context and the establishment of the Baltic Defence Line

The security situation in the Baltic Sea region has deteriorated significantly since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This grave shift has necessitated a strengthening of the region's defensive capabilities and the establishment of effective deterrence against potential aggression. As a frontline NATO member sharing an eastern border, Estonia feels this pressure acutely, given its 338.6-km border with Russia, which simultaneously serves as an external frontier for both NATO and the European Union. Of the Estonian-Russian border, 135 km traverses difficult terrain and forested areas, 76 km follows the Narva River, and 127 km runs along Lake Peipus.

Russia's aggressive conduct has compelled the Baltic states to reassess their defensive posture and take swift action to enhance their security. Consequently, in 2024, the Baltic states approved a concept for the construction of anti-mobility defensive installations along their borders with Russia and Belarus. This joint initiative by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania aims to reinforce the security of NATO's eastern flank and create a credible military deterrence against potential Russian aggression<sup>1</sup>. This project forms an integral part of NATO's collective defence principle, unequivocally supporting the allies' interest in bolstering the Baltic Sea region's defensive capabilities. Estonia's role is particularly critical, as the country shares borders with strategic Russian military hubs, including the St. Petersburg and Pskov oblasts. Additionally, the border region presents

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<sup>1</sup> Estonian Ministry of Defence, *Baltic countries to build defensive installations on their borders*, 19 January 2024, <https://kaitseministeerium.ee/en/news/baltic-countries-build-defensive-installations-their-borders>.

a challenging topography, characterised by forests, swamps, and various bodies of water.

Previous border management primarily concentrated on peacetime threats such as illegal migration and smuggling; however, Russia's escalating aggression has necessitated a shift in focus toward a comprehensive military defence and deterrence strategy. This reorientation signifies a fundamental change in how Estonia and its Baltic neighbours perceive and prepare for threats, moving beyond mere border control to active military fortification and the principle of "defence from the first centimetre". This evolution clearly demonstrates a direct causal link between the perceived threat level and the nature of the defensive measures being implemented.

## 1.2. Political discussion and international cooperation

In Estonia, there is generally a broad political consensus regarding the necessity of the Baltic Defence Line. While localised questions or regional variations in support may arise depending on the viewpoints of different political party constituencies, the overarching commitment remains robust. The current governing coalition, comprising the Reform Party and Eesti 200, has explicitly included a pledge to establish the Estonian section of the Baltic Defence Line within its coalition agreement for the years 2025–2027<sup>2</sup>. This indicates that the perceived external threat transcends typical domestic political disagreements, enabling long-term strategic planning and resource allocation. The project's inclusion in a multi-year coalition agreement demonstrates a high degree of strategic alignment and commitment that surpasses short-term political cycles, signalling a strong and resilient national security policy.

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<sup>2</sup> Vabariigi Valitsus, *Eesti Reformierakonna ja Erakonna Eesti 200 valitsusliidu alusleping*, <https://valitsus.ee/valitsuse-eesmargid-ja-tegevused/valitsemise-alused/koalitsioonilepe-2025-2027/riigikaitse>.

According to the Estonian Minister of Defence, the Baltic Defence Line initiative has progressed well because the need for it is a shared concern among allies in the Baltic Sea region. He added that the necessity of the defence zone stems from the current security situation and supports NATO's new "tripwire defence" concept. "Simultaneously, it strengthens the security of the European Union and the military defence of its borders, which is why we clearly see that the European Union could also financially support the project", stated Minister of Defence Hanno Pevkur<sup>3</sup>.

The Baltic states and Poland share a common understanding that the defence zone should be a project of common interest within the EU, enabling joint funding from EU mechanisms. To this end, a joint concept paper for the defence zone is being finalised. This document has received preliminary approval from the Baltic defence ministers, and they are currently awaiting feedback from Poland.

The new 3.5% + 1.5% defence investment model proposed by the NATO Secretary General (3.5% for "hard military spending" and 1.5% for related areas like infrastructure and cybersecurity) would also support the development of defence-related infrastructure, which the Baltic Defence Line undoubtedly is. This project is explicitly part of NATO's collective defence principle.

### 1.3. Public opinion and societal opposition

A public opinion survey commissioned by Estonian National Broadcasting (ERR) indicated that 70% of respondents viewed the establishment of the Baltic Defence Line favourably<sup>4</sup>. This reflects a heightened security awareness

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<sup>3</sup> Kaitseministeerium, *Balti riigid ja Poola soovivad kaitsevööndi rahastust ka EL-st*, 28 September 2024, <https://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/et/uudised/balti-riigid-ja-poola-soovivad-kaitsevoondi-rahastust-ka-el-st>.

