

## Lessons Identified in Crimea

Does Estonia's national defence model  
meet our needs?

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## Introduction

The annexation of Crimea in late February 2014 raises a number of questions about whether Estonia's own national defence system is adequate. The military part of the national defence development plan approved last year states that Estonia can only benefit from units that consist of trained personnel and possess the specific equipment and weaponry they require. Given the events in Crimea, we can of course only concur with the planners, but do the core elements of Estonia's military national defence system meet the current needs?

## Rapid action by Russian Federation forces

It took very little time for Russian Federation forces to occupy strategic sites in Crimea. On 26 February at mid-day, President Putin announced a training drill involving around 50,000 men. At 4:00 on 27 February, the president gave the order to launch an exercise on the Black Sea involving 36 ships and 7,000 troops, including personnel from Russian Federation rapid response forces, airborne units, marines and GRU special forces units.<sup>1</sup> In the hour that followed – starting around 4:00 local time – about 30-50 Russian special forces members entered and occupied the parliament and government buildings of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

The Russian Federation, which in 2007 suspended compliance with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, provided timely notice of the training drill to OSCE members as required under the Vienna Document of 2011. In the case of the Black Sea exercise, Russia invoked a provision that sets the notifiable threshold for exercises that last more than 72 hours as well as to exercises where troops are not given advance notification. This meant that Russia had achieved a situation where the countries most concerned by any military activity on the part of the Russian Federation were focused on the major exercise on Ukraine's eastern border while the developments on the Black Sea and in the Crimea likely went unnoticed.

By doing so, the Russian Federation evidently also tried to divert the attention of a Ukrainian military leadership already distracted by internal problems. There should have been a swift response to the developments in Crimea. Indeed, had the Ukrainian leadership acted rapidly and forcefully, utilizing the forces at the disposal of its Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence, the advances made by Russian special forces could have been hindered and possibly halted. Unfortunately, such orders never even reached the military structures.

In the 20 hours following the order to launch exercises on the Black Sea, Russia was capable of seizing three strategic sites on the Black Sea, using approximately 150 special forces personnel. After 40 hours, about 2,200 special forces units and airborne troops had been deployed. The first news that the parliament and

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian Federation held a similar exercise on March 28 of last year as well. Then, too, it began at 4:00 at night. Неожиданные учения на Черном море. Интерфакс. 28 March 2013.

government building had been occupied mentioned only “armed pro-Russian individuals” – including both Russian special forces and hastily-assembled self-defence and members of the Berkut special police unit which had fled to the Crimea – and this made it more difficult to take adequate measures. Late on the same day, i.e. February 27, approximately 50 Russian elite unit members seized Belbek airfield in Sevastopol. A couple hours later, another detachment, of 50 men, took over Simferopol Airport. On the evening of 28 February, Russian military planes landed at the airfield carrying some 2,000 soldiers. On 1 March, the Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea headed by freshly elected chairman Sergei Aksyonov contacted the Russian president asking him to restore order. The Russian Federation federal Assembly upper house voted unilaterally to send forces to Ukraine. The next day, the blockade and siege of Ukrainian units on the bases began, which was accomplished in the guise of a civilian action. On 3 March, Russian forces also took over the port of Kerch. The military victory was clinched. The Ukrainian leadership and the rest of the world had been presented a fait accompli.

Throughout its invasion of Crimea, Russia counted on two key factors to minimize the risk of bloodshed among its own forces and maximize the chances for success: (1) A brand new Ukrainian central government in disarray; and (2) No prospect for a military response by NATO.

## How would Estonia have fared in a similar situation?

If we put Estonia in the same place as Ukraine, what would have been Estonia’s chances of adequately responding? What sites would have been targeted by the adversary? Above all, an attack would, similarly to Crimea, focus on sites that would make it possible to rapidly introduce additional forces into Estonia, as well as on local government institutions, which would have more of a political role. Key sites in north-eastern Estonia would be the bridges over the River Narva and the Port of Sillamäe. In Tallinn and Harju County, strategic sites would be Ülemiste and Ämari airport and airfield, respectively, and the ports of Tallinn, Paldiski and Muuga. Estonia and the other two Baltic states have more strategic infrastructure sites than the ones listed above, but the resources on the adversary’s side are limited and it would not be able to seize them all simultaneously. Unlike Crimea, forces can be deployed and fanned out across the country using the southeastern Estonian road network.

