Commentary
October 7, 2026

Any Good News in Eastern Europe?

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Originally published by Haqqin.az

Summary

Under identical military and political conditions, Eastern European states belonging to different military blocs are guided by the same logic of self-preservation and emphasize the same factor of deterrence of last resort. However, this is where the commonality of interests and approaches in the security realm among the region's countries appears to end.

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On 22 September, the Lithuanian Parliament supported a legislative proposal that could remove the constitutional ban on the deployment of weapons of mass destruction and foreign military bases on Lithuanian territory. For the approved amendment to enter into force and amend Article 137 of the Basic Law, two-thirds of the Seimas must vote in favour twice, three months apart. The first vote took place on 6 October, and the second one is scheduled for 12 January of next year.

The September review of this proposal revealed overwhelming support from parliament: 99 MPs voted in favour, 13 against, and five abstained. On 6 October, this support grew even further: 106 voted in favour, 18 against, and six remained undecided. Therefore, there is no reason to expect the final round of voting to yield any different result. This is especially true since these rounds of parliamentary voting are part of a plan approved by parliamentary parties back in early July.

> This means that Lithuania will soon cease to be the only Baltic state with a constitutional ban on the deployment of nuclear weapons on its territory.

Nuclear intentions are spreading across the Baltics

Other Baltic neighbours of Vilnius have also been increasingly turning their attention to the nuclear arsenals of their NATO allies.

For example, on 30 September, Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs publicly confirmed the country's readiness to host this type of weapon if a decision is made at the NATO level. He did so, in part, in response to recent reports that the United Kingdom is prepared to provide an additional nuclear umbrella for the Joint Expeditionary Force coalition: the Baltic states, Nordic countries, and the Netherlands.

Furthermore, following Latvian-French talks on 22 September, Emmanuel Macron agreed to include Latvia in his initiative for a European advanced nuclear deterrent. Latvian authorities have made no secret of their active pursuit of this decision from Paris. The Estonian government, which is holding similar talks with the French leadership, has also made no secret of this. As Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal emphasized, "If there is an opportunity to deepen cooperation in the nuclear sphere, then that is probably what will happen."

In neighbouring Finland, similar efforts led to the lifting of a decades-old nuclear ban. In June, the Finnish parliament voted overwhelmingly for amendments that now allow the country to acquire, transport, or otherwise move nuclear weapons within its territory as part of defensive operations with NATO allies.

> The now publicly disclosed nuclear intentions of the three Baltic republics and Finland complement Poland's long-standing aspirations in this direction.

The latter's leadership—regardless of party affiliation—has been openly expressing interest in having nuclear warheads on its territory for years. The main focus so far has been on joining some form of joint nuclear missions with NATO allies. Either based on the model of the missions already in place since the 1950s, in which a certain number of American nuclear weapons are based in Europe, with the military aircraft of Germany, Türkiye, the Netherlands, Italy, and Belgium having the capability to support their combat use if necessary. Or through some other bilateral agreement with the United States. Or in the context of the aforementioned French initiatives to create a European nuclear umbrella.

For example, last March, then-President Andrzej Duda proposed deploying American nuclear weapons in Poland. He stated that "the time had come" for such a decision and that it would enhance the security of his country and its allies. Karol Nawrocki, who

succeeded Duda as president, and Prime Minister Donald Tusk share a similar opinion.

The same logic of deterrence

Several years ago, Belarus, a member of a different military-political bloc, made a similar request to its ally Russia. As a result, Russian nuclear warheads are now based on Belarusian territory under agreements that effectively replicate NATO's sharing arrangements. Interestingly, however, the connotation surrounding this news in Western media from the very beginning was (and in many ways remains) radically different from the interpretation of similar intentions in the Baltic states, Poland, and Scandinavia.

Firstly, Western media and political and diplomatic circles practically rejected the idea that Minsk could have actually initiated such a decision. In the West, they almost unanimously declared that this was yet another sinister plot by Moscow, which had decided to intimidate NATO without even asking Belarus's permission, since the latter, in their view, had lost its sovereignty.

Secondly (and this largely contradicted the first point), there was a widespread expression of bewilderment that by deploying Russian nuclear warheads on its territory, Belarus was making itself a target for hypothetical pre-emptive strikes by NATO.

But what do we see now? Eastern European NATO members are now approaching their nuclear-armed allies with exactly the same proposals and requests, and with exactly the same logic. And this is not at all surprising.

This example leads to an obvious conclusion. To enhance their own security in the face of a sharp escalation of military tensions, countries in the region are increasingly leaning toward nuclear solutions. Most of them lack their own nuclear capabilities (and are signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) and are therefore trying to influence their more powerful allies to ensure that their preferred solutions are adopted jointly.

> Incidentally, it is precisely through such actions that Eastern European countries—the Baltic republics, Poland, and Belarus—express their sovereignty and agency.

Because, in an increasingly unfavourable regional situation, they are trying to reduce the risk of aggression against themselves and increase their chances of survival in the event of a major war. The extent to which nuclear weapons actually contribute to achieving these goals is a complex topic in itself. But the fact remains: in identical

military-political conditions, Eastern European states belonging to different military blocs are guided by the same logic of self-preservation and emphasize the same factor of deterrence of last resort.

The aforementioned former Polish President Andrzej Duda succinctly explained this logic. According to him, “any US and NATO strategic infrastructure we have on our soil strengthens the propensity of the US and NATO to defend this territory.” The same applies to the Belarusian logic within the framework of the Union State with Russia or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). And it is precisely this logic that explains why, for both the Baltic states with Poland and Belarus, simply having alliance treaties and the collective defence clauses contained therein seems insufficient.

Is an intraregional solution possible?

The bad (or rather, very bad) news here is that the desire of Eastern European countries to deploy nuclear weapons on their territories, driven by the same logic of self-preservation, is leading to ever-increasing regional escalation. With their pursuit of nuclear weapons, they are rapidly intensifying the so-called “security spiral” (also known as the “security dilemma”). And it is beginning to seem as if this process in Eastern Europe has no end in sight. This is the most dangerous dynamic imaginable in the context of the virtual collapse of the entire system of international relations and the institutions that previously supported it.

But, in theory, there should be some good news here.

If states on both sides of the Eastern European barricades share similar security concerns and similar aspirations to ensure their security, then theoretically they should have a common interest in risk reduction. Moreover, this interest should be greater for regional countries than for their more militarily powerful allies, since the Eastern European states would be the first victims of any hypothetical conflict. Therefore, unlike their allies, they have no margin of error.

> In other words, Eastern European countries must have a common rational basis for some intraregional solutions that would reduce tensions in the region and reach agreements on how to jointly minimize the likelihood of unnecessary scenarios.

If so, this would not just be good news, but a potential key to solving many problems, including those extending beyond Eastern Europe.

Unfortunately, however, such theoretical hope has not yet stood the test of geopolitical reality. Long before the current phase of the conflict in Europe, the Baltic states and Poland strongly opposed any intra-regional security mechanisms. The reason is clear: if countries in the region are capable of independently agreeing to reduce military risks, then NATO allies have less incentive to actively participate in ensuring the security of the "eastern flank." And even less incentive to deploy their forces and assets there, especially nuclear weapons.

Therefore, weighing the risks of regional escalation against the likelihood of a reduced US and NATO military presence, states on NATO's "eastern flank" tend to prioritize the latter. For them, extreme escalation is an acceptable price for an increased allied presence. This is particularly true for the Baltic states and, to a lesser extent, for Poland and the Nordic countries. In this regard, their perception of risks and prioritization of security measures differ radically from the approaches of another state in the region: Belarus.

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