



riigikontroll
National Audit Office of Estonia

Readiness of the Estonian state to receive Allied military units in peacetime

Have the preconditions for the smooth reception of the Allied military units within the timeframe established in NATO been created under the leadership of the Ministry of Defence?

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Report of the National Audit Office to the
Riigikogu
Tallinn, 27 November 2024

Summary of audit results

Light brigade is a unit that can be rapidly deployed, which (based on the example of the 4th Brigade of the British Army) consists of light infantry, light cavalry and limited support units (including artillery).

Heavy brigade is a unit with high firepower and armour protection. Based on the example of the British Army, a brigade has ca 5,000 soldiers and ca 10 battalion-sized subunits.

Sources: Militerm ([light force](#) and [heavy force](#)) and the [website of the British Army](#)

Host nation support is civil and military assistance, provided by a host nation during peacetime, a crisis or wartime to forces from NATO or other allied countries, which are located on the territory of the host nation, operate there or from there, or are in transit through the host nation's territory.

Source: [Milaterm](#)

Deployment is the repositioning of forces to operation area(s) or between them.

Estonia can receive an Allied battalion smoothly within the established timeframe¹ in peacetime. There are trailers and areas for receiving a **light brigade and the creation of conditions for receiving a heavy brigade is underway. Receiving a **heavy brigade** or several units at the same time may create difficulties in transporting equipment by road and in the use of the staging and training areas.**

The Ministry of Defence, together with the other ministries, must ensure that the transport of Allied equipment and machinery runs smoothly. In addition, it is necessary to organise the use of staging and training areas and the supply of liquid fuels to Allies, even in the event of supply difficulties.

What did the National Audit Office audit and why?

Since spring 2017, Estonia has been regularly providing **host nation support** to Allied units up to the size of a battalion. From June 2022, the readiness to receive Allies at the shortest possible notice became more important than ever in ensuring the military defence of NATO countries – in the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, which began in February 2022.

The direction chosen by Lithuania and Latvia is to ensure the permanent presence of a brigade-sized Allied unit. The United Kingdom has pledged to send a brigade to protect Estonia in order to implement regional defence plans.

Estonia must be prepared to provide host nation support to Allied forces to the extent never done in practice so far. The bigger the scope in which Estonia is prepared to receive additional Allied military units and provide host nation support, and the smaller the quantity of disruptions in this, the more effectively the Allied units arriving in Estonia can focus on their main duties.

The National Audit Office audited the functions of the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Climate, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, on which the smooth reception of Allies depends, and identified the circumstances that slow down **deployment** and obstruct the activities of Allies on site. The audit focused on the reception of additional Allied forces in peacetime, where the country is in a state of general defence

¹ Based on the sample deployment plan in NATO standard ATP-3.13.1 "Reception, Staging and Onward Movement (RSOM) Procedures". Edition A Version 1).

readiness². The possible impact of increased defence readiness on the reception of Allies is also covered in the audit report.

Main observations

The audit showed that Estonia is ready to receive up to battalion-size units of the Allies in peacetime. There are machines for transporting people and equipment to receive a light brigade, but reception has not been practiced so far. Preparations for receiving a heavy armoured brigade have been launched.

A battalion has been received in the conditions of general defence readiness. Ministries and their agencies would be able to do this in cooperation with contractual partners. The Ministry of the Interior (Police and Border Guard Board) and the Ministry of Finance (Tax and Customs Board) are ready to receive Allied troops and their equipment under the simplified border crossing procedure.

When a brigade with heavy equipment is received, obstacles may arise in its arrival in the staging area and onward movement if the agreements made with contractual partners cannot be adhered to or no agreements have been made about the organisation of transport using civil infrastructure. Due to the limited number of heavy equipment transporters and the restrictions on increased traffic volumes on the road, the transport of heavy equipment would not run smoothly. Equipment and supplies cannot be transported by rail either, because there are no suitable flatcars. These restrictions should be considered when transport is organised.

The peacetime staging of a brigade-size unit has not been practised, so it is uncertain that the process will go without any time-consuming problems, and the existing areas are too small to practise interoperability. The current Liquid Fuel Stocks Act does not allow for the needs of additional Allied units to be considered when establishing the state's strategic liquid fuel stocks. The Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Climate and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications have not developed an appropriate solution to cover the liquid fuel needs of Allies in the event of supply difficulties.

During the period audited, the focus of the Ministry of Defence was on activities in its area of government (including investments in staging areas owned by the Defence Forces) and activities related to NATO or the Allies. The Ministry of Defence has not been consistent in its guidance to other ministries and in describing the needs and planning the reception of an additional

² Read more about the levels of readiness in Chapter 3 of the [National Defence Act](#). The term 'crisis situation', which will be declared by the Government of the Republic and for the resolution of which special authorisation is established, is used instead of the terms 'emergency' and 'increased defence readiness' in the draft of the Civil Crisis and National Defence Act.

Allied military unit, and other ministries have not taken the initiative in their areas of responsibility.

The tasks of the ministries in the planning and provision of host nation support are defined in the concept of support by Estonia as a host nation and in the national defence action plan. The Ministry of Defence is responsible for planning and ensuring support to the Allies. The Ministry of Defence has a leading and coordinating role in the process.

