

# Latvia and NATO - contribution to international security

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It is almost exactly a year since Latvia became a full member of NATO. On April 2, 2004, in a special ceremony, flags of the new NATO member states were raised at the Alliance's Headquarters in Brussels. This happened just four days after Latvia had become an official member of NATO and two days after NATO planes began policing the Baltic sky. This was more than just a symbolic act, since it firmly established NATO's acknowledgement of Latvia's security policy. Latvian membership in NATO was not just a dream come true. Through it, a Latvian policy concept based on integration in NATO and the EU found its fulfillment. Today Latvia enjoys security at a level that has never existed before. This is not only because Latvia can rely upon the support of its NATO allies, but also because NATO offers new opportunities for our active participation in security processes worldwide. Latvia, together with its partners, is dealing with the problems of international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, failed states and organized crime – the problems that small states can hardly face and combat alone.

Latvia is strongly committed to active participation in peacekeeping missions and crisis response operations. Latvian troops have taken part in operations in the Balkans since 1996. Currently, Latvia participates in altogether five international peacekeeping missions in Kosovo (KFOR), Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR), Afghanistan (ISAF) and Iraq (OIF). The number of Latvian troops has reached 144 – one of the largest contributions to the international operations since the beginning of our participation. Latvian troops have obtained considerable practical experience and proven their ability to co-operate with NATO and the armed forces of partner states. Latvia is developing defense capabilities assets for international operations – military medics, divers, explosive ordnance disposal units (EOD), military police, minesweeping capability,

as well as nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) protection capability. In August 2005, Latvia will send 100 troops to a NATO mission in Kosovo (KFOR) – therewith the number of Latvian troops in international missions will reach about 250. Latvian troops participate in KFOR missions following the principle of rotation between Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia after a period of six months. Notwithstanding the limited financial resources, Latvia has found a possibility to improve its contribution to Afghanistan - the troops for EOD training missions are to be prepared in 2006.

In 2003, Latvia revised its National Defense Concept which states that participation in collective defense, establishment of professional armed forces, co-operation between armed forces and society, and international military co-operation are the basic principles of defense. A new structure of professional National Armed Forces has been developed. Reforms will be completely implemented by 2007.

Latvia is looking towards further cooperation with its partners inside and outside of NATO and is ready to give its contribution to international security.