In 2007, *Postimees* daily published an article titled “Defence Forces’ initial readiness currently limited to a few hundred men.”<sup>2</sup> Then chief of defence Gen. Laaneots said that if it faced a military threat, Estonia would have had only a few hundred Scouts Battalion men at its immediate disposal. Has the situation changed much in the last seven years?

Today the mobilizable reserve forces form the main bulwark of Estonia’s military defences. The primary role of the Defence Forces in peacetime is to prepare reserve units by training conscripts and reservists. Less emphasis is laid on

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<sup>2</sup> The Defence Forces’ primary capability is currently limited to a few hundred men. *Postimees*. 21 June 2007.

<http://www.postimees.ee/1674409/kaitsevae-esmane-valmidus-piirdub-praegu-paarisaja-mehega>

training professional Defence Forces units (Scouts Battalion being the main one) and sub-units manned by members of the voluntary defence organization *Kaitseliit*.

### **Usability of conscripts**

In Estonia, conscription is currently organized as a training cycle repeated at regular intervals. Unlike the former Soviet army, units manned by conscripts that have completed their training cycle do not remain on active duty. Conscripts are assigned to the reserves and sent home. Reserve units are assembled solely for reservist training and mobilization. In the first 10 weeks of service, soldiers undergo basic training where they pick up the basic skills needed by an individual combatant. Then the soldiers moves on to specialized courses, which last an average of six weeks. Having passed this stage, the soldier will have spent four months acquiring military skills but has not yet formed units that have trained together. The sub-unit course comes next. In this stage, the conscripts learn to operate as part of a squad, platoon and company in all of the main types of combat (this stage lasts an average of 17 weeks).

Based on the goal of holding a major field exercise at the end of the training cycle, most call-up selectees start service in July (11-month service) and October (eight-month service) which allows the annual field exercise to be held. A positive aspect of such a training system is the fact that conscripts train together; however, trained conscript-based subunits are not available for immediate use year-round. To this point, it has been considered a sound practice because since the 1990s, the Russian armed forces have been considered to have their hands full dealing with internal problems, and thus Estonian defence planners assumed that the security environment would deteriorate only gradually, allowing the country's political and military leaders time to calmly prepare and procure more ammunition, mobilize reserve units and carry out additional training.

But today it can be already said that the general security situation has grown significantly worse. The Russian Federation has publicly expressed the will to use military force and is actually using it. Moreover, Russia has proven it is capable of rapidly – and unnoticed by our allies – massing its forces.

The short advance warning time places higher demands on Estonian military structures. Of critical importance is that should a Crimea scenario arise, the Estonian Defence Forces would not have time to mobilize reserve units. Moreover, there would be no point in pitting Estonian conscripts – who would have less than six months of service – against Russian special forces who would already have seized and taken up defence of sites of strategic importance. If we analyse the dates when conscripts are called up for compulsory military service in 2014 and the number of conscripts<sup>3</sup>, we see that only in the first five months of the year there are significant number of conscripts (1,600-2,900 men) who would be capable of operating at least on a platoon level. From early June to the end of the year, there is constant availability of 150-450 conscripts who have completed platoon level training.

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<sup>3</sup> Minister of Defence regulation no. 13 of 15 March 2013, on the terms for call-up in 2013 and 2014 and their numerical distribution between structural units engaged in conscript training “<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/119032013014>”

## Units manned with active duty personnel

In addition to the reservists who can be mobilized, the Defence Forces have a smaller contingent consisting of rapid-response units (above all, the Scouts Battalion and also a special operations unit), who are able to operate over the entire country's territory and take part in operations outside Estonia. These units are manned with active duty personnel. One of the tasks of the Scouts Battalion is to be prepared to defend strategic sites in Tallinn using a company tactical group. The number and size of these units is very limited.

## The voluntary defence organisation *Kaitseliit*

In recent years *Kaitseliit* has increased its membership at a stable pace and as of the end of 2012, the organization had around 13,200 active members.<sup>4</sup> *Kaitseliit*'s Tallinn and Harju districts have a total of approximately 3,400 active members. Yet caution should be exercised in using these numbers, because all active members do not belong to units that have trained together, though their commitment to defend their country can be assumed to be high. The level of training and equipment in *Kaitseliit*, however, is inferior to that of the Russian special forces, as a result of which the numerical superiority against a well-trained and equipped Russian adversary will not confer a decisive advantage.

