

Germany deploys troops to Lithuania in NATO build-up against Russia

Johannes Stern
8 February 2017

The operations of the battle group led by the German army in Eastern Europe were formally launched on Tuesday. In the presence of German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democrats), Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė welcomed the soldiers from Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, who are part of the so-called enhanced forward presence (EFP), NATO's military build-up on the border with Russia.

Three further battle groups are being established: one in Estonia (led by Britain), Latvia (led by Canada), and Poland, made up of US forces.

Already on Monday, the US warship *Hue City* arrived in the eastern Lithuanian port of Klaipėda. According to media reports, additional combat vehicles and US military technology arrived at the Tapa base in Estonia, including Abrams tanks and Bradley armoured vehicles. Over recent weeks, a total of 4,000 soldiers, 2,000 tanks, field guns, jeeps and lorries have travelled through Germany to Eastern Europe in close cooperation with the German army.

The advance of NATO combat troops to Eastern Europe is part of the war preparations against Moscow adopted at NATO's summit in Warsaw in early July. This included the construction of a NATO missile defence system in Romania and Poland and the establishment of a 5,000-strong "very high readiness" joint task force, initiated at the NATO summit in Wales in 2014.

The German army is increasingly assuming a leading role. The core of the battle group, the first German battalion in Eastern Europe since the end of the Wehrmacht's war of extermination against the Soviet Union during the Second World War, is the *Panzer Grenadierbataillon 122*, an armored infantry battalion from the Bavarian town of Oberviechtach.

According to official army figures, 230 German and Belgian soldiers are already in Rukla, Lithuania. By May at the latest, the unit should have grown to over 1,000, of which around 450 will come from the German army.

The heavily armed unit—according to the Bundeswehr it possesses "a variety of large vehicles," including "several dozen tanks (combat, mining, engineering, bridge-building and armoured vehicles)"—can be topped up at any time. As army inspector Lieutenant General Jörg Vollmer stated at the beginning of February in Vilnius, "Along with the permanent parts of the EFP battle group, we are retaining troops in Germany to temporarily support exercises as required. In addition, in the event of a crisis situation, we are capable and prepared to send the necessary reinforcements to Lithuania. You can depend on that."

At the joint press conference with von der Leyen, Grybauskaitė justified the NATO offensive with reference to the "threat" of Russia. Von der Leyen declared dramatically, "What we see today, this is NATO ... the fact that we are ready at any time to step in for each other. ... we are determined to support Lithuania, we have brought well-trained units here to do so." Ultimately the issue at stake was the "defence of democracy and joint values and friendship."

This is equally as dishonest as it is cynical. In reality, it is the Western powers, not Russia, who are the aggressors in Eastern Europe. In early 2014, Berlin and Washington organised a coup in Kiev in close collaboration with fascist forces to overthrow pro-Russian President Victor Yanukovich. Since then, Germany has exploited Russia's overwhelmingly defensive response to systematically build up its military forces and go on the offensive. And this is not about "democracy," "values" or "friendship," but the

imposition of economic and geo-strategic interests with military force if necessary.

After an initial shock, the German government views the contradictory stance of the US administration towards NATO as a chance to strengthen its own position in the military alliance and at the same time develop a more independent German and European foreign policy.

In a telephone call, the new US defence secretary, James “Mad Dog” Mattis, reassured von der Leyen that the US remained loyal to NATO, she said in Rukla. But she was “of the firm belief that Europe must assume more responsibility within NATO, that means also investing more in its capabilities.” This had already been “clear and obvious” prior to the election and now “continues to be a legitimate demand in the room.” It was in “Europe’s own interests to invest in its own defence capacities, on the one hand as a stronger European pillar within NATO, but also in the spirit of a European security and defence union.”

The Baltic states and Poland, which mainly depended on support from the US within the framework of NATO until now, were shaken by the comments of US President Donald Trump—that NATO is no longer relevant and the EU is an opponent—and are orienting increasingly towards Germany.

“Even a flesh-and-blood Atlanticist like former Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski, who led his country into NATO, are choosing words of unheard of sharpness” and described Trump’s remarks as “extremely disquieting,” the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* acknowledged in a recent article headlined “Gaps in the deterrence.”

In the Baltic and Poland it was feared “that Trump’s lack of clarity could undermine joint defence,” the paper reported. Wojciech Lorenz from the transatlantic-oriented think tank Polish Institute for International Affairs warned of “a conceivable deal between America and Russia at the expense of Ukraine, the Baltic states and the former Warsaw Pact members.”

“For politicians in Berlin (and other capitals in the EU)” Kwasniewski “therefore has some advice,” the FAZ acknowledges, visibly relieved. “Europe must take its own security in its hands—independently of Washington. A ‘Europeanisation of NATO’ to the logical conclusion: ‘Europe must have a perspective as to how it can [create] its own nuclear deterrence.’”

Spiegel Online commented on yesterday’s visit by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to Poland as follows: “Whatever serves to strengthen the EU’s defence capacity, Merkel and Kaczynski (president of the governing PiS party) will quickly agree. The Pole can even conceive of a ‘nuclear European superpower.’”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact