

Poland integrates paramilitary groups into the army

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The Polish government has integrated paramilitary groups into the army, strengthening right-wing forces within the police and army while intensifying the confrontation with Russia in the process.

On March 21, volunteer militias, citizens' defence groups, paramilitary associations and schools with so-called defence training classes in the Warsaw region came together to form an association at a conference with over 800 participants.

Poland's National Security Adviser Stanislaw Koziej explained that the paramilitary militia would work closely with the army. This isn't about creating an army outside of the army, he stated. The integration of civil defence organisations was an important step in increasing the country's security.

It remains unclear which tasks these paramilitary groups will take on and where they will be deployed. Military exercises with the reserves and the utilisation of military training grounds were discussed at the Warsaw conference.

According to estimates, there are approximately 120 groups in Poland composed of some 45,000 members carrying out military exercises, shooting practice or tactical training. Almost all are closely aligned with right-wing political parties and groups. Their actions are not only directed against the alleged external threat of Russia, but also domestically against minorities, left-wing forces and homosexuals.

The extreme right-wing Ruch Narodowy, which has close ties to Hungary's Jobbik party and other right-wing parties in Europe, controls its own paramilitary group. Many groups maintain links to the fascist militias in Ukraine, which are fighting alongside the Ukrainian army against separatists in the east of the country, having played a major role in the Maidan movement.

The association is to be led by General Boguslaw Pacek, who was responsible for improving military training in Ukraine as part of the NATO programme. Pacek spoke of the collaboration between the groups and the defence ministry reaching a "new quality."

Pacek was also adviser to defence minister Tomasz Siemoniak, who personally attended the conference. In the lead-up to the conference, Siemoniak declared that these organisations would potentially need to be utilized more. He referred to the positive experiences in providing rescue services or disaster protection, in which volunteers had successfully partnered with professionals. The government was considering paying a wage to 2,500 volunteers. These would then serve as the backbone of the volunteer organisations at the local level and be mobilised in the event of war.

In tandem with the creation of the paramilitary association, Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz changed the law on involvement in military exercises. While previously only active soldiers and reserves could be called up for duty, now any Pole can be called up in principle. In addition, the government is pushing to reintroduce military service, which was abolished in 2010.

The *New York Times* wrote on the collaboration between the government and the volunteer groups: "The defence ministry has been trying to entice the groups to join an alliance with the government, offering equipment, uniforms, training and even money in exchange for a clearer idea of who they are—and a chance to assemble a new generation of energized recruits."

According to Pacek, beyond the roughly 120 paramilitary groups in Poland, there are approximately 1,500 so-called uniform classes in Polish schools in which pupils are taught military techniques. There

could be possible joint exercises between these civilian volunteers and the reserves. Already in 2014, the Polish government decided to increase the size of the reserves.

The provoked conflict with Russia is not only being used in Poland to push forward with a military build-up and give right-wing militias a semi-official status. This is also a prominent development in the Baltic states, which together with Poland, have taken the lead in the conflict with Russia.

In Latvia, on March 16, veterans of the German SS held their annual parade under the protection of a massive police escort. Around 1,500 people marched through Riga, according to police estimates, including several parliamentarians. They celebrated the 140,000 Latvians who fought in the Second World War in the uniforms of the SS against the Red Army, and committed unspeakable atrocities, as independence fighters.

In Lithuania, President Dalia Grybauskaite ordered the distribution of a government pamphlet to every household providing advice on what to do in the event of a Russian attack. In this way, a climate of fear is being created, enabling the government to implement planned cuts and increase the military budget.

A component of the growing militarism directed against Russia is the almost 1,800-kilometre-long trip of a US military convoy through Eastern Europe. Two weeks ago, a group of American tanks set off from Estonia to drive through Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the Czech Republic. Two further groups started in Lithuania and Poland. On April 1, all three groups will meet at the Rose barracks in Vilseck, Germany. The convoy is part of a massive rearmament of the US and NATO in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski recently called for a reorientation of NATO's strategic concept. The Western allies confronted a movement by Russia "away from straightforward cooperation towards one-sided confrontation with the Western world", he said. The conclusion to be drawn by Poland was that its defence capabilities had to be increased.

Last week, American Patriot missiles were sent to Warsaw from Germany. As part of the "Atlantic Resolve" operation, which is supposed to strengthen NATO's eastern flank, around 100 US soldiers and 30 vehicles have been stationed there.

A further point of conflict could be the attempt of the

Polish government, five years after the event, to reopen the investigation into the crash of the presidential plane in Smolensk, Russia. Two officers from Russia's air surveillance service should be held accountable in the courts due to the disaster, state prosecutor Ireneusz Szelag said.

On April 10, 2010, then Polish President Lech Kaczynski, his wife, and almost 100 high-ranking Polish officials were killed in the plane crash. Russian investigators have rejected Polish claims that Russia was in some way responsible for the crash. Air traffic controllers had followed their procedures and observed international protocol, said Russian spokesman Vladimir Markin in Moscow.



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