

# In wake of Trump election, Baltic states push for military build-up against Russia

Markus Salzmann  
25 November 2016

Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election has intensified calls in the Baltic states for a more aggressive stance towards Russia and stepped-up militarisation. The unstable Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, are appealing to the NATO alliance under US leadership, as well as calling for more engagement by the European Union.

Trump's statements during the election campaign provoked consternation in the Baltic republics. Concern was raised over Trump's pledge to make the US commitment to defend the Baltic states conditional on their financial contributions to NATO and his positive remarks about Kremlin chief Vladimir Putin.

In September 2014, US President Barack Obama gave the Baltic states an unconditional guarantee of mutual defence. He declared at the time in the Estonian capital Tallinn, "The defence of Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius is just as important as the defence of Berlin, Paris and London." He committed himself to an "eternal" obligation to defend Estonia with its 1.3 million residents according to Article 5 of the NATO statutes and promised to send American ground troops in the worst case scenario.

Emboldened, the three Baltic states are now demanding that EU members significantly increase their defence spending following Trump's criticism of NATO. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius stated in an interview in Paris, "Maybe the way he said it was sharp but the criticism was right that we have to contribute more ourselves."

The day after Trump's victory, Linkevičius confirmed that he had strong contacts with Trump's team. "We are ready to work with the new administration in the same spirit that has been built up over decades... The long-standing traditional, strategic, strong bonds cannot fade away. We have reasons to say

so, because we know the Republicans very well and we have a lot of friends among them. In fact, we have a number of contacts among those around Trump too," he said.

According to Linkevičius, it is too early to say anything about Trump's foreign policy, and the declarations from the election campaign should not be taken too seriously. The policies would depend strongly on the team advising the new US president.

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics also stated in an interview that he understood the calls for higher military spending and supported them. Lithuania and Latvia have already announced major increases in their military spending by 2018. Estonia has already been spending more than the 2 percent of GDP demanded by NATO on military purposes since 2007.

The right-wing conservative Latvian daily *Latvijas Avīze* backed the Foreign Minister's stance and advised striving for cooperation with Trump.

"First, the politicians should answer the question of whether the United States is still our ally," the newspaper wrote. "If the answer is yes, Latvia's political elite should respect the Americans' election result, even if there are strong waves of personal emotions. It is good that Latvia's Foreign Minister understands this. With a healthy dose of common sense, he should be able to convince his parliamentary colleagues not to direct any derisive comments at Trump and not to question his abilities to lead the country. Because such judgments would only damage Latvia's foreign policy and security."

The call for a European security and defence union, which is above all being promoted by Germany, is finding little support in the Baltic states. Krisjanis Karins, a Latvian deputy in the European Parliament, told *Deutschlandfunk* that his country's defence policy

was closely linked to the Transatlantic alliance and that without the US it would be unconceivable. It was not “in Europe’s interests to weaken NATO,” he said.

At NATO’s summit in Warsaw in early July, participants decided to permanently station 4,000 troops in the Baltic states and Poland. At the same time, the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian governments increased defence spending. The Estonian government approved more than €13 million for the construction of new barracks.

In tandem with the military build-up, the right-wing Baltic governments are intensifying their chauvinist anti-Russian campaign. The Lithuanian Defence Ministry recently published a pamphlet warning the population of a Russian invasion and preparing them for guerrilla warfare.

“Prepare to survive emergencies and war,” the ministry appeals in the pamphlet. “It is important that civilians are ready and have the will to resist. If this element is strong, an aggressor will find it difficult to create the conditions for a military invasion.”

The anti-Russian propaganda is also triggering conflicts. The EU will decide in the coming month on the extension of sanctions against Russia. A large proportion of the Baltic states’ 6.1 million population is heavily dependent on the Russian economy or have Russian roots.

The counter-measures adopted by Russia in retaliation have hit the agricultural sector hard. Agricultural products like meat and milk have lost their sales markets in Russia. Bloomberg cited a manager of a meat factory in Rezekne, Latvia, who complained that his firm had lost approximately €1 million per month due to Russia’s import ban.

Due to the drying up of Russian contracts, the railway repair plant in Daugavpils was forced to lay off half of its workforce since last year. The firm now faces bankruptcy because it can no longer access loans. Management has blamed bad Russian-EU relations for this.

The Baltic governments are also responding to the intensification of the economic and domestic political crises with their anti-Russian propaganda.

In mid-November, the EU Commission confirmed that Lithuania, along with eight other EU members, would not be able to remain within the limits laid down for budget deficits. Both Latvia and Lithuania had to

reduce growth expectations announced earlier in the year.

The governments in all three countries are extremely unstable. They base themselves on a tiny fraction of the population and are viewed with contempt by the majority. After the collapse of the pro-European coalition in Estonia, the parliament toppled Prime Minister Taavi Roivas in a vote of no confidence. He had only been in power since March 2014.

The leader of the Centre Party, Jüri Ratas, was subsequently confirmed as the successor to Roivas. Although the Centre Party is the second strongest in parliament, it was previously excluded from power because it maintains contacts with Russia. The Centre Party government is expected to have only a short shelf life, like the discredited social democrat and right-wing conservative IRL governments.

The government in Lithuania was punished in parliamentary elections in October. The League of Farmers and Greens (LPGU), a small party with just a few hundred members and only one member in the outgoing parliament, rose to become the largest party and is likely to nominate the future prime minister. It is expected that the right-wing former police chief Saulius Skvernelis will assume the position. The leader of the LGPU is the billionaire Ramunas Karbauskis, a landowner and industrialist.

Out of an electorate of 2.5 million, voter participation stood at 38 percent, according to the electoral commission. Under conditions of widespread poverty and unemployment, young, well-educated Lithuanians are emigrating in ever larger numbers. Around 370,000 have left the country since it joined the EU in 2004.



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