

Arming Ukraine and the Baltics could prove counter-productive in the West's stand-off with Russia

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/08/20/arming-ukraine-and-the-baltics-could-prove-counter-productive-in-the-wests-stand-off-with-russia/

8/20/2015

One of the most controversial issues in the context of the Ukraine crisis is the question of whether the US and its allies in NATO should send weapons to Ukraine and the Baltics to dissuade Russian aggression in the region. [Catherine Lefèvre](#) provides an overview of recent developments, arguing that while there are real concerns over the actions of Russia, arming Ukraine and the Baltics carries significant risks and could prove counter-productive.



As the crisis in Eastern Ukraine continues, concern over Russian aggression grows in Eastern Europe and the Baltics. During the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in February 2015, many Eastern European leaders called for the arming of Ukraine against pro-Russian rebels. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have on many occasions expressed concern over their territorial integrity and fear is spreading amongst their populations in regards to a possible Russian intervention in their countries. But would it be wise to arm Ukraine and the Baltics against Russia?

Arming Ukraine

Western leaders have been discussing the possibility of sending weapons to Ukraine since last year to counter Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine, but up until now opinions on the matter are divided. During the MSC, the issue dominated the agenda as Western leaders extensively debated the issue.

Russia's Foreign Minister [Sergei Lavrov](#) continues to firmly deny that Russian forces are involved in Eastern Ukraine and claims that the US and the EU carry responsibility for the crisis and the general deterioration of their relationship. US vice-president [Joe Biden](#) made clear during the MSC that "the United States and, God willing, all of Europe and the international community will continue to impose costs" on Russia until the supply of weapons and troops to separatists is cut.

It is important to note that opinions differ within the European Union (EU) as countries such as Germany strongly oppose supplying Ukraine with weapons. As German Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) stated during the conference "I cannot envisage any situation in which the improved equipment of the Ukrainian army will convince Putin he will lose militarily". The UK's Prime Minister [David Cameron](#) stated that the UK would assist the Ukrainian army with advice, training and non-lethal equipment.

On the other hand Eastern European countries have been arguing in favour of supplying Ukraine with weapons. In June, Lithuania's ambassador to Ukraine, [Marius Yanukonis](#) declared that his country was prepared to send weapons to the Ukrainian army, stating that "we are ready to help Ukraine by all means, especially military". Through this move the ambassador hopes to encourage other NATO members to do the same.

Risks and rewards

The crisis in Eastern Ukraine and concern over Russian aggression has spread to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania: countries that have been part of the EU and NATO since 2004. Having attended the EU-NATO roundtable in Estonia in April, I can certainly vouch for the general sense of unease over Russian aggression among citizens in the Baltics. Without exception, I was told that there is a deep concern about Russia and that people are following the news closely for every step that the country takes.

Out of all the Baltic states, Lithuania is the country expressing the strongest concerns over being targeted by

Russia. One Lithuanian I spoke to expressed anxiety over the fact that Lithuania borders a small Russian Baltic Sea exclave (Kaliningrad) that many Russians, sometimes armed, cross Lithuania to reach. Another reason of concern is that Lithuania also borders Belarus, a long-standing Russian ally.

Some of this concern can also be seen in the statement by a senior Lithuanian analyst at Vilnius' Eastern Europe studies center, [Marius Laurinavicius](#) that Russia “need(s) a corridor from Kaliningrad to mainland Russia... just like they need one from Crimea to Donbas”. It is no secret that Russia and Belarus have been carrying out [military exercises](#) in Kaliningrad near the Lithuanian and Polish borders, which is a cause of concern for these countries.

The [EU](#) does not believe that Russia would ever attack a NATO country as that would trigger a response from all members as part of the mutual defence alliance. Some experts argue that Russia would use the pretext of ethnic Russians in the Baltics for an invasion. Out of the three Baltic states, Lithuania is the one with the least ethnic Russians, with around [5.88](#) per cent of the population belonging to this group. Interestingly, Poles make up the largest ethnic minority living in Lithuania with [6.65](#) per cent.



Lithuanian soldiers during a joint exercise between US, Lithuanian, Estonian, Latvian and Polish forces in June 2015, Credit: US Army Europe Images (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Due to the spread of concern over Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine, the US has sent forces to the region. It sent [3,000 soldiers](#) for military exercises with the armies of the three Baltic States in March. This move was well received by these countries and as Latvian Defence Minister [Raimonds Vejonis](#) stated “the presence of our allies in Latvia is a confirmation of solidarity and security in the region”. In [April](#) the US sent paratroopers to train Ukrainian National Guard units, with Russia criticising the move as jeopardising the peace process with the separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

The [US and NATO](#) have committed themselves to increasing military activities in Eastern Europe to reassure their partners and dissuade Russia. Both [Russia and NATO](#) have been organising war games and military exercises, signalling the increasing tension in Eastern Europe. In [June](#) EU members also decided to extend the ongoing economic sanctions imposed against Russia for an additional 6 months due to the Ukrainian crisis. The sanctions were first imposed on Russia in July 2014 due to its alleged support for pro-Russian separatists – something Russia has denied vehemently ever since.

The involvement of the US has also been subject to domestic politics. In June, the U.S. Senate voted 71-25 to pass a [defence policy bill](#) worth \$612 billion that calls for providing weaponry to Ukrainian forces and prevents military bases from being closed. US president Barack Obama [opposed the bill](#) as it does not allow for the closure of unnecessary military facilities and complicates closing down the prison in [Guantanamo Bay](#). The bill also forces the administration to deliver lethal military assistance to the Ukrainian army, something the White House has been avoiding as it could put additional strain on the country's relationship with Russia.

Nevertheless, on the [23rd of June](#) the US took the decision to send military equipment to bases located in Eastern Europe in countries such as Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania to strengthen their security and dissuade Russia from starting another intervention in the region. US Defence Secretary [Ash Carter](#) said that “the tendency by Russia to try to turn back the clock and go backwards in history, rather than go forwards in history – we're not going there with them”.

The [defence secretary](#) also said that the US, its allies and NATO have to scrap the “Cold War playbook” and think about the security challenges that Russia poses today. A week earlier Vladimir Putin further increased concerns by declaring that Russia would increase its nuclear arsenal with [40 intercontinental ballistic missiles](#) this year in order to send a clear signal to NATO.

In light of these developments, is sending weapons ever really a good solution? It would not be the first time that the West has sent military supplies that ended up in the wrong hands. Military equipment such as tanks, vehicles, and ammunition that the US sent to Iraqi forces very quickly ended up in the possession of Islamic State.

Weapons can also encourage war rather than deter it, and who is to guarantee that Ukraine or the Baltic States will act responsibly? In 2008 Georgia used the training and military equipment it gained from the West in a war with Russia which lasted just a few days. Most of that equipment ended up being destroyed or disappearing altogether. Supplying these countries with weapons will further deteriorate relations with Russia and will only trigger a Russian response. Sending weaponry will only shift the focus to arming instead of resolving matters through diplomacy; if history has taught us anything it's that arming two sides of a potential conflict very rarely, if ever, leads to peace.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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