



## 2 AFFAIRS: Defence


# Ready and waiting *Lithuania*

Lithuania might be small but this plucky Baltic nation's proximity to Russia means that it is ramping up its military might. Monocle meets its newest conscripts.

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The world is facing a number of hybrid threats. In Europe, the return of large-scale land warfare has led furrow-browed defence ministers to issue warnings about the transition from a “post-war” to a “pre-war” world. There and elsewhere, governments are grappling with the dangers posed by a changing climate and urban anomie. The 2020s have been marked by health emergencies, civil disorder and supply-chain disruption. None of these looks set to abate.

Such times call for calm heads and forward planning. Over the following pages, we look at three examples of countries and organisations doing their best to ready themselves for the worst: conscription in Lithuania, elite police in France and disaster management in the US. This is our Security Survey – at a time when we should all be prepared. — 



Moments ago, MONOCLE was forced to abandon its battered station wagon on a mud track under Lithuania's cloudy skies and hop in the back of an army-issue Mercedes-Benz GD. But now the driver – Sergeant Vidas Stasaitis, clearly doing his best to live up to his title of community outreach officer – decides that he is going to have some fun. Throwing his foot on the accelerator, he launches the off-roader at the lunar-like craters created by the day's rain. At one point the infallible machine totters at a 45-degree angle, sending its civilian cargo hurtling towards the roof, before the engine wins and it lurches forwards.

Back on solid ground, our destination is a series of fields surrounded by woodland that make up the Lithuanian army's Zukauskas training area near the eastern town of Pabrade. We're here to see more than 2,200 military personnel and 300 military vehicles that have gathered for an annual exercise of Nato allies known as Strong Griffin. There may be international hardware on display and troops from Poland, the US and Portugal but Lithuania is clearly leading the show of strength.

The Baltic nation wouldn't be able to do it without its conscripts – an increasingly important element within armed forces throughout Europe following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. High defence spending and the draft are back, a policy shift that has been vindicated by an increasingly perilous global geopolitical outlook, including ongoing unrest in the Middle East. Global military spending topped €2.06trn in 2022, the highest figure on record. Much of the rise in spending was led by Europe – a trend that looks set to continue. Sweden has expanded conscription to civilian emergency services; Denmark is weighing extending it to women; and Latvia brought back compulsory male military service from the start of this year. Meanwhile, countries from Germany to the UK and France (*see box*) are having intense discussions within their defence ministries about whether to follow suit.

But Lithuania has been a European trailblazer. It introduced a nine-month conscription for several thousand randomly selected Lithuanian men every year (the age range is currently 18 to 23) in 2015 in the wake of Russia's smash-and-grab annexation of Crimea. Today the

#### Battle lines

During the annual Strong Griffin exercise, soldiers acting as opposing forces (look out for red tape on vehicles and uniforms) conduct infantry and armoured offensive operations to test Lithuania's Griffin Brigade's readiness.







Be prepared: Security Survey



#### Show of strength

Some 2,200 soldiers and 300 vehicles are involved in the exercise: US Abrams tanks and Bradley infantry fighting vehicles; Lithuanian M113 armoured personnel carriers and ATV Humvees; and Polish Rosomak armoured vehicles.

Strong Griffin exercise is taking place amid biting winds that cut across open fields. Two thirds of the soldiers from the Duke Margiris battalion taking part are conscripts; half of the Kestutis battalion's 400 soldiers have also been drafted. "The main purpose is to prepare the reserves," says Margiris battalion's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Mindaugas Specius, who sounds hoarse after barking orders all day. As well as having a large reservist base with basic military training, conscription is also a way of boosting active soldier numbers that had previously been flagging. "It's a very good link between the armed forces and society, and a way to show [combat] readiness."

Combat preparedness is vital as the threat – perceived or real, depending on your point of view – from Russia and its allies looms large. "Our neighbours are unpredictable and unstable so we need to check our readiness every day," says Specius. "The situation dictates that this type of exercise must be conducted at every possible opportunity." Having untangled itself from its Soviet past and turned decidedly towards Europe, Lithuania feels a certain amount of vulnerability due to its geographical position. Indeed, Alexander Lanoszka, defence analyst and associate professor of political science at the University of Waterloo in Canada, calls the Baltic state "a small country that sits uncomfortably between Kaliningrad and Belarus" – a reference to the fact that it borders a Russian enclave to the west and what is effectively a Putin proxy state to the east. At one point,

along the Suwalki Gap border that Lithuania shares with Poland, these hostile territories are separated by just 65km.