## Mobilizable reserve units

According to the national defence development plan approved in 2013, Estonia's military defence capacity will grow significantly in the decade ahead. The Defence Forces' rapid response structure will include over 21,000 members instead of the 18,000 set forth in the last development plan; among them there will be 3,600 active duty personnel instead of the current 3,100. Meanwhile, the total number of trained Estonian reservists will grow from 60,000 today to 90,000 by 2022.

These larger numbers, however, do not necessarily ensure sufficient security in a situation where a highly capable enemy is acting in a rapid, well-thought-out manner, and thereby hamper Estonia's mobilization efforts. As illustrated by the events in the Crimea, an attacker may intentionally sow doubts as to whether the country has fallen victim to aggression or whether it is merely a criminal group that has managed to occupy a building. This "fog" may cause mobilization to be put off so long that the adversary could occupy key sites and thereby make mobilization difficult, if not impossible.

Estonia's current mobilization plans could play into the hands of an invader employing the information warfare tactics described above. In spite of the strong development of the mobilization system under the previous chief of defence, Gen. Ants Laaneots, the development of the reserve force as a whole focuses on training conscripts, and other aspects related to mobilization are relegated to the background. Moreover, unlike decentralized mobilization stockpile networks seen in Scandinavian countries during the Cold War, the Estonian Defence Forces stockpiles are largely concentrated in locations that were frequently in use already

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<sup>4</sup> *Kaitseliit* annual report 2012.

[http://www.kaitseliit.ee/files/kaitseliit/img/files/Majandusaasta\\_aruanne\\_2012.pdf](http://www.kaitseliit.ee/files/kaitseliit/img/files/Majandusaasta_aruanne_2012.pdf)

back in Soviet times. Thus it can be presumed that the adversary is aware of the locations and will utilize this intelligence.

### **Allied forces**

The deployment of Allied forces to Estonia before or during a possible military attack is one of the most important aspects of NATO membership. The main value of belonging to the alliance lies in military deterrence through all members' commitment to collective defence under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which should lead potential adversaries to abandon the idea of military aggression in the first place. But if a Crimea-type, "creeping" invasion scenario involving special forces should come to pass, Estonia would have very limited immediate support from Allied units, since none are yet deployed in significant numbers on Estonian or Baltic soil. The NATO Air Policing Mission, even with its recent strengthening in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, would offer primarily symbolic support until additional NATO forces arrived from elsewhere in Europe. The key and missing deterrent is therefore deployment of NATO ground troops to Estonia – either participating in exercises or permanently deployed here.

A key additional measure that could provide visible reassurance of NATO's readiness and ability to come to Estonia's aid militarily could also be prepositioning NATO Allies' equipment in the Baltic States, allowing the units' personnel to be deployed relatively quickly if a crisis develops. Yet, even this more modest measure may be politically unacceptable in some key NATO member states, whose business communities rely on Russian markets and natural gas supplies, especially Germany. Indeed, as Russia was invading and preparing to annex Crimea, German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen was publicly criticized by the foreign policy spokesperson of the parliamentary group of the Social Democratic Party, for calling on NATO to support the Baltic States. The reason given for the criticism was that such steps could lead to "escalation of the situation"<sup>5,6</sup>. Yet NATO collective defence is no stronger than its weakest link.

## **Conclusions**

Estonia's current national defence model has developed over two apparently calm decades, when Russia has won hopeful friends in the West even as it gradually increased its capability and willingness to use military forces, especially by exploiting domestic problems in neighboring countries. A new aspect seen with regard to Russia is its ability to incite revolts and unrest on foreign soil while rapidly deploying military forces to aggravate and exploit the resultant political turmoil. This creates confusion in determining what countermeasures to resort to, leaving the country being attacked with minimal time to implement them. In light of the events in Crimea, the question is about what measures Estonia could implement already in peacetime to allow it to respond immediately and forcefully to military aggression.

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<sup>5</sup> German defence chief von der Leyen calls for stronger NATO backing in Ukraine crisis. Deutsche Welle. 23 March 2014

<sup>6</sup> Von-der-Leyen-Vorschlag: Koalition streitet über Nato-Präsenz im Osten. Spiegel Online Politik. 23 March 2014

Therefore, it is critically important that the Estonian Government immediately develops a strategy to eliminate these weaknesses in Estonia, based on a whole-of-government approach to comprehensive security, and working in close collaboration with its NATO Allies.

