

Intergovernmental Coordination in Crisis Governance

The Role of Pro-Defence Organizations in Polish and Lithuanian Responses to the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract: The Russian invasion of Ukraine has reshaped the security environment of Eastern Europe and highlighted the importance of civil-military cooperation. This paper aims to identify how the Lithuanian government coordinates actions with pro-defence organizations with particular attention to the efficiency and effectiveness of such collaboration. The Lithuanian case will be compared with Polish regulations and practices in order to highlight similarities, differences, and potential gaps. The analysis then extends to the sphere of Polish-Lithuanian cooperation in defending the eastern border of the European Union and NATO, a frontline region of strategic importance. The ultimate goal is to find examples of good practices and patterns that can serve as models for effective functioning of state-civil society cooperation in crisis conditions. By combining Lithuanian and Polish experiences, the study contributes to a broader understanding of resilience-building in the face of hybrid threats and conventional military aggression.

Keywords: Poland; Lithuania; intergovernmental coordination; crisis; pro-defence organisations; Russia-Ukraine War; security.

1. Introduction

Almost every day since the beginning of full-scale Russia-Ukraine war, Poland and Lithuania experience Russian and Belarusian hybrid actions targeted on weakening security. It includes artificially caused migration crisis on Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian border, arsons, cyberattacks on public authorities and bank systems, disinformation, spreading fake news, violations of an air space by drones, balloons and military aircrafts and recently even acts of sabotage which could lead to the catastrophe on railways in Poland.¹ This threats combined with a large-scale

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¹ S RAINSFORD, 'Poland says blast on rail line to Ukraine "unprecedented act of sabotage"' (BBC News, 18 November 2025) <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp85g86x0zgo> accessed 27 November 2025.

conflict in Ukraine completely reshaped the security environment of Eastern flank NATO countries.²

During the NATO summit in Hague in June 2025, members agreed to gradually increase defence spending to 5% of GDP, of which at least 3.5% would be allocated to defence investments, while up to 1.5% would finance critical infrastructure protection, civil preparedness, innovation development, and industrial base strengthening.³ In 2026 Poland and Lithuania plans to spend at least 5% of their GDP on defence. In the National Security Strategy from 2025 Polish government highlighted the role of civil society and civic education in strengthening a state defence system enabling the use of the state's potential to defend against external and internal threats.⁴ Already existing example of civic organisation contributing national defence and community resilience could be found in Lithuania – which is the Lithuanian Rifleman Union – state supported para-military organisation.

2. The Lithuanian legal framework – The Lithuanian Rifleman Union

The Lithuanian Rifleman Union (LRU) has a long history dating back to the end of the first World War, fights for the independence of Lithuania in 1919-1920 and armed resistance against Soviet Union in 1944 to 1953. The legal status and functioning of the organisation are regulated by several legal acts⁵. The main legal regulation introduced by the Lithuanian government on the 2nd of July 1997 is the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union. The act regulates the status and activities of LRU⁶. It is important to highlight that the LRU cooperates closely with the Lithuanian Armed Forces and Ministry of National Defence. Currently the organisation has around 17 000 members with the aim of recruitment of new members. The Union has a public legal entity of limited civil liability, and it operates in form of an association⁷.

Within the organisation function 10 teams based in all 10 main districts in Lithuania. The Union maintains close cooperation with the Armed Forces, Police, Fire and Rescue Service, and Border Guard⁸.

The LRU is a vital part of Lithuania's comprehensive defence system⁹. Its activities are fully

² NATO's Eastern Flank, also known as The Bucharest Nine (B9), is comprised of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. In September 2025, NATO launched Operation Eastern Sentry, aimed to protect its territory in response to hybrid actions. NATO's Forward Land Forces (FLF) are a key element of the Alliance's military presence along the eastern flank.

³ NATO, The Hague Summit Declaration issued by the NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in The Hague (25 June 2025).

⁴ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland (25 July 2025).

⁵ For the purposes of the paper there are considered main three of them: Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, Statute of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union and Riflemen's Code of Ethics.

⁶ Article 1, Lietuvos Respublikos Lietuvos šaulių sąjungos įstatymas (2 July 1997) Nr VIII-375 (Law on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union).

⁷ Article 5, *Ibidem*.

⁸ Lietuvos šaulių sąjunga, 'Rinktinės' <https://www.sauliusajunga.lt/rinktines> accessed 27 November 2025.

⁹ R SZYNOWSKI, 'Competences of the Republic of Lithuania Authorities in the Area of Defence' (2020) 1 *Security Forum* 102, https://doi.org/10.26410/SF_1/20/8.

compliant with the basics of ensuring the national security of Lithuania¹⁰. It is important to highlight also the positive public perception of the organization which results in more and more candidates of becoming the new members of the Union.

The LRU has significant successes in helping the government managing the polycrisis during last years, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic or migration crisis on the border with Belarus¹¹. The Union also conducting educational activities and helps the authorities in fighting natural disasters. The organisation is subordinate to the Lithuanian Government¹². The financing increased several times since 2020, and it was 13,6 million euro in 2024¹³.

This legal approach is completely different comparing to the Polish regulations in this matter. While Lithuanian government decided to create centralised organisation directly subordinated to the Ministry of National Defence and functioning on legal act introduced by the parliament. Polish authorities leave the freedom for organisational issues to the entities. However, Polish regulations also include cooperation with civic organisations with pro-defence profile.

3. Polish Homeland Defence Act and cooperation with pro-defence organisations

In Poland, in April 2022 came into force the Homeland Defence Act from 11th of March 2022. The new act has been introduced right after the full-scale war in Ukraine has started. It replaced the previous act from 1967 originally introduced by the communists in Polish People Republic¹⁴.

It is a complex legal act aimed on regulating the most important issues related to the state security such a general organisation of Polish Armed Forces, command system, development of the Army, recruitment and service and meeting the needs of the Polish Armed Forces, mainly in relations with the administration and by entrepreneurs¹⁵.

It also consists of regulations related to the pro-defence organisation which are not part of the Polish Armed Forces. According to the Polish law, the pro-defence organisation is understood as a non-governmental organization with which the Minister of National Defence has concluded a pro-defence partnership agreement¹⁶.

The Minister of National Defence may conclude a pro-defence partnership agreement with a non-governmental organization conducting socially useful activities aimed at strengthening

¹⁰ Lietuvos Respublikos nacionalinio saugumo pagrindų įstatymas (19 December 1996) Nr VIII-49 (Act on the National Security of the Republic of Lithuania).

¹¹ See 'Šauliai ir pasieniečiai sutarė drauge valdyti nepaprastas padėtis, užaboti nusikalstamumą' (15min, 2025), available from: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/sauliai-ir-pasienieciai-sutare-drauge-valdyti-nepaprastas-padetis-zaboti-nusikalstamuma-56-1646276> accessed 27 November 2025.

¹² Article 12 of the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union states that the Minister of National Defence shall appoint, dismiss and remove the Commander of the LRU from office.

¹³ See 'Šaulių sąjungoje už 200 tūkst. eurų bus steigama 15 naujų pareigybių' (LRT, 2025), available from: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2278793/sauliu-sajungoje-uz-200-tukst-euru-bus-steigiama-15-nauju-pareigybiu> accessed 27 November 2025.

¹⁴ Act of 21 November 1967 on the universal duty to defend the Republic of Poland has been replaced by the Homeland Defence Act of 11 March 2022.

¹⁵ Homeland Defence Act (Poland) (11 March 2022), art 1.

¹⁶ Ibid., art 2.

national security and defence capabilities, at the request of that organization¹⁷. The direct consequence of concluding such an agreement in relation to members and volunteers of pro-defence organizations is the possibility of their being called up for 28 days of basic training as part of voluntary basic military service¹⁸.

Under a pro-defence partnership agreement, the Minister of National Defence may undertake to organize training for members or volunteers of a pro-defence organization to become instructors, to make the resources and infrastructure of the Armed Forces available free of charge, and to provide material and financial support. Under the law, commanders of military units may cooperate with pro-defence organizations as part of their official duties¹⁹.

As it is highlighted in the National Defence Strategy from 2025 the main threat to the state security still remains aggressive policy of Russian Federation²⁰. In this context Polish states is facing significant challenges. Focusing on civil capabilities, Polish rescue units do not have the human and material resources to provide large-scale protection in the event of the unavailability of the Polish Armed Forces. Civil defence will probably have to become a separate uniformed formation, even in peacetime. Its key tasks in peacetime should include securing critical infrastructure, which is the main target of attacks in modern armed conflicts²¹. In current strategy Polish government focuses on strengthening the resilience of the state, with particular emphasis on civil protection and civil defence, as well as the resilience of critical infrastructure and services. Another goal is developing the potential and role of civil society, civic education, strengthening national identity and social cohesion, on which the determination to defend the country and protect the population depends.

All above mentioned challenges and priorities could be supported also by non-governmental pro-defence organisations. However, unlike the Lithuanian solutions most of the crisis in Poland are solved by the uniformed services. During the crisis on the border with Belarus, Border Guard was supported by the police and military. Right after the act of sabotage on the Polish railways in November 2025, to protect the important railway connection also was used military – Territorial Defence Forces (TDF)²².

There are some similarities between Lithuanian Riflemen Union and Territorial Defence Forces such as a voluntary element of service however from the legal perspective counterpart of TDF's in Lithuania is a The National Defence Volunteer Forces²³.

In Poland there is already a plenty of pro-defence organisations who cooperates with Polish Ministry of National Defence. Pro-defence partnership agreements refer to the principles of

¹⁷ Ibid., art 114.

¹⁸ J BULIRA, 'Commentary on Article 114', in H KRÓLIKOWSKI (ed), *Homeland Defence. Commentary* (2nd edn, LEX/el 2024).

¹⁹ Ibid., arts 116-117.

²⁰ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland (25 July 2025).

²¹ See T PAWŁUSZKO, 'Nowa strategia bezpieczeństwa narodowego RP. Założenia i wyzwania' (2020), 7–8, available from: <https://doi.org/10.36735/AXLA7062> accessed 27 November 2025.

²² One of the five branches of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland, alongside the Land Force, Air Force, Navy, and Special Forces.

²³ The National Defence Volunteer Forces or NDVF (Lithuanian: Krašto apsaugos savanorių pajėgos [KASP]). P SZYMAŃSKI, *The Baltic States' Territorial Defence Forces in the Face of Hybrid Threats* (OSW Commentary No 165, Centre for Eastern Studies 2015) 3.

subsidiarity, openness and transparency of action, effectiveness, equal treatment, and respect for the autonomy of organizations. The decisive factor in concluding an agreement with a given entity is its neutrality in political matters and its independence from political parties or other political organizations. On this basis, pro-defence organizations are involved in civil defence and broadly understood crisis management tasks and carry out activities for the security of the country and in the area of defence and cooperation with the Polish Armed Forces²⁴.

There are differences between Polish model of cooperation with such organisations comparing with Lithuanian regulations. There is no organizational structure imposed in advance by the Ministry, leaving considerable freedom to the organization itself. The agreement is voluntary. The apolitical nature of such organizations is required, which cannot be said about the LRU which is controlled directly by the Ministry. However also the level of cooperation in helping to resolve the crisis is different placing Lithuanian solutions more effective and efficient.

Polish Ministry of National Defence can support financially the pro-defence organisations which with has concluded agreement, however the support is limited and do not cover all costs. The law allows also material support²⁵. The LRU is mostly financed by the Ministry of National Defence of Lithuania.

It is clear that the Polish legislator relies mainly on the uniformed services solving the crisis rather than on pro-defence organisations which is in contrast with Lithuanian solution where is strong state support for the LRU and participation of the Union in many activities. However, the strength and size of Polish Armed Forces cannot guarantee today full security²⁶, that is why is crucial to reconsider the contribution of pro-defence organisations in National Defence Strategy. Many Polish experts also highlight that nowadays Polish Armed Forces are used for the purposes which are not necessarily strictly military duties and are used to supplement the security system because other services are inefficient²⁷.

4. Intergovernmental coordination

The complex nature of the intergovernmental coordination, focused on outcomes or process itself²⁸, poses even greater challenges in analysing the issue. The focus in this paper is dedicated to horizontal, inter-organizational, as well as trans-boundary coordination. The main obstacles in trans-boundary coordination have been identified. They are divergent national regulatory frameworks and public expectations.

The Polish and Lithuanian governments strengthen the military cooperation. There are mutual meetings of the representatives of both governments from Ministries of National Defence aimed on joint infrastructure and defence projects aimed at strengthening the security of NATO's

²⁴ 'Organizacje proobronne' (Wojsko Polskie), available from: <https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/zostanzolnierzem/organizacje-proobronne/> accessed 27 November 2025.

²⁵ Regulation of the Minister of National Defence of 5 May 2022 on support for pro-defence organisations.

²⁶ Currently it is 210 000 soldiers, the aim is 300 000.

²⁷ M KOZUBAL, 'Czego nie widać na horyzoncie: czy wojsko jest od ochrony torów' (Rzeczpospolita, 2025) <https://www.rp.pl/komentarze/art43370301-marek-kozubal-czego-nie-widac-na-horyzoncie-czy-wojsko-jest-od-ochrony-torow> accessed 28 November 2025.

²⁸ N BEHNKE and S MÜLLER, *Challenges and Opportunities of Intergovernmental Coordination* (Policy Brief No 1, November 2021) 7, available from <https://igcoord.eu> accessed 28 November 2025.

eastern flank²⁹. There are bilateral agreements between the Polish and Lithuanian authorities for example in area of cybersecurity. Moreover, the Polish strategic defence project “East Shield” will be integrated with the “Baltic Defence Line”, which is being built by Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Cooperation between the two countries at the governmental level is carried out not only bilaterally, but also within the framework of membership in the European Union and, above all, within NATO.