<sup>4</sup> ERR.EE, *Uuring: 81 protsenti elanikest toetab rünnakule relvastatud vastupanu*, 21 June 2024, <https://www.err.ee/1609378301/uur-ing-81-protsenti-elanikest-toetab-runnakule-relvastatud-vastupanu>.

and increased confidence in the project's necessity. Another survey indicated that 81% of the Estonian population supports armed resistance in the event of a foreign attack, with 61% of those surveyed also willing to participate in defence activities themselves<sup>5</sup>. This strong public backing provides the government with significant political capital to implement ambitious defence projects.

However, the project has faced some opposition, primarily from landowners. The main criticisms concern compulsory land acquisition and insufficient involvement in the decision-making process<sup>6</sup>. The Estonian Centre for Defence Investments (RKIK) acknowledges that it is now adopting a more flexible approach towards landowners whose properties fall within the defence zone. During negotiations, both purchase-sale options and usage possibilities are being considered, with these needs reviewed individually with each private owner<sup>7</sup>.

#### 1.4. Environmental impacts and solutions

Legislation concerning Environmental Impact Assessment requires the evaluation of material, social, and ecological impacts, assessing the duration, irreversibility, and community-wide scope of these effects – not merely temporary security enhancements. This applies to all types of projects, including military infrastructure, that could affect Natura 2000 areas<sup>8</sup>. The Ministry of Defence has confirmed that defensive structures will be dispersed across the landscape,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> ERR.EE, *Eramaaomanike valmisolek Balti kaitsevööndi rajamiseks jaguneb kahte leeri*, 15 April 2025, <https://www.err.ee/1609665593/eramaaomanike-valmisolek-balti-kaitsevoondi-rajamiseks-jaguneb-kahte-leeri>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Keskkonnaamet, *Keskkonnamõju strateegiline hindamine*, <https://keskkonnaamet.ee/keskkonnakasutus-kiirgus/keskkonnakorraldus/keskkonnamoju-strateegiline-hindamine>.

taking into account both potential enemy activity and the findings of environmental analyses<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. Current state of border infrastructure in Estonia

### 2.1. Physical infrastructure and its condition

Since 2015, Estonia has invested significantly in border infrastructure development, but Russia's 2022 aggression in Ukraine provided new impetus for these developments. The construction of the eastern border is broadly divided into two main parts: the southeastern border, which encompasses the land border, and the Narva River border, extending upstream from Lake Peipus. The entire border is being treated as a unified project, developed under the designation of the "Eastern Border Project".

Currently, approximately 90 km of the 135-km land border is covered with a delay fence. The first segment of the new border infrastructure is also equipped with modern surveillance technology, and the initial surveillance positions along the Narva River have been completed.

Work on the full construction of the eastern border is ongoing. By the end of 2025, the objective is to complete the land border infrastructure, meaning 109 km of the Estonian-Russian land border will be covered by a delay fence. The fence will only be interrupted in areas where the terrain is impassable on foot, such as bodies of water and highly marshy areas, where illegal border crossing would be extremely difficult to achieve and monitor. In these locations, it is significantly more practical to monitor the border using technical means. In the following years, the installation of surveillance technology will continue along the river and land borders<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Kaitseministeerium, *Balti kaitsevöönd*, <https://kaitseministeerium.ee/et/eesmargid-tegevused/baltikaitsevoond>.

<sup>10</sup> *Narvas avati rekonstrueeritud piirivalvekordon*, 4 February 2025, <https://lounaaestlane.ee/narvas-avati-rekonstrueeritud-piirivalvekordon/>.



## 2.2. Surveillance and monitoring systems

Since 2023, border patrol capabilities have been enhanced with drone-based systems, allowing for uninterrupted surveillance even in challenging terrain.

However, current border surveillance capabilities are largely designed for peacetime threats, such as illegal migration and smuggling. Systems fully adapted to military threats will require additional financial and technological investments.

Regarding the rest of the border, the first section of the Narva River stretch was completed at the end of 2024 with the establishment of new surveillance positions. Construction work is currently underway on the second section of the Narva River border, which is planned for completion in the first half of 2027, and will include the construction of nine new surveillance positions<sup>11</sup>.