### **National level decision-making arrangements**

On the national level, the transition from peacetime to wartime must be seamless and ensure continuity of leadership. Command exercises must be regularly held for Estonia's political and military leaders, stemming from realistic threat scenarios. The responsibility of every government agency should, as a crisis deepens, remain as little-changed as possible, without complex and risky transitions. In the preliminary phase of a crisis, security services and police and border guard administration will have the main role, but where necessary, the Defence Forces and *Kaitseliit* must be prepared to support them. But once a military scenario is triggered, the Defence Forces must have the primary role although cooperation (among other things, cross-use of resources and exchange of information) between all parties must remain in place as well. The simplest and most logical move is to base all activities that take place across all agencies in both peacetime and wartime on a uniform set of principles instead of continuing to use two parallel and mutually distinct systems (one for peacetime crisis management led by the Ministry of the Interior and another wartime system led by the Ministry of Defence).

Accomplishing these goals requires a single coordinating body that can integrate all elements of government into a unified and comprehensive approach, along the lines of the National Security Council under the U.S. President. In Estonia, the logical bureaucratic location for such a national security coordinating body is the Government Office. There is therefore an urgent need for Estonia's political leaders to reinforce this coordinating body.

### **The Estonian national defence model**

When it comes to national defence, the main question is about where the emphasis should be placed: the Defence Forces' reaction time versus quantity. Russia has both, but it can't implement both at the same time. The first units to be used in Crimea were ones with under 50 men. Estonia will be unable to win a war of sheer numbers against its eastern neighbour, so it must focus on quality. This will require units in a high state of readiness, fully manned, well-trained and equipped so that they are able to get the best of their opponent who will initially deploy small numbers of highly trained special forces. In addition, reserves are obviously needed. The question facing Estonian defence planners is therefore whether the Defence Forces' activity in future should focus on reserves or on ensuring the existence of highly capable units that can be used right away. The events in Crimea show that the latter should be a priority.

According to the national defence development plan approved in 2013, Estonia has shortcomings in its rapid response capability, but the planned solutions will not eliminate the main problem: if aggression does break out, the Defence Forces may not be capable of responding with sufficient rapidity and in the needed extent, as a noteworthy part of its everyday activity has been aimed at developing reserve forces, and mobilizing them is time-consuming.

There are a number of possibilities for developing rapid-response capability. To some extent, the situation could be improved by distributing the number of conscripts more evenly over the year, so that they could be used at any point in time. The practical usability of the conscripts would increase, but it would come at a cost – larger units would not have time to train together.

Undoubtedly more radical measures should be considered, such as increasing the number of units manned with active duty personnel, with a corresponding decrease in the number of reserve units. Would it be realistic to create a second and third unit similar to the Scouts Battalion? If so, what would have to be given up to make this possible?

Another possibility is to extend the duration of conscription so that the units that are trained during compulsory military service are not immediately assigned to the reserves but instead left on active duty for a time. This is the option being explored in Norway, where an 18-month-long term of service is being attempted. The main argument in favour of a change is that the current system does not allow conscripts to be used after the training period ends. The 18-month service period, on the other hand, would allow conscripts to be used for up to six months. Of course, the longer period of service would have to be compensated with larger monetary incentives. Implementing similar principles in Estonia could result in greater rapid response capability and better trained units, but in such a case, the total number of conscripts would have to be reduced somewhat.

*Kaitseliit*, which operates everywhere in Estonia, should be capable of responding rapidly, but the state should not assign the organization goals for which it is not ready. Not all members are immediately available or usable. *Kaitseliit*, too, should include sub-units at a high state of readiness, with a training level and equipment that allows them to be used against an opponent's elite units.

Even more alternatives could certainly be considered. Considering more options does not remove the option of declaring that in fact nothing needs to be changed.

In parallel to Estonia's efforts, its allies in NATO could be asked to maintain a more visible and concrete presence in the Baltic States, one that goes beyond NATO's current Air Policing Mission. In light of Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, the lack of a NATO military presence in a state neighbouring Russia appears to provide an incentive for Moscow to consider using force to pursue political objectives. Thus, the permanent stationing of NATO ground units and/or establishing stockpiles of equipment in some of the Baltic States could be of critical importance to deterring potential aggressors and provocateurs in coming months and years.