Although the international security situation became more tense in 2022 due to Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the domestic activities of the Ministry of Defence in planning and preparing the reception of an additional Allied military unit came to a standstill and activities only resumed in the first half of 2024. For example, the planning and organisation of exercises and the work of the Host Nation Support Steering Committee, convened by the Ministry of Defence, came to a standstill. The role of this Committee is to coordinate cooperation between the areas of governments in the planning of host nation support.

As there was no coordination, other ministries were left in charge of the provision, planning, capability building and monitoring of host nation support, but they did not receive information from the Ministry of Defence on the services needed and their scope. As a result, the state did not have a complete picture of what capabilities were needed to receive the Allies, nor planned any funds.

The Ministry of Defence waited for changes in NATO plans and guidelines due to the events of 2022 when planning the reception of Allied military units. However, in the opinion of the National Audit Office, it would have been essential to continue the activities even without external guidelines, including to determine the state's maximum capability to receive Allied military units, identify capability gaps and start eliminating them in cooperation with other areas of government. The National Audit Office finds that the cooperation based on a concept of comprehensive national defence, in particular for planning the reception of larger units (e.g. a brigade) in Estonia, was not sufficient in 2022 and 2023.

In 2024, the Ministry of Defence has taken important steps to improve Estonia's comprehensive preparedness to receive Allied military units. In spring 2024, a tabletop exercise on the readiness to receive additional Allied military units for ministries and their agencies was carried out, the activities of the Host Nation Support Steering Committee continued and planning the deployment exercise of a brigade-size unit of the United Kingdom in 2025 was launched. The number of trailers used for deployment was also increased in 2024 and

the Reedo base in Southern Estonia, used as a temporary staging area, was added.

According to the National Audit Office, there is a risk that problems will arise when it is necessary to receive a heavy brigade of the Allies or more units at the same time. In order to improve the situation, cooperation with other ministries should continue, including planning the reception of Allies, eliminating capability gaps in areas of government and testing readiness.

Recommendations of the National Audit Office

Recommendations of the National Audit Office to the Minister of Defence:

- Oversee the provision of host nation support consistently and in accordance with the concept of comprehensive national defence. Involve other ministries in the process of planning and organising the reception of Allies according to plan, using the Host Nation Support Steering Committee or other forms of cooperation. This would ensure that the decisions necessary to be ready to receive Allies are made and that the needs of Allies are considered in all ministries.
- In cooperation with the Minister of Infrastructure and the Minister of the Interior, practice the reception and movement of a brigade-sized unit (with heavy equipment) on the road during periods of heavy traffic during future host nation support exercises with the Defence Forces, the Transport Administration and the Police and Border Guard Board. As part of the exercise, assess the durability of the roads and the availability of trailers at different times.
- Work with the Minister of Climate and the Minister of Economy and Industry to develop a solution to ensure that the liquid fuel needs of additional military units of the Allied Forces are met in case of supply difficulties, major exercises and national defence crises.

Response of the Minister of Defence:

- The Ministry of Defence has consistently led the provision of host nation support, regularly involving other ministries and state agencies.
- The Ministry of Defence will continue to work closely with civilian partners in organising and conducting exercises. A deployment exercise of the Forward Land Forces (FLF) of the British Army Brigade will be held during the major exercise Hedgehog in 2025 to practice the implementation of the deployment operation plan of the Support Command of the Estonian Defence Forces in a realistic environment.

- The Defence Forces provide fuel to the Allies on a daily basis under existing contracts. The same principle applies in a military crisis.

Comment by the National Audit Office: The additional liquid fuel needs of the Defence Forces and Allies have currently not been considered in the creation of the national liquid fuel stocks. Therefore, if the state's liquid fuel stocks are taken in use to cover the additional needs of the Defence Forces and Allies, this would affect the general availability of liquid fuel in Estonia, the continuity of vital services, and the guarantee of internal security and public order.

Recommendations of the National Audit Office to the Minister of the Infrastructure:

- The Transport Administration should clarify whether the bridges and viaducts on the roads can withstand the military transport of Allied forces, keeping in mind that in the coming years (e.g. in connection with the development of the South-Estonian Military Base) the transport of heavy equipment on these routes will increase. Evaluate the condition of bridges and viaducts and plan the reconstruction of weaker bridges.
- In cooperation with the Minister of Defence, identify technical bottlenecks in roads and railways that hinder the deployment of additional allied forces. Take the bottlenecks into account in the development of infrastructure.

Response of the Minister of the Infrastructure:

- The Ministry of Climate and the Ministry of Transport cooperate with the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Forces on the basis of the cooperation agreement of 2015. This means, among other things, that movement routes are regularly inspected. The condition of bridges and viaducts is assessed during annual inspections and their maintenance and reconstruction is carried out in accordance with the road maintenance plan. A total of €30 million has been earmarked for this from 2024 to 2027.
- The Ministry of Defence has the opportunity to express its views during the processing of the Action Plan for the Development of the Public Railway Infrastructure and the National Road Maintenance Plan. As far as the Ministry of Climate is aware, the roads in the TEN-T network meets the needs of military mobility.

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