But if Lithuania's conscripts are anything to go by, no one seems to believe that the country is in any real danger. At the Zukauskas training area, fresh-faced boys in brown-and-green fatigues clutch Heckler & Koch G36 rifles as they perform drills across fields, communicating with central command via Harris Galcon III RF-7800V radio stations. The troops have strips of blue tape attached to their uniforms to show that, in this simulation of a hostile environment, they are friendly forces. Wandering over to talk to MONOCLE is 24-year-old Vilius Monkunas, who has a confident air and a firm handshake. He is broadly in favour of conscription and says that it provided him with a break from office life in Lithuania's second city, Kaunas. He might earn less here but with free board and food, he can save. He also thinks that it's good to defend his country, though he doesn't believe that the borders are in danger of being compromised. "I don't feel any kind of threat, to be honest," he says. "We are in Nato and we have a lot of allies. I'm not scared personally; neither is my family nor anyone around me." It's an opinion shared by 22-year-old Gvidas Daukintis, whose accent has an English twang – he moved to Maidenhead with his family six years ago. He says that Vilnius kept "bugging" him about conscription and he even had to pay a small fine for an initial no-show. "I feel safer than ever," he says, rifle slung over his shoulder. But then he adds something that gets to the core of Lithuania's conscription policy. "I don't feel like anything is going to happen but we have to be ready for the unthinkable."

Lithuania hasn't shirked away from talking about the potential threat posed by Russia and other bad actors who might be inspired by its bravado in Ukraine. Its foreign minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, has long been vocal about strengthening what he calls "the eastern flank" of the two key blocs to which Lithuania belongs: Nato and the EU. Alongside unwavering support for Ukraine, the country has repeatedly called on Nato allies to increase their presence in the Baltic states. Germany has listened and has committed to the permanent stationing of some 4,800 soldiers inside Lithuania, who it expects to be combat-ready by 2027.

Highlighting Lithuania's strategic position has its advantages if you are used to being overlooked as a country, according to Mark Galeotti, the UK-based executive director of the Russia-focused Mayak Intelligence think-tank. "All of a sudden, countries such as Lithuania can present themselves as being ready and active," he tells MONOCLE. "In a way, that actually makes them more important." Galeotti also points to the example of Poland, which has upped its status as a central European defence powerhouse by exploring a €20bn arms deal with South Korea.

Lithuania's armed forces are never going to match those of Germany, France or even Poland. But that's missing the point, according to Zilvinas Tomkus, vice-minister





of national defence. “Our strength is how we involve society,” he says, referring to how Lithuania builds resilience. “And this is an important thing to know.” He’s not the first Lithuanian official to talk about bridging the armed forces to civilians divide through conscription. And he’s not the first to point to a 2023 poll showing that 86 per cent of Lithuanians are in favour of the military profession, up by 7 per cent from the previous year. Indeed, the Ukrainian experience has shown what having widespread domestic support can mean on the battlefield, even in the face of a larger adversary.


Still, there’s little doubt that conscript life is a big change from the creature comforts of home. Over in Zukauskas, soldiers are arriving back at their muddy temporary home, known in military speak as an assembly area, after the day’s exercises. They wash in blocks of portable-cabin showers and drop off their kits at the large army-green tents in which they’ll sleep on rudimentary folding beds. In an outdoor kitchen, protected from the rain by a tarpaulin, army chefs are heating up vegetable soup for dinner while Kiss’s *I Was Made for Lovin’ You* drifts from a stereo. Days typically start at 06.00 with lights out at 22.00. It’s not exactly the big nights out and weekend lie-ins that many 20-somethings are used to. “What’s the hardest thing here?” asks Vilius Monkunas, the junior private with that firm handshake. “Probably the rules; to stand in a crowd and for it to be very strict. It’s hard for me as I’m kind of a free soul.”