## 2.3. Border guard units and readiness

Over the past two years, the Police and Border Guard Board has strengthened the capabilities of its mobile patrol units. Additional funding has been allocated for enhanced equipment, including night vision devices, armoured vehicles, and communication tools, enabling swift responses to both hybrid threats and conventional attempts to breach the border. To bolster comprehensive national defence, a crisis reserve is being established within the Police and Border Guard Board. This involves forming a 1,000-member crisis reserve group composed of military personnel who have served in the military police<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> ERR.EE, *Estonia's eastern border infrastructure due for completion by end of 2027*, 7 March 2025, <https://news.err.ee/1609625186/estonia-s-eastern-border-infrastructure-due-for-completion-by-end-of-2027>.

<sup>12</sup> Vabariigi Valitsus, *Laiapindse riigikaitse lisarahastuse fookuses on politsei kriisireserv, idapiir ja varud*, 16 January 2025, <https://valitsus.ee/uudised/laiapindse-riigikaitse-lisarahastuse-fookuses-politsei-kriisireserv-idapiir-ja-varud>.

## 2.4. Identified Weaknesses and Gaps

While significant progress has been made, critical gaps persist on several levels. Topographical complexity hinders the construction of physical barriers in many areas, such as the “Saatse Boot” region. Although a land exchange with Russia was initially planned for this area, it didn’t materialise, necessitating the construction of additional facilities there. Similarly, several sections of the border remain without cameras or surveillance systems.

Furthermore, intelligence gathered through satellite imagery has revealed that Russia has simultaneously reinforced its infrastructure near the border, including warehouses, troop rotations, and road networks<sup>13</sup>.

## 2.5. Recent investments and strategic direction

Estonia’s national “Defence Investments 2025–2029” plan allocates additional funds for adapting border infrastructure for military use<sup>14</sup>. The opening of the Nurmsi training centre in April 2025<sup>15</sup>, and the establishment of the Reedo military camp in 2024<sup>16</sup>, demonstrate that the addition of infrastructure facilities and the training of new capabilities will enable enhanced responsiveness to border activities.

The Nurmsi training centre facilitates continuous UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) training, including cooperation with allied forces. The Reedo military camp is a modular

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<sup>13</sup> *Satellite imagery analysis. What’s going on in Putin’s military bases behind the Estonian border and how big a threat they really pose us*, 1 November 2024, <https://ekspress.delfi.ee/artikkel/120333504/satellite-imagery-analysis-what-s-going-on-in-putin-s-military-bases-behind-the-estonian-border-and-how-big-a-threat-they-really-pose-us>.

<sup>14</sup> Riigi Kaitseinvesteeringute Keskus, *Kaitseinvesteeringud 2025–2029*, <https://www.kaitseinvesteeringud.ee/strateegia-ja-investeeringud/kaitseinvesteeringud-2025-2029/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kaitseliit, *Estonia Opened Its First Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Training Center*, 25 April 2025, <https://www.kaitseliit.ee/en/news/estonia-opens-first-unmanned-aerial-vehicle-training-center>.

<sup>16</sup> M. Rojoef, *Estonia Inaugurates Military Camp Near Russian Border*, 20 September 2024, <https://thedefensepost.com/2024/09/20/estonia-military-camp-russian-border/>.

force reception centre, with the capacity to accommodate up to 1,000 soldiers, representing a crucial element for rapid NATO response.

Furthermore, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, is establishing a command centre in Narva. An opening ceremony is scheduled for July 2025, with the decision on establishing a permanent centre expected by the end of the year. Additionally, the government aims to develop the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences' Narva study centre into Frontex's training hub for the European Union's northern region<sup>17</sup>. The Estonian Defence Forces plan to establish a base in Narva, enabling immediate response towards the Narva border crossing point. This base will house over 200 Estonian soldiers, as well as allied units<sup>18</sup>. This means that, together with Frontex personnel, the number of individuals contributing to border security will increase by approximately 500.

The "Secure Internal Security Program 2025–2028" outlines that Estonia's eastern border will be equipped with the following:

- Stationary cameras, radars, and motion sensors along the entire land, river, and lake borders.
- Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) detection systems (for drone detection and neutralization).
- Drone surveillance systems on the land border, in addition to surveillance mast systems along the Narva River sections.
- Automated command centres that process real-time border monitoring data and provide rapid alerts<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> E. Gamzejev, *Narva-Jõesuusse rajatakse Euroopa piirivalveagentyuri juhtimiskeskus*, 22 May 2025, <https://pohjarannik.postimees.ee/8254040/narva-joesuusse-rajatakse-euroopa-piirivalveagentyuri-juhtimiskeskus>.

