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Latvia Report

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1 | Introduction

A whole-of-government approach (WGA) to dealing with external conflicts and crises has not been defined as a specific objective in Latvia. Though there accordingly is not any specifically defined WGA in place, and neither such nor similar terms are used in legislation and policy planning documents, it is implicitly but clearly present in policy planning and implementation. Engagement of all relevant institutions has been a common practice roughly since Latvia regained its independence in 1991 and commenced re-establishment of its diplomatic corps, armed forces and other institutions.

Latvia's current approach to dealing with external conflicts and crises is primarily determined by four factors: the size of its public administration (and the country itself), resources devoted to external engagements, level of political priority, and its membership in international organisations. Given the small size of Latvia, its relatively compact public administration, its limited resources devoted to external crises and conflicts, and the lack of consistent and meaningful political initiatives to foster a more active role, Latvia has compact crisis-management mechanisms and it has not hit above its weight in dealing with external crises and conflicts. This, however, does not impede its fairly good whole-of-government operation in practice.

As Latvia has been a member of both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for over 15 years, its approach and engagement abroad primarily fits within the mechanisms, approaches and priorities of those two organisations.

2 | What policies have been developed to further policy coherence?

There is no single specific document defining Latvia's foreign policy, though various laws and policy planning documents unambiguously set the margins of Latvia's foreign policy. In particular, they underscore that its membership in the EU and NATO as well as its strategic partnership with the US are cornerstones of its foreign and defence policies, as outlined further below.

Short-term priorities of external relations are addressed in declarations of governments (cf. the current declaration: Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia 2019) and annual reports of the minister of foreign affairs (cf. the latest report: Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2018).

Less parsimony can be seen with long-term national security and state defence documents. The National Security Concept (Saeima 2015) takes a wide view of national security, covering various military and non-military issues; it serves as an umbrella document for internal and external security issues. Russia here stands out as the most notable adversary (it is mentioned 43 times in the strategy alone, up from five times in the previous edition from four years earlier (Saeima 2011)). The Concept underlines that membership in NATO and the EU are the cornerstones of Latvia's national security, while the role of the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council of Europe are also noted with regard to international security issues. In terms of specific external regions, most attention in the Concept is devoted to the conflict in Ukraine, and the Middle East is also mentioned in the context of risks to Europe emanating from the region. In what can clearly be attributed to the whole-of-government approach, the document stresses that "[t]he spectrum of threats to the national security of Latvia exceeds the responsibility of the institutions of defence and interior system. [...] [T]he whole public administration has to be involved in identifying, preventing and overcoming threats to the national security." Furthermore, the Concept underlines the importance of having centralised management both in regard to policy and coordination, of having inter-institutional mechanisms that are constantly operational, and of having each institution manage issues falling under its respective responsibility (Saeima 2015). The State Defence Concept, which primarily focuses on military-security issues, largely stands in the same line with the National Security Concept in terms of inter-institutional cooperation and information exchange (Saeima 2016).

Latvia's development-cooperation (aid) policy, as outlined in the Development Cooperation Policy Guidelines for 2016–2020, focuses on fostering sustainable development, eradicating poverty, and promoting the rule of law and good governance. In Latvia's bilateral development cooperation, the priorities are the countries in the EU's Eastern Partnership (especially Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and in Central Asia (especially Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) along with places where Latvian soldiers or civilian experts are deployed. The development-cooperation policy is implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the support of other institutions and NGOs (Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia 2016).

All three of the aforementioned documents exemplify an integral whole-of government approach. The first two are well supported at the political level, and most of the priorities are backed by adequate resources, especially those falling under the responsibility of military

authorities (since 2018, Latvia's defence expenditures have amounted to 2 percent of GDP (Saeima 2017)). The same cannot be said about Latvia's development-cooperation policy, which, though clearly defined, has lacked both financial and political support. For example, in 2017, Latvia provided the lowest net official development assistance (ODA) as a percentage of gross national income among all EU member states (0.11%), which was the second-lowest figure in the EU in absolute terms (USD 31.92 million) (OECD 2018). Given this, it is difficult to characterise Latvia's development aid as a significant instrument in dealing with external crisis and conflicts.

