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Eastern Europe, Divided by a Mine Wall

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Summary

With Poland's official withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention on 20 February 2026, it joins five other European countries that have left the treaty prohibiting the use, production, and stockpiling of anti-personnel mines. Belarus now remains the only country in its immediate neighbourhood that chooses to uphold its Ottawa Convention obligations. This creates a dangerous dynamic in which Eastern Europe risks being divided not just by militarized borders, but by minefields.

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Adoption of the Ottawa Convention

The adoption of the 1997 Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines was the result of the Ottawa Process, a non-UN diplomatic initiative launched by Canada in 1996. The process was strongly supported in Europe: Austria, Germany, Belgium, and Norway were instrumental to the diplomatic talks, while Princess Diana drew global attention to the anti-personnel mine campaign with her famous walk along a cleared path on an Angolan minefield.

The treaty aimed to mitigate and prevent the severe consequences of anti-personnel mine use. Anti-personnel landmines are weapons that are by nature indiscriminate and are therefore prohibited under customary international humanitarian law.

> In 2024, civilians, nearly half of them children, accounted for 90% of the global casualties from landmines.

Anti-personnel mines also have long-lasting humanitarian, social, and economic effects, as mined territories become unusable and pose ongoing dangers to local communities.

Having suffered the consequences of landmine use in the 20th century, with tens of millions laid in the region during the Second World War, Eastern European countries naturally supported the adoption of the Ottawa Convention. Russia, however, chose not to join. According to Roman Dolgov, a Russian expert on the prohibition of anti-personnel mines, Moscow considers its obligations not to employ weapons causing unnecessary suffering under Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions 'sufficient', and views anti-personnel landmines as a cost-effective tool for national defence. Belarus, by contrast, not only has been a party to the Convention since 2003, but has also always been a vocal supporter of the treaty and has never signalled any intention to withdraw. By April 2017, Minsk had fully met its obligations, destroying all 3.4 million of its anti-personnel mines, some through joint projects with the European Union, Canada, and Lithuania.

Post-2022 decisions on withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention

Several European countries — Ukraine, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland — announced plans to withdraw from the Convention following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022.

In 2025, Ukraine itself made a «difficult but necessary political decision» to cease implementing the Ottawa Convention, citing the asymmetric advantage on the battlefield created by Russia's widespread use of landmines in its military operations. Ukraine found itself in a legal paradox: the initial idea of suspending the treaty was dismissed as impermissible, and withdrawal was also viewed as unlawful, given that the country was engaged in an armed conflict. Since 2022, millions of mines have reportedly been deployed across Russia–Ukraine battlefields. In the Rivne region alone, Ukraine has installed tens of thousands of mines, including anti-personnel landmines, leaving the Belarus–Ukraine border heavily mined.

Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia started the process of formally withdrawing from the Ottawa Convention in 2025. In a joint statement, the defence ministers of the four countries attributed this decision to the sharp rise in military threats to the NATO members bordering on Russia and Belarus, as well as the overall deterioration of regional security. The Lithuanian Minister of Defence explained that the withdrawal from the Convention is needed to utilize all options to strengthen deterrence and defence, enabling the country to «counter potential aggression and safeguard NATO's eastern flank». The Chair of the Latvian Saeima Foreign Affairs Committee stated this decision

would provide its armed forces with «manoeuvring space in the event of a military threat», while Poland's defence minister insisted that the country cannot be put in a 'straitjacket' that would prevent it from defending itself.

Anti-personnel mine production and deployment plans in Eastern Europe

Intentions to increase the defence capability of NATO's eastern flank countries with anti-personnel mines extended well beyond the legal realm, shaping practical military-industrial planning in these countries. For example, Lithuania announced it is 'gearing up' for mine production and acquisition, reportedly planning to launch the production in 2026 with a view to both strengthening its own defences and supporting Ukraine.

Poland has also shared plans to restart anti-personnel mine production, ranging from several hundred thousand to 1 million units, as part of the 'East Shield', a defensive program aimed at fortifying Poland's borders with Belarus and Russia. Polish officials, however, emphasized that any future use of mines would depend on the General Staff's assessment and occur only in response to 'real threats'. At the same time, Latvia has neither deployed landmines along its borders with Belarus and Russia nor reported any plans to produce or acquire them.

> Interestingly, the military assessments of the necessity to withdraw from the Ottawa Convention have sharply contradicted the political narrative.

In 2024, Latvia's National Armed Forces concluded that the withdrawal should not be supported, with the commander publicly stating that «there are far more efficient and modern weapon systems than landmines», emphasizing that the constant monitoring of the minefields would demand significant human resources in peacetime. Estonian military officials expressed a similar view, arguing that leaving the Ottawa Convention is not necessary to successfully defend the country.

Long-term ramifications of anti-personnel mine use

Indeed, one could argue that anti-personnel mines present a simpler, more familiar, and more cost-effective defence option compared with more technologically advanced systems. It would also be intellectually dishonest to ignore the security rationale for their potential use, given the threat perceptions of NATO's Eastern flank states. Anti-personnel mines are not inherently offensive; they are designed to deny territory rather than seize it, which makes a valid case for their defensive use.

However, acknowledging their potential utility in wartime does not resolve the deeper political and humanitarian dilemmas posed by their deployment, especially during peacetime.

The withdrawals from the Ottawa Convention in Eastern Europe reflect a broader pattern of deterioration in arms control frameworks. This trend is most visible among great powers, especially with the expiration of the New START treaty, the last remaining strategic arms control agreement. Seeing this pattern extend to smaller states, tactical-level weapons, and foundational humanitarian norms is no less alarming.

The argument against anti-personnel landmines goes beyond their indiscriminate effects and high civilian casualty rates. Even more concerning is their long-term impact, particularly when used as a permanent defensive measure along EU external borders. Landmines can remain active for decades, rendering land unusable, damaging ecosystems, and posing risk to the local civilian population. These consequences can linger long after tensions subside, as anti-personnel mines are notoriously difficult and expensive to remove.

> To mine a border, especially with a state that is not a direct military adversary, is to make a statement about permanence, about the expectation that relations will not normalize for generations.

It is a security measure that outlives political cycles and may persist long after conflicts themselves. As Anne Héry of Handicap International put it, anti-personnel mines «do not respect ceasefires or peace agreements».

One can hope that these numerous withdrawals from the Ottawa Convention will not be followed by the actual deployment of anti-personnel mines, and that the voices of military professionals — many of whom have witnessed the long-term consequences of these weapons — will be heard by political elites. History teaches us that even the firmest physical walls can be dismantled in a day. A mined field, by contrast, is a border meant to stay, even long after the threat it was meant to counter has disappeared.

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