



ENHANCING LATVIAN ARMED FORCES' MEDICAL PREPAREDNESS IN THE FACE OF POTENTIAL RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

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Aim

1. This Paper aims to analyze Ukraine's medical experience in its war with Russia and provide suggestions for the Latvian National Armed Forces (LNAF) to enhance the effectiveness of its military medicine during a potential conflict with Russia.
2. The Paper recommends in-depth research in Latvian military medicine in potential conflicts with Russia, focusing on effectively evacuating the wounded, enhancing medical infrastructure, and collaborating with allied countries to protect medical facilities and potentially evacuate the injured from Latvia.

Introduction

3. The geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe has been marked by tensions and concerns about security, particularly for countries like Latvia, which shares its borders with Russia. In the event of a potential conflict, the LNAF must be well-prepared to address the medical needs of the wounded soldiers. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia has not only tested the resilience of the Ukrainian people but has also provided valuable insights into the challenges of military medical support during the war. Examining the experiences of Ukraine becomes crucial for Latvia as it evaluates its preparedness and response strategies in the face of security threats. Furthermore, the LNAF ensures adequate healthcare for international soldiers within the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group Latvia (eFP Battle Group), comprising ten countries.
4. A qualitative research method has been used in this Paper.¹ The essay is divided into three major parts. The first section offers lessons learned from Ukraine and Russia war experiences. Secondly, the essay discusses the possible options to increase the capabilities of military medicine in Latvia. Finally, the Paper debates the LNAF's necessity to collaborate with NATO allies. The conclusion provides the key findings of the Paper.

Ukraine's Experience

5. In February 2021, Russia initiated an invasion of Ukraine. Since then, Russia has demonstrated a lack of regard for any constraints, showing a willingness to destroy everything in pursuit of its objectives. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has reached a distressing juncture, with reports emerging of Russia targeting medical facilities. Russia has purposefully and consistently attacked healthcare facilities in Ukraine, according to Luke Harding, a British journalist and author known for his work on Russia

¹ Bhandari, Pritha. "What Is Quantitative Research? | Definition, Uses & Methods." June 2020. <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/quantitative-research/>.

and its relations with the West.² Russia undoubtedly possesses its own reasons for purposefully targeting and causing the destruction of hospitals in Ukraine. As per Stephen Morrison, Senior Vice President at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, targeting something as essential as hospitals to societal functioning is an effective means to demoralize a population in a conflict-ridden area.³

6. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, various types of weapon systems have been employed to destroy medical facilities. Christian De Vos, the Director of Research and Investigations at Physicians for Human Rights et al, states in his report, that out of 464 incidents, 34 involved Russian airstrikes using piloted airplanes that damaged or destroyed health facilities in Ukraine. The majority of these airstrikes occurred in the early weeks of the invasion, and some attacks affected more than one hospital at a time.⁴ What is more, the pilots conducting attacks on medical facilities were aware of their actions. When aircraft pilots execute air strikes, they typically possess the ability to identify large and marked hospitals. This capability enables them to differentiate between military and civilian infrastructure, especially when using the so-called "precision-guided" weapons.⁵

7. Additionally, healthcare infrastructure in various parts of Ukraine has been targeted using long-range missiles and rockets launched from both sea and ground platforms. These weapon systems are frequently deployed over distances spanning several hundred kilometers.⁶ Therefore, hospital staff and patients in Ukraine cannot feel safe.

8. Throughout the seventeen-month full-scale invasion by Russia, human rights and humanitarian organizations have documented over a thousand Russia's attacks on healthcare infrastructure and personnel. In the August 2023 press release of Physicians for Human Rights it is pointed out, that approximately 150 healthcare workers have lost their lives in these assaults, and more than 400 attacks on medical facilities have resulted in partial or complete destruction.⁷ These facts prove that Russia is not interested in following international agreements and observing ethical norms. In her analysis of the effectiveness of the Geneva Conventions, Lise Morjé Howard, a political scientist and international

² Luke, Harding. "Revealed: How Russia Deliberately Targeted Kherson's Hospitals." *The Guardian*, September 20, 2023, World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/20/revealed-how-russia-deliberately-targeted-kherson-hospitals>.