The issue of funding can be viewed as a detrimental factor for a bolder and better-integrated whole-of-government approach and foreign policy in general. Funding for crisis-management issues is fragmented, with each of the institutions requesting and receiving funds for its own operational purposes. There is no dedicated funding for enhancing inter-institutional mechanisms for external affairs. There is also no clear and comprehensive human resources policy that would foster a whole-of-government approach. For example, there are no comprehensive training programmes for the government apparatus at the national level to foster inter-institutional cooperation (Official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2019; Official of the Ministry of Defence of Latvia 2019).

Finally, there are no explicit political initiatives to foster a smoother whole-of-government approach to external affairs. Granted, there is a clear understanding that no major issue concerning external crises and conflicts can be dealt with by one institution alone. But there has been no clear and consistent push to strengthen a multistakeholder approach that, among other things, would include targeted funding and a comprehensive role for civil society actors.

3 | Who are the main actors involved in cooperating in a WGA?

There is fairly well-established formal and informal coordination and cooperation in the framework of national security and state defence. Though it is difficult to pinpoint a distinct approach in regard to external crises and conflicts from (internal) national security and state defence, all relevant ministries and other institutions are covered by the respective regulations and mechanisms.

Most engaged in dealing with external crises and conflicts are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, and the Ministry of Interior as well as their subordinate institutions, such as the National Armed Forces and the State Border Guard.

The Saeima, as the parliament is called, is in charge of the main strategic decisions regarding national security and state defence, including adopting laws and strategies related to national security and state defence, as well as approving deployments of Latvian troops abroad. Meanwhile, the Cabinet of Ministers is tasked with implementing the policies adopted by the Saeima and operational tasks, as well as deciding on deployments for international rescue and humanitarian operations (Saeima 2000).

The National Security Law tasks the Cabinet of Ministers with dealing with threats to the state, while each ministry is responsible for planning for and countering threats to the state in its respective field of responsibility (ibid.).

Among the national inter-institutional coordination mechanisms, two have to be underlined. First, the National Security Council, tasked with coordination of national security policy, consists of the president of Latvia, the chairperson of the parliament, the prime minister, chairpersons of two committees of the parliament, and the ministers of defence, foreign affairs and the interior. Second is the Crisis Management Council, which is tasked with operational-level coordination issues. It consists of the prime minister and the ministers of defence, foreign affairs, economics, finance, the interior, justice, health, transport and communications, environmental protection and regional development (ibid.).

Issues related to significant external crises and conflicts are dealt with by the National Security Council, whose work is usually not discussed in detail publicly. It is generally considered to be an effective coordination mechanism at the highest political level. The Crisis Management Council tends to be seen as a reactive rather than a proactive mechanism for operational-level issues (Official of the Ministry of Defence of Latvia 2019).

Coordination is also formalised in the aforementioned institutions. In the Saeima, the main committees involved with issues related to external crises and conflicts are: the Foreign Affairs Committee; the Defence, Internal Affairs and Corruption Prevention Committee; and the National Security Committee. Furthermore, ministries have internal structures that are responsible for focusing on internal and external crises and conflicts. For example, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is a NATO and European Security Policy Division as well as an International Operations and Crisis Management Division (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2019a), whereas there is a Crisis Management Department in the Ministry of Defence (Ministry of Defence of Latvia 2019).

Informal mechanisms, such as those between the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, are functioning fairly well. Since the number of persons working on the respective issues is not vast, officials often participate in the same exercises and jointly coordinate their draft legislation, policy or operational issues (Official of the Ministry of Defence of Latvia 2019; Official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2019).