However, when it comes to the inter-organizational level of the coordination in context of the pro-defence organisations in Poland and Lithuania there is a lack of formal cooperation. First of all, it is important to highlight that there are grassroots initiatives for the cooperation between Polish and Lithuanian pro-defence organisations. The three Polish pro-defence organisations began with letter of intent informal cooperation between Polish and the Lithuanian Riflemen Union, in particular with the Tadeusz Kościuszko Unit within the LRU structures³⁰. The cooperation is based on democratic values and common history of Poland and Lithuania. Secondly the different legal approach to the pro-defence organisations creates additional obstacles. The Polish entities are not subordinate to Ministry of National Defence, and their cooperation is based on agreements which they are not obliged to sign, they are requesting for concluding the agreement, the Ministry has discretionary power to accept or refuse the proposal. In Lithuanian case is different, the LRU is regulated by an act introduced in the parliament, state supported and directly subordinated to the Ministry.

The third important issue is the public expectations. As in Lithuania, the LRU enjoys respect and widespread acceptance, which is reflected in the growing number of members of the formation, in Poland, pro-defence organizations are not well known by the majority of society, and there are no state mechanisms to encourage membership in such organizations. Citizens are more encouraged to join regular units of the Polish Armed Forces – such a Territorial Defence Forces.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The role of civic organisations and civil capabilities in national defence system in both countries is significant however in Lithuania it is more highlighted. There are different legal approaches and public expectations related to pro-defence organisations. However, the threats are similar: acts of sabotage, arsons, migration crisis, cyberattacks and disinformation.

In context of intergovernmental coordination there are good practices on the governmental level such a bilateral meetings and agreements, cooperation within EU and NATO. However, there is a lack of coordination on inter-organisational level, which also comes from the nature

²⁹ ‘Polska i Litwa wzmacniają współpracę wojskową’ (TVP Wilno, 2025) <https://wilno.tvp.pl/88112152/polska-i-litwa-wzmacniaja-wspolprace-wojskowa> accessed 28 November 2025.

³⁰ Based on the interview with Mr Dariusz LITWINOWICZ, Commander of Kościuszko Unit, member of LRU and Dr Andrius PUKSAS, member of LRU, conducted on 16 September 2025 during a Short-Term Scientific Mission funded under Cost Action IGCOORD, CA20123, on the topic of: “Intergovernmental Coordination in Crisis Governance: The Role of Pro-Defence Organizations in Polish and Lithuanian Responses to the Russia-Ukraine War”. The letter of intent from 10 June 2025 includes three Polish pro-defence organisations: Związek Strzelecki “Strzelec”, Związek Strzelecki “Strzelec Józefa Piłsudskiego”, Fundacja na Rzecz Obronności i Bezpieczeństwa Kraju “Combat-Alert”.

of organisations, at least in the Polish security environment. Moreover, Polish solutions are more focused on development regular Armed Forces rather than supporting civic pro-defence organisations which is in contrast with Lithuanian approach.

There are initiatives such as joint training sessions, bilateral exchanges between Armed Forces and also pro-defence organisations however when it comes to the organisations, they have more informal based on private contacts of the commanders and they are not institutionalised.

The common challenges, direct neighbourhood with Russia and Belarus, the Suwałki Gap³¹, hybrid threats and war in Ukraine intensified Polish-Lithuanian efforts on developing their defence system. Modern challenges emphasised the need of civil-military cooperation in order to protect the state, in particular the critical infrastructure and main transport routes.

The Lithuanian model of cooperation with pro-defence organisation – in particular with the Lithuanian Riflemen Union seems to be more efficient than the Polish solutions based on decentralisation and voluntary character of cooperation with the state. Polish legislator focused on developing one of the components of Polish Armed Forces which is the Territorial Defence Forces which they have quite similar tasks and obligations like LRU however they are part of the Armed Forces so we cannot qualify them as a civic organisation.

The threat of open conflict is escalating as enemy provocations grow increasingly frequent and severe. In any case, military and civilian cooperation between Poland and Lithuania should be strengthened within NATO and the European Union. It should also be based on bilateral agreements and informal cooperation, as it is currently.

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³¹ The Suwałki Gap, or Suwałki Corridor is an area around the border between Lithuania and Poland, and centres on the shortest path between Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad Oblast on the Polish side of the border. Named after the Polish town of Suwałki, this choke point has become of great strategic and military importance since Poland and the Baltic states joined the NATO.