

Asta Maskaliunaite\*

# Editorial Introduction: Special Issue on Understanding of Total Defence in the Baltic Countries

<https://doi.org/10.2478/jobs-2020-0001>

received November 17, 2020; accepted November 17, 2020.

Welcome to the Special Issue of the Journal on Baltic Security, which will focus on the conceptualisation of ‘total defence’ and the issues surrounding it. As our authors note, a vision of defence is not created in a vacuum, but is an answer to the changing geopolitical environment and perceptions of actors. This applies to the great powers, but even more so to the smaller states that have to be even more adaptable to the continuous fluctuations of the world politics. The Baltic countries are very good examples of the development of various options for national defence that small actors faced with a much larger potential adversary can explore. The last twenty years of existence have witnessed the experiments conducted by the Baltic countries with various options and ideas to ensure their continuous existence and enhance their security. The revival of the concept of ‘total defence’ in all three countries, separately but simultaneously, serves as a good example of such innovations (since innovation is considered a well-forgotten old) in defence.

The ‘total defence’ concept, as Dr. Ieva Berzina writes, is closely linked with the defence posture of neutral, non-aligned states during the Cold War. For these states, neutrality implied a necessity to deal with defence issues, since they could not explicitly rely on outside help. As these states (Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, Yugoslavia, etc.) were less populous and militarily viable than their potential adversaries, there arose an idea of multiplying their strength through societal engagement; this would serve the purpose of defending their countries from possible aggression. The purpose of this type of defensive posture was both to deter the aggressor and, if this deterrence failed, to use these societal capabilities to resist aggression.

The end of the Cold war also led to an eclipse of this model of defence. As threats came to be located in the far-flung regions of the world and countries became more engaged in expeditionary, peacekeeping operations rather than focusing on the self-protection, there seemed to be little need for territorial defence and even less need for the total defence. The situation again changed in 2014 due to Russian aggression in Ukraine and a more forceful posture towards European countries, leading to a renaissance in the concept of total defence as well.

The Baltic countries had some engagements with the concept of total defence through their collaboration with their Swedish and Finnish counterparts after their restorations of independence took place. These two countries had significant influence on the thinking of defence policymakers, especially in Latvia and Estonia, and through them, some of the conceptual thinking on the model of ‘total defence’ found its way into the policies of these countries as well. The Lithuanian trajectory was somewhat different, yet, at the very beginning of the 1990s, its toying with neutrality also led to discussions of a suitable defence model that would potentially be based on the Swedish archetype. However, these discussions were short-lived, and the experience of all three countries during the interwar period led decision-makers to the conclusion that the most viable option for these countries’ survival was integration into Western institutions, especially linking their security to membership in NATO.

This vision led to particular defence policy choices, which focused on adaptation to NATO standards and procedures on the tactical and operational level, as well to the organisation’s vision of the strategic level. Since the September 11 attacks in 2001, this vision was strongly linked to the view that the threats for the West in general and NATO countries

---

\*Corresponding author: Asta Maskaliunaite, Baltic Defence College, Tartu, Estonia, E-mail: [asta.maskaliunaite@baltdefcol.org](mailto:asta.maskaliunaite@baltdefcol.org)

in particular come from the instability in far-off regions rather than aggressive intentions of the close neighbours. The defence of the homeland in these conditions meant participation in military operations either as part of NATO or in a coalition with the United States, coupled with the reliance placed on protection from Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Two of the Baltic countries – Latvia and Lithuania – enthusiastically adopted this view, redesigning their armed forces to follow this expeditionary logic. They abandoned mandatory conscription for the professional armed forces, and also began to engage in procurements (such as Spartan airplanes) that had a particular utility in the context of expeditionary operations rather than use inside the territory of a country. Estonia adopted a more cautious approach, staying closer to the Finnish model of defence, and complimenting it with participation in NATO operations.

Several developments led to changes in this arrangement. It is already trivial to say that the war in Ukraine has changed the perception of the security situation which prevails in the Baltic region. The first reactions to this new situation, however, concentrated on attempts to continue the same policies, only with more specific assurances from NATO about the commitment to defence of the Eastern partners in the alliance. At the same time, the new emphasis on so-called hybrid war led to an understanding of the deficiencies of existing defensive arrangements and requirements for a broader understanding of what it means to defend the country. Further developments in the international situation, especially the unpredictability of the United States under President Trump, as well as growing US confrontation with China, led to some rethinking of the attitude towards defence in all three countries. The concept of ‘total defence’ was thus reintroduced and began to be discussed again.

The selection of articles presented here goes deeper into this discussion. The first contribution by Dr. Ieva Berzina provides the historical context for this concept, discussing its origins and meanings in the non-aligned states up to the present day. The three other papers focus on the understanding of ‘total defence’ and the concepts linked to it in the three Baltic countries. Each of them adopt a somewhat different approach in a methodologically rich discussion. Veebel *et al.* use document analysis coupled with the focus group interviews to probe the Estonian understanding of these concepts and their actual implementation. As was mentioned, only Estonia retained conscription during this entire period, making sure it can rely on a large force of reservists in case of an attack. It continues to depend significantly on the volunteer units of the *Kaitseliit* in its bid to cover the entire territory of the country and ensure credible deterrence. It does, however, face significant challenges, not the least of which is imbalance in funding between the ‘professional’ and ‘voluntary’ forces and a lack of coordination between the Estonian and Latvian territorial defence units, which could be detrimental in case of a simultaneous attack on both.

Kristine Atmante’s article uses process tracing to extract details concerning the developments of the Latvian comprehensive defence approach and its origins in the total defence model, which has been designed on the Swedish example. While Latvia retains a professional army, it is trying to introduce a system of training for its youth to compensate for a lack of reservists from the former conscription service. It also aims to engage the civic organisations, NGOs and churches in the development of a more comprehensive approach to defence that emphasises the role and duties of citizens in the defence of the country.

Statkus and Zdanavičius’ article on the Lithuanian understanding of total defence focuses on the context in which the notion has developed, emphasising the growing great power competition that may potentially lead to a situation wherein small countries such as Lithuania have to fend for themselves. This demands a rethinking of the implemented strategies of defence postures and credible deterrence, relying not only on the NATO allies – primarily the United States – but also on the Baltic countries’ own capabilities to formulate a system of high costs for potential attacks. This is especially important in the context of hybrid war where a variety of methods and targets of attackers makes it difficult to have a response solely based on the preparation of the armed forces. In this context, energy security as well as protection of the cyber domain become important, and the information sphere can hardly be protected without an engagement of society and its will to resist negative narratives transmitted by adversaries.

While approaches to the defence of non-aligned countries took considerable time to crystalize, the concepts developed in the three Baltic countries did not have this luxury of time to become solid and clear. There are some serious issues to consider in each of these approaches: the relation between the armed forces and society, a possible burden on citizens that the model of total defence places on them, and possibilities of a more unified approach in all three countries which, while different, share a confined physical geographic space. It is our hope that the collection of these articles will help facilitate a discussion on these topics and provide inspiration for the development of a more encompassing approach to comprehensive defence in this region.