³ Stephen, Morrison and Ash, Kline. "Explainer: Why Russia Is Targeting Ukraine's Hospitals." *I24news*, 8 March 2022. <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/ukraine-conflict/1646732907-explainer-why-russia-is-targeting-ukraine-s-hospitals>.

⁴ Christian, De Vos, Anna, Gallina, Pavlo, Kovtoniuk, Uliana, Poltavets and Will, Jaffe. "Destruction And Devastation One Year of Russia's Assault on Ukraine's Health Care System." February 2023. <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/REPORT-Destruction-and-Devastation-Ukraine-Feb-21-2023-ENG-WebOptimized.pdf>.¹⁷

⁵ Christian, De Vos, Anna, Gallina, Pavlo, Kovtoniuk, Uliana, Poltavets and Will, Jaffe. "Destruction And Devastation One Year of Russia's Assault on Ukraine's Health Care System." February 2023. <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/REPORT-Destruction-and-Devastation-Ukraine-Feb-21-2023-ENG-WebOptimized.pdf>.¹⁷

⁶ Ibid.¹⁷

⁷ Kevin, Short. "A Horrific Milestone: More Than 1,000 Attacks on Health Care in Ukraine Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion". *PHR* (blog), August 10, 2023. <https://phr.org/news/a-horrific-milestone-more-than-1000-attacks-on-health-care-in-ukraine-since-russias-full-scale-invasion/>.

relations scholar who has written extensively on topics related to armed conflict, and humanitarian law, states that Russia does not respect the Geneva Conventions, established in 1864, which specify that the protection of the sick and wounded must be impartial. Importantly, the Geneva Conventions prohibit the targeting of medical facilities during conflicts.⁸ Given the current circumstances, Ukraine is compelled to explore different approaches to protect its wounded people.

9. Despite encountering obstacles, Ukraine has received significant assistance from various European countries, all dedicated to supporting both its wounded soldiers and civilians. According to the news article from the European Commission Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), twenty-two countries have expressed their willingness to help Ukraine. As a result, more than 3000 wounded Ukrainians have been transferred to European hospitals since the start of the invasion.⁹

10. Nevertheless, Ukraine faces several medical challenges on the battlefield. One of the key obstacles the conflict in Ukraine has highlighted is the issue of evacuation of injured soldiers from the frontlines due to continuous Russian artillery attacks. Additionally, frontline medics face difficulties in obtaining crucial medical supplies such as blood, essential for treating the wounded. Even though Ukraine faces tough conditions due to continuous attacks by Russia, they have come up with a clever solution. The Defense Post news writer Joe Saballa informs that the Ukrainian military is using big cargo drones to rescue injured soldiers from the frontline. These drones can carry up to 180 kilograms over 65 kilometers to a safer place where they can get the medical help they need.¹⁰ While this technology comes at a considerable cost, it enables the safeguarding of both the personnel engaged in evacuation and the frontline doctors.

11. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a significant concern for a country like Latvia, located next to Russia and vulnerable to its potential military aggression. Ukraine's experience demonstrates that evacuating and treating wounded soldiers becomes challenging due to Russia's disregard for international rules. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare for such scenarios promptly.

Medical Care Enhancement

12. Analyzing the ongoing situation of Russian aggression in Ukraine, it is crucial that the LNAF leverage the lessons learned from Ukraine's experiences and enhance Latvia's

⁸ Howard, Lise Morjé. "A Look at the Laws of War — and How Russia Is Violating Them." *United States Institute of Peace*, September 29, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/look-laws-war-and-how-russia-violating-them>.

⁹ "Over 3,000 Ukrainian Patients Transferred to European Hospitals since the Start of the War." *European Commission News Article*. January 15, 2024. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/news/over-3000-ukrainian-patients-transferred-european-hospitals-start-war-2024-01-15_en.

¹⁰ Joe, Saballa. "Ukraine Using Drones to Evacuate Wounded Soldiers: Report." *The Defense Post*, August 8, 2023. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/08/08/ukraine-drones-wounded-soldiers/>.

readiness for a potential Russian military operation within its borders. Based on the Ukrainian experience, it is evident that the effective planning of medical care is essential on today's battlefield, given that modern weapon systems can be effective even at distances spanning hundreds of kilometers. Such planning must involve the evacuation of the wounded from the front line, the supply of medical equipment to the frontline, as well as the development of medical infrastructure in locations that offer strategic advantages.