Engagement with civil society actors regarding external crises and conflicts, however, is unbalanced. Experts from thinktanks and universities are involved in consulting with the authorities on external affairs in general terms, while non-governmental organisations are involved in consulting on and implementing development-cooperation activities (Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia 2016). At the same time, non-governmental actors do not have any significant impact on major decisions regarding external crises and conflicts, such as whether Latvian troops should be deployed on international missions or operations abroad. To be fair, such decisions regarding participation have not been widely contested by civil society, apart from forms of activism regarding the Second Iraq War.

4 | How does your country operationalise a WGA?

Latvia's contribution to preventing and managing external crises and conflicts consists of providing political support and/or development and humanitarian aid to certain countries in addition to participating in military and civilian operations and missions.

Latvia's most notable efforts in terms of external political engagement in crises and conflict situations have been providing assistance to Georgia and Ukraine following their respective conflicts with Russia. Countries in the EU's Eastern Partnership (including the aforementioned Georgia and Ukraine) and in Central Asia have been priority areas of Latvia's development policy, along with areas where Latvian troops and civilian experts are deployed. Such assistance, though limited, has been provided in various spheres. The development aid, along with political support and other activities, has helped Latvia to maintain a decent level of visibility in both Ukraine and Georgia as well as in Central Asia.

Another instrument of engagement is Latvia's participation in military operations abroad. To date, the highest number of troops has been sent to operations led by NATO and the US: the Implementation Force (IFOR) and Stabilisation Force (SFOR) in Bosnia-Herzegovina; the Kosovo Force (KFOR); the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan; and Operation Iraqi Freedom (National Armed Forces of Latvia 2019). Latvia's current military operations include: the EU-led operations NAVFOR ATALANTA, EUNAVFOR MED Sophia and EUTM MALI; the UN-led operation MINUSMA (also in Mali); and the NATO-led operation Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan (which currently has the largest contingent of Latvian troops, or 42). The current number of troops on operations – 63 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2019b) – is significantly lower than it used to be, down from more than 300 in the 2004–2012 period (National Armed Forces of Latvia 2019).

Latvia also contributes its experts to civilian missions. At present, 16 Latvian experts have been contributed to the EU-led operations EUMM Georgia and EUAM Ukraine as well as to the OSCE-led SMM Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2019b). However, the pool of experienced and qualified experts who can be sent abroad is small, and they are also needed at home, though the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is striving to increase the current number (Official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019).

Latvia has also contributed to other missions and operations. For example, Latvia's border guards have participated in operations of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) aimed at supporting the protection of the EU's southern external border (cf., e.g. State Border Guard of Latvia 2010).

5 | Conclusions

Overall, even though it has not been an objective per se, the whole-of-government approach has been running well in Latvia. Having all relevant institutions involved in policymaking has been a standard practice. No known significant decisions on external crises have been taken unilaterally.

The main advantage of Latvia's system is its smallness and the frameworks set by its international alliances. The former factor means a relatively compact public administration in which the relevant players interact with each other frequently and across a broad spectrum of issues. The latter factor – i.e. membership in both the EU and NATO for 15 years (which is longer than the period between gaining independence and joining these alliances) – has fostered the transposition of a mostly modern, post-Cold War-era approach to preventing and managing crises and conflicts. Operations and missions led by the above-mentioned organisations as well as by the United States have been the focus of Latvia's external engagement, along with the development aid and civilian missions to countries in the EU's Eastern Partnership (Georgia and Ukraine, in particular) and Central Asia.

The drawbacks of the Latvian approach are the lack of strong political initiatives and insufficient resources devoted to streamlining the whole-of-government approach as well as engagement with external crises and conflicts. To make Latvia's external engagement and the national mechanisms underpinning it work better and more boldly, the following can be suggested: to enhance training for and funding of a better-integrated whole-of government approach and external engagement in general; to increase funding for development aid and to thereby expand the scope of activities in crisis and conflict regions; to increase the number of Latvian troops and civilian experts deployed to missions and operations abroad; to launch bolder political initiatives aimed at preventing and managing crises and conflicts abroad – and to thereby enable Latvia to hit above its weight.

6 | Reference list

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