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**Current security trends on NATO's eastern flank**

**and prospects for regional cooperation**

Russian aggression, the annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014, and the war in Eastern Ukraine shook the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The states of the region that were once part of the USSR or felt Soviet influence within the "socialist bloc" have been concerned about Russia's expansive foreign policy. Russia is exacerbating the military threat through intensive militarization of Crimea, the Black Sea basin and the Kaliningrad enclave. Consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic open new vulnerable areas for the region. In addition to the propaganda offensive in traditional media, the compilation of operations of influence, hacking attacks, penetration of information resources and critical infrastructure via cyberspace are examples of dangerous actions Russia may take. Despite the fact that the vast majority of post-socialist countries are now part of the North Atlantic Alliance, Moscow's behaviour and disregard for the basic principles of international law have forced the region's states to react.

The reaction has taken shape of several trends that are going to be discussed below. According to SIPRI’s data, among the states of the region there is a positive trend in terms of increasing defense spending. For example, during 2018, defense spending in Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia and Lithuania increased compared to 2017 by 18% - 24%[[1]](#footnote-1). In 2019, the Slovak government decided to achieve a defense spending ratio of 2% of GDP by 2022 - two years earlier than previously planned. Hungary has also set itself the goal of achieving defense spending at 2% of GDP by 2024. In turn already in 2017, Polish government adopted legislation that guarantees an increase in the defense budget to 2.5% of GDP by 2030 - in 2020-2023, expenditures are expected at 2.2%, and will continue to grow gradually. In 2019, also the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Andriy Babiš confirmed readiness to increase defense spending to 2% of GDP.

Another trend that has been taking place in the region of Central and Eastern Europe are the programs for the purchase of new military materials and the replacement of old Soviet equipment. Only in 2019, the National Assembly (Parliament) of Bulgaria adopted, and later the US State Department approved, a decision to purchase eight American F-16s to replace Soviet models. In 2018, Slovakia decided to replace the Soviet MiG-29 with fourteen American F-16s. Poland's technical modernization plan envisages the purchase of new submarines, helicopters, 32 F-35 aircraft to replace the MiG-29 and Su-2227.

As has been already briefly mentioned, leaders of CEE countries have been trying to boost security in the region by working closely with the United States. In particular, in 2019, the dynamics of bilateral security relations between Hungary and the United States increased. In February 2019, the cooperation agreement was signed on the supply of American military equipment to Hungary. Shortly after the statement by Slovak Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini about the increase in defense spending, he was invited to the meeting with US President Donald Trump, where the parties reaffirmed the high level of allied relations between the two countries.

In the field of defense policy, Poland's relations with the United States are developing dynamically. In June 2019, US President Donald Trump decided to place an additional 1,000 American soldiers on the territory of Poland. Apart from Poland, Bulgaria and Romania are also hosting a bilateral American military presence. What is more, NATO Wales Summit in 2014 established a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), consisting of up to 5,000 troops, who are ready for deployment within 48 to 72 hours, and enlarged the number of the NATO response force from 25,000 to 40,000 personnel[[2]](#footnote-2). NATO military exercises in the region have become more often, while at the 2016 Warsaw Summit the enhanced forward presence (eFP) of about 4,000 (multinational) troops in the Baltic countries and Poland was set up[[3]](#footnote-3).

Another trend is regional cooperation of states in order to strengthen the security situation. One such regional initiative is the Bucharest Nine (B9), composed by nine NATO members on the eastern flank of the Alliance (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic), launched in November 2015, in Bucharest. All Joint Declarations adopted at the Bucharest meetings stated that Russia's actions undermined the European security architecture and emphasized support for Ukraine's sovereignty, as well as its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

In turn, in Ukraine, new national security strategy was approved on September 14 2020[[4]](#footnote-4). The document emphasizes that the constant threat in the military sphere is the expansion of the military structures of the Russian Federation on NATO's eastern flank and near the border with Ukraine. Russia has been explicitly described as an aggressor state that threatens Ukrainian statehoodнк. At the same time, the strategy assumes further development of cooperation with NATO, the aim of which is to receive an invitation to join the Alliance.

It is worth noting that the relations between NATO and Ukraine have significantly intensified after the Russian aggression against this country. The Alliance was actively involved in helping Ukraine, both at the strategic level - through consultancy in the field of security and defense sector reform, and tactical - as part of training courses for Ukrainian units by instructors from NATO countries. At the summit in Warsaw, the Alliance countries additionally approved the Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine, including projects in the field of improving the efficiency of command and communication systems, logistics, cybersecurity and medical rehabilitation.

Ukraine's multinational exercises with NATO countries have also intensified. Sea Breeze exercises are held in the Black Sea; Sea Shield training is also regular. Ukraine and its Romanian counterparts have launched joint Riverian exercises, which started in 2018 and were the first joint exercises of sailors and maritime border guards of the two countries. A striking example of training in the air is training Clear Sky. In the first year, nine countries took part in the exercise: Ukraine, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and the United States.

It should be mentioned that on June 12 2020 NATO upgraded its relations with Ukraine officially recognizing it as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner that will provide Ukraine with some potential benefits such as better access to interoperability exercises and programs, more substantial information and experience sharing. Evidently, Ukraine in recent years has maintained a regional and strengthened global component of cooperation with NATO countries, which, along with the constitutionally established Ukrainian aspirations to join NATO and the common understanding of the Russian threat, creates preconditions for deepening cooperation with B9.

The need to strengthen Ukraine's defense capabilities and the key role assigned to relations with partners in these process frame prospects for regional cooperation. The deepening of military-defense cooperation with the Bucharest 9 countries can take place through the creation of a subregional platform with Ukraine and Georgia, and potentially with Moldova. Such an alliance is needed to accelerate the reform of national security and defense sectors according to NATO standards, to meet the criteria for membership in the Alliance. Cooperation with the Bucharest 9 format would help synchronize policies, in particular on countering hybrid threats from Russia. This would create a new mechanism of communication between countries that are directly interested in strengthening the security of Central and Eastern Europe. Ukraine would be provided with an additional to EOP institutional platform for practical action (military maneuvers, defense cooperation, military-political consultations, intelligence exchange, etc.) in the context of the Euro-Atlantic perspective.

In addition, it is worth considering building effective mechanisms of cooperation and coordination in the construction and then practical use of offensive capabilities for operations in cyberspace, in other words, cyber defense forces. Awareness of the common goals and threats of the countries of NATO's eastern flank requires that the activities undertaken in this area should be coordinated from the earliest stages of creating operational infrastructure. Taking into account and timely carrying out these prospects would strengthen the security and defense positions of NATO's eastern flank.

1. “Military expenditure by country, in constant (2018) US$ m., 1988-2019”, SIPRI 2020. <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932019%20in%20constant%20%282018%29%20USD.pdf> (access October 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Wales Summit Declaration*, Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, Newport 2014. <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm> (access October 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Warsaw Summit Communique*, Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, Warsaw 2016. <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm?selectedLocale=en> (access October 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Strategiya nacionalnoyi bezpeki Ukrayini,* Rada nacionalnoyi bezpeki i oboroni Ukrayini, Kiev 2020. <https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/ua/Ukazy/4693.html> (access October 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)