13. To begin with, the quick and safe evacuation of wounded soldiers is of fundamental importance. The first hours of the wounded person are the most critical because immediate and well-coordinated medical intervention significantly increases the chances of survival and positive outcomes. Elisabeth Mahase, a British journalist whose work mainly focuses on healthcare policy, medical research, and public health issues, and who contributes articles to publications such as *The BMJ* (British Medical Journal) and *The Guardian*, in her publication reports that Ukraine's experience underscores that Russian forces frequently target medical transport for destruction.¹¹ As a consequence, Ukraine is compelled to explore alternative options, and it has identified a successful resolution. To prevent the loss of injured personnel, including medical personnel and drivers, Ukraine has successfully initiated the evacuation of the injured using drones. According to a U.S. Army and Air Force veteran, a regular media commentator on military technology and national security, Wes O'Donnell claims that such drones can carry wounded adult people for many kilometers, and Ukraine has become the pioneer in executing this type of automated medical evacuation¹²

14. In addition to transporting the wounded from the frontlines, it is also important to deliver necessary medical supplies such as blood and antibiotics to the frontlines. According to K. Keuleman, a marketing coordinator at Drone Delivery Canada, drones are already being used successfully for healthcare delivery in many countries. Their ability to swiftly navigate challenging terrains ensures timely and efficient healthcare delivery, particularly during emergencies, facilitating the transportation of critical medical resources to locations that are difficult to reach through traditional means.¹³ Given the proven effectiveness of such technologies, the LNAF should also consider investing in drones, as they have the potential to save the lives of soldiers by ensuring fast medical supplies.

15. What is more, it is important to establish medical facilities in strategically appropriate and secure areas. Geographically, Latvia is a small country with a distance of approximately 400 kilometers from the Russian border, located on the east side of Latvia, to the west side at the Baltic Sea. Taking into account the current Russian capabilities of their weapons and the safety reasons of Latvian medical facilities, it would be necessary for the LNAF to invest in hospitals in cities like Liepaja and Ventspils, which are situated on the western side of Latvia near the Baltic Sea. According to the websites of the hospitals,

¹¹ Elisabeth, Mahase. "Ukraine: Over 700 Recorded Attacks on Health Facilities and Workers in Year since Russia Invasion." *BMJ* 380, February 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p451>.

¹² Wes, O'Donnell. "Ukraine Evacuating Wounded Soldiers with Large Drones in a Battlefield First." August 7, 2023. <https://wesodonnell.medium.com/ukraine-evacuating-wounded-soldiers-with-large-drones-in-a-battlefield-first-556433ab8e87>.

¹³ Katt, Keuleman. "Medical Drones for Healthcare Delivery." September 14, 2023. <https://dronedeliverycanada.com/applications/healthcare/>.

Liepaja Hospital is a Level 4 facility with 338 beds and surgical capabilities,¹⁴ and the hospital in Ventspils is a Level 4 facility with 240 beds and surgical capabilities.¹⁵ Both cities are situated along the seashore and have shipping ports and airports. In the event of an emergency, there is an option to evacuate the severely wounded either by air or sea. These hospitals are the most suitable choices from a geographical standpoint. It is crucial that the LNAF and the government conduct a comprehensive examination and strategic planning for allocating essential resources to these medical facilities.

16. Based on the lessons learned from Ukraine, the LNAF needs to additionally focus on efficient planning, integrating advanced technologies like drones for the prompt and secure evacuation of injured soldiers and send medical supplies to the frontline. Another essential aspect is the establishment of strategically positioned medical facilities, particularly on the western side of Latvia, as it is vital for ensuring comprehensive healthcare services and an effective response to emergencies.

International Cooperation

17. Considering the challenges and threats posed by a potential conflict with Russia, Latvia's active engagement with NATO partners, especially those countries within the NATO eFP Battle Group or Latvia's neighboring countries, is essential to enhance its medical preparedness, taking into account that evacuation of hospitals from Latvia would become necessary due to Latvia's insufficient medical capacity or the potential threat of an attack.

18. Latvia should develop effective cooperation with NATO and other allied countries to protect the wounded during a potential military conflict. To begin with, Latvia should initiate negotiations with countries capable of receiving wounded soldiers in their hospitals. Despite its geographical location, Sweden stands out as a potential candidate. The distance from the Latvian border to Stockholm, Sweden's capital, is approximately 300 kilometers. Another viable option could be Germany, with Berlin situated about 660 kilometers away, especially due to the valuable experience of German hospitals treating individuals wounded in battle. An editor for the European Portal for Cities and Citizens Denis Balgaranov highlights that German doctors have demonstrated proficiency in caring for injured Ukrainian soldiers since as early as 2014.¹⁶ Such expertise is priceless in ensuring the success and swift recovery of injured soldiers.

19. In addition, to ensure a fast and safe evacuation of the injured from Latvia, it is imperative to assess and enhance the infrastructure of airports and seaports in both cities, Liepaja and Ventspils. This improvement is crucial as it not only facilitates the transportation of the wounded to Sweden and Germany by either ship or plane, but it would

¹⁴ "SIA "Liepājas Reģionālā Slimnīca." February 2024. <https://liepajasslimnica.lv/lv/par-mums/par-slimnicu>.

¹⁵ "Ziemeļkurzemes reģionālā slimnīca." October 2021. <https://ziemelkurzemesslimnica.lv/par-mums/>.

¹⁶ Denis, Balgaranov. "Berlin Will Treat Wounded Ukrainian Soldiers for Free." February 2024. <https://www.themayor.eu/en/a/view/berlin-will-treat-wounded-ukrainian-soldiers-for-free-11845>.

also constitute a considerable contribution to the availability of vital military provisions and reinforcements. As Liepaja and Ventspils airports are primarily designated for domestic flights, there is a possibility that their runway specifications may not align with international standards. According to NATO airfield standards, critical runway criteria include take-off weight and length. The landing and takeoff path requirements escalate with the size and weight of the aircraft, varying based on the type of aircraft, typically ranging from 1000 to 3000 meters.¹⁷ Information from Liepaja¹⁸ and Ventspils¹⁹ airport websites indicate that Liepaja has a 2000-meter-long runway, while Ventspils airport has 1300-meter-long runway. Consequently, it is imperative to collaborate with a partner nation to assess and fulfill the requirements essential for elevating airport standards and facilitating the landing of international airplanes.

20. In addition to airports, sea ports should be ready for evacuation operations as well. According to Latvian sea ports' official websites, the ports in Liepaja²⁰ and Ventspils are in good condition, and capable of transporting various cargoes, including wounded individuals even during winter.²¹ Although the ports currently do not demand any additional investment, the Latvian authorities should engage in discussions with allies to explore potential solutions for obtaining suitable ships capable of transporting the wounded to Sweden and Germany. Kris Osborn, President of the Center for Military Modernization, notes that the United States is actively investing in Fast Transport vessels equipped with life-saving medical and surgical capabilities, capable of reaching speeds of up to 60 km/h.²² Such vessels would be valuable assets, benefiting Latvia and the entire Baltic region.

21. Another crucial aspect to ensure the successful recovery of the wounded is the provision of safety. A strategic asset like military medical infrastructure becomes imperative to be protected in times of war, especially when faced with an adversary like Russia, infamous for not adhering to international rules. Arturs Danga, a senior desk officer at the Latvian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Military Public Affairs Department, points out on the Latvian MoD homepage that Latvia is currently in the process of acquiring the IRIS-T medium-range air defense system produced by the German company Diehl Defence. This air defense system is designed to counter potential threats from enemy aircraft and drones, covering a radius of up to 40 kilometers and altitudes of up to 20 kilometers.²³ Until Latvia

¹⁷ "NATO Approved Criteria and Standards For Airfields." October 2010. https://www.shipyarddoor.com/sys/hangar/documents/bi-sc_85-5.pdf.

¹⁸ "Liepāja Airport - Technical Information." 2024. <https://liepaja-airport.lv/en/about-airport/about-airport/technical-information/>.

¹⁹ "Lidosta Ventspils." November 2014. <https://airport.ventspils.lv/en/home/>.

²⁰ "Liepājas SEZ." February 2024. <https://liepaja-sez.lv/>.

²¹ "Ventspils Brīvostas Pārvalde." February 2024. <https://www.portofventspils.lv/lv/pakalpojumi-osta/biroju-noma/pramju-pasazieru-terminalis-darza-iela-6-ventspils/>.

²² Kris, Osborn. "US Navy Receives First-of-Its-Kind Medical Trauma Transport Vessel." Warrior