<sup>18</sup> ERR.EE, *Kaitsevägi rajab Narva baasi*, 23 April 2025, <https://www.err.ee/1609672436/kaitsevagi-rajab-narva-baasi>.

<sup>19</sup> *Programm „Kindel sisejulgeolek 2025–2028“*, <https://siseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2025-01/Lisa%203.%20Programm%20Kindel%20sisejulgeolek%202025-2028.pdf>.

### 3. Implementation of the Baltic Defence Line in Estonia

#### 3.1. Project scope and strategic vision

The implementation of the Baltic Defence Line in Estonia commenced in 2023, when the Baltic states signed a memorandum of understanding establishing unified standards and approach to the military fortification of their eastern borders<sup>20</sup>. Estonia's plan anticipates the construction of approximately 600 concrete bunkers along the entire length of its eastern border. This constitutes a multi-layered infrastructure designed to slow down or impede the advance of a potential invasion and ensure the necessary time for NATO units to mobilise<sup>21</sup>.

The defence line strategy is based on a deep defence concept, where physical barriers, shelters, and technological surveillance systems together form an extensive defensive network capable of responding to both conventional and hybrid threats. This approach is designed to gain critical time for NATO reinforcements and mobilisation, transforming the border zone into a complex battlefield that degrades enemy capabilities before they can reach vital areas. The clear objective of “buying time for NATO mobilisation” underscores the project's integral role within broader alliance defence plans, demonstrating a coordinated effort to strategically exploit time and space.

#### 3.2. Types of installations and capabilities

The installations being constructed in Estonia include:

**Concrete Bunkers and Ammunition Shelters:** Approximately 600 structures, inspired by lessons from the war in Ukraine. These are designed as defensive positions for

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<sup>20</sup> The Baltic Times, *Estonia lags behind other Baltic states in defense zone construction*, 25 March 2025, [https://www.baltictimes.com/estonia\\_lags\\_behind\\_other\\_baltic\\_states\\_in\\_defense\\_zone\\_construction/](https://www.baltictimes.com/estonia_lags_behind_other_baltic_states_in_defense_zone_construction/).

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Baltic countries to build defensive installations on their borders*, 19 January 2024, <https://kaitseministeerium.ee/en/news/baltic-countries-build-defensive-installations-their-borders>.

Estonian and allied forces during combat. Crucially, these bunkers are built to protect personnel from enemy artillery fire, specifically capable of withstanding a direct hit from up to a 152 mm artillery shell.

**Anti-tank Barriers and Mobility Obstacles:** This category includes anti-tank ditches, dragon's teeth, and movable hedgehogs, all designed for rapid deployment in crisis situations<sup>22</sup>.

**Observation and Surveillance Points:** Equipped with drone systems, radars, and passive sensors, enabling continuous monitoring<sup>23</sup>.

**Command Centres and Logistics Hubs:** Such as the Reedo military camp, which will serve as centres for troop accommodation, supply, and operational command<sup>24</sup>.

The infrastructure leverages natural barriers – rivers, swamps, and forested areas – to integrate them into military defence solutions.

### 3.3. Funding and procurement process

Funding for the Baltic Defence Line project relies on a combination of state budget allocations, NATO investments, and European Union funding mechanisms. The Estonian portion of the Baltic Defence Line is estimated to cost approximately 60 million EUR, which will be managed through the Estonian Centre for Defence Investments<sup>25</sup>.

The work is divided into three phases. Phase I (2024–2025) involves procuring obstruction materials (dragon's teeth and concertina wire) and testing bunker prototypes, totalling approximately 3 million EUR. Phases II and III will focus on acquiring bunkers and necessary land

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<sup>22</sup> *Poland and Baltic States to start mining borders in response to threats from Russia and Belarus*, 24 March 2025, <https://armyrecognition.com/news/army-news/2025/poland-and-baltic-states-to-start-mining-borders-in-response-to-threats-from-russia-and-belarus>.

<sup>23</sup> Kaitseliit, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Riigi Kaitseinvesteeringute Keskus, op. cit.

areas (including storage sites), as well as establishing strongpoints.

The procurement process includes both domestic and international companies involved in bunker design, material supply, and the installation of electronic components. To ensure project competitiveness and transparency, procurement results are publicly accessible on the RKIK website.

In a joint letter dated 21 June 2025, Poland and the Baltic states appealed to the European Commission and the European Council to recognise the Eastern Shield and Baltic Defence Line as “projects of common European interest” – and to utilise all available EU instruments (i.e., financial mechanisms) to support them<sup>26</sup>.

### 3.4. Construction timeline and current status

The first phase of establishing the Baltic Defence Line began in spring 2025, following the approval of initial locations and conditions. The Estonian Centre for Defence Investments and the Defence Forces are set to begin constructing anti-tank ditches along Estonia’s southeastern border in summer 2025.

The durability of the bunkers was tested at the central polygon in October 2024. Based on the feedback from these tests, the Defence Forces adjusted the technical specifications for the bunkers. Procurement for bunkers that meet the Defence Forces’ requirements will begin in the coming months, with installation on the ground expected by this autumn<sup>27</sup>.

Meanwhile, support infrastructure has been activated, including UAV training centres and pre-positioned logistics points, most notably the Nurmsi training centre and the Reedo military camp. These facilities are strategically

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.pap.pl/en/news/poland-baltic-states-urge-eu-fund-eastern-defence-projects>.

<sup>27</sup> Kaitseministeerium, op. cit.

located to enable troop reception, surveillance, and immediate response in the relevant areas.

### **3.5. Crisis response solutions and NATO integration**

A crucial component of the Baltic Defence Line is its “hidden layers” – minefields, movable obstacles, and sensor networks that can be activated in a crisis. Poland and the other Baltic states have formalised their withdrawals from the Ottawa Treaty to allow a flexible approach to weapon systems that may have previously been subject to international restrictions, depending on the situation<sup>28</sup>.

Simultaneously, Estonia has designed the Baltic Defence Line with NATO’s defence concept in mind. The infrastructure is engineered to integrate seamlessly with NATO’s rapid reaction forces and enhanced forward presence concepts. For instance, the Reedo military camp’s modular design allows for the accommodation of up to 1,000 allied soldiers within 48 hours, providing them with protected facilities and an operational command centre<sup>29</sup>.

## **4. Conclusion: achievements, challenges, and future prospects**

### **4.1. Achievements**

The establishment of the Baltic Defence Line in Estonia has yielded numerous strategic, political, and technological advancements. Estonia has successfully mobilised national and international resources to develop a robust and rapidly responsive border infrastructure. Thanks to sustained political and financial backing, a systematic approach to defence facility planning has been possible, with clear objectives of deterrence, readiness, and capability.

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<sup>28</sup> [https://www.reuters.com/world/finland-notifies-un-withdrawal-land-mine-ban-treaty-2025-07-11/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.reuters.com/world/finland-notifies-un-withdrawal-land-mine-ban-treaty-2025-07-11/?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>29</sup> Kaitseliit, op. cit.

Infrastructure achievements include the construction of concrete bunkers, anti-tank barriers, and UAV training centres, as well as the opening of the Reedo military camp in 2024. These developments significantly expand Estonia's territorial defence capabilities and strengthen the rapid response capacity of its allies<sup>30</sup>.

#### 4.2. Challenges and limitations

While the project has generally progressed successfully, the Baltic Defence Line faces several significant challenges. The most visible is partial opposition from landowners, who are protesting compulsory acquisition, insufficient compensation, and inadequate involvement. The Ministry of Defence and the Estonian Centre for Defence Investments have identified this issue and are actively working to find solutions.

As part of the Baltic Defence Line's construction passes through Natura 2000 areas, environmental protection requirements must also be considered. The Ministry of Defence has committed to taking these conservation requirements into account.

Furthermore, some logistical bottlenecks have been identified, including:

- Challenging terrain (especially marshy and forested areas).
- Delays in surveillance technology deliveries across the EU defence market.

#### 4.3. Future prospects

The success of the Baltic Defence Line project hinges on several factors:

- Continued funding from both national and international sources.
- Strengthened cooperation among the Baltic states and NATO allies.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



- Maintaining citizen support through transparent and inclusive governance.
- Further development of innovative infrastructure, particularly in surveillance, mobilisation, and supply.

The full completion of the infrastructure is projected for 2027–2028. By this time, Estonia's eastern border should be equipped with rapid response infrastructure, encompassing not only permanent installations but also mobile units and on-demand minefields<sup>31</sup>.

The Baltic Defence Line is more than just a defence infrastructure project; it represents Estonia's first line of deterrence and defence for national security, as well as a significant contribution to NATO's collective defence. Its successful completion hinges on a balanced approach that considers both security imperatives and community interests, coupled with the ability to swiftly adapt to a changing strategic environment.

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<sup>31</sup> I. Cleave, *The Baltics are building a defensive line against Russia. Can they do it fast enough?*, 7 April 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/04/07/baltic-secret-defensive-line-keep-russia-out-europe/>.

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