Despite the rigidity of their new regime, most of the conscripts have positive things to say about the time spent away from screens, learning skills that they most likely wouldn’t have acquired otherwise. No one we spoke to knew how to operate a gun previously. Many now know how to successfully navigate their way back to base from the middle of nowhere in the dead of night using only a map, a compass and a set of co-ordinates. Some, such as 19-year-old Ainaras Paukstis, are even contemplating becoming a professional soldier, though he’s yet to be fully convinced. For others, it has been an opportunity to test mental and physical reserves. “It’s changed me psychologically,” says Daukintis, the conscript with the English twang. “When you’re running or doing exercises, you can’t stop because the leaders are asking you to do it. You just keep pressing on and realise that you can do it – it’s amazing.”

Of course, contemporary warfare needs more than brute force and land troops. “That’s why we need riflemen but also the guy who can operate a drone or use artificial intelligence as a tool to defend and fight against aggression,” says defence vice-minister Tomkus. Indeed, hybrid warfare is increasingly on policymakers’ lips, a term used to refer to non-conventional acts of hostility. For Lithuania, this has meant irregular flows of Middle Eastern and African migrants crossing from Russia-allied Belarus, a phenomenon that peaked in 2021 and has subsequently affected Latvia and Poland. Since the end of

last year, it has been the turn of Finland to experience an influx of migrants seemingly funnelled there by Moscow; it responded by closing its border with Russia.

Clearly the rumble of armoured vehicles and camouflage paint on soldiers’ faces during the Strong Griffin exercise is more than a stunt. Military spending has risen to 2.75 per cent of GDP this year (up from just 0.89 per cent a decade ago) and there has been a doubling down on compulsory military service, even if many of the draftees we speak to say that they think the decision to join should remain voluntary. Lithuania’s ambassador to Nato, Deividas Matulionis, tells MONOCLE that although it hasn’t happened yet, “it seems that the political will is there” for Lithuania to move from a partial to a general conscription model in the future. In fact, its parliament’s lower house has already passed a bill that will move things in that direction. At the end of last year, it provisionally approved lowering the conscription age range from 18 to 21, instead of 18 to 23. More importantly, the bill also aims to reduce the number of exemptions that stop people from joining, including for students. It will be put to a subsequent vote this spring and, if everything goes to plan, Lithuania could be drafting some 5,000 soldiers a year by 2027, up from the current maximum of 3,800.

Officials here are keen to underline that Russia should never be underestimated. They draw on the examples of the war with Georgia in 2008 and the Ukraine invasions of 2014 and 2022, which all largely took the West by surprise. It’s an opinion that battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Specius shares, shrugging off the overconfidence of his young conscripts. “Young people might judge the situation differently,” he says. “But when you have to make difficult decisions, you need to understand the situation from all sides. We need to be ready when the moment comes.” — 

#### Draft plans: Europe’s conscription debate

So far, the return of conscription in Europe has largely been limited to Nordic and Baltic nations that feel a deeper threat from Russia due to their proximity. But there are signs that countries such as France, Germany and the UK are rethinking military service, a policy that largely fell out of favour in the aftermath of the Cold War. Former UK defence secretary Ben Wallace said that he was in favour of conscription as a means to build the reserves, inspired by the Swedish and Finnish models. Grant Schapps, his successor, has been open about the problems facing the army and the need to recruit more people

(conscription being an obvious way to do it, even if the British public remain unconvinced). In France, MPs last year approved the largest military spending hike in half a century and Emmanuel Macron is known to be an admirer of military service. His introduction of a four-week voluntary service for teenagers has had a lukewarm reception but he’s still pushing to make it compulsory. As for Germany, its armed forces – the *Bundeswehr* – are also facing a drop in recruitment. Its 181,383 soldiers are short of the target of 203,000 that Europe’s largest economy wants to achieve by 2031. Conscription, abolished in Germany in 2011, could be a way to solve the problem.



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#### Serve and protect

Male draftees are called from among Lithuania’s 18 to 23 year olds, whereas all 18 to 38 year olds – male and female – in the country are invited to enlist on a voluntary basis. Both cohorts complete the same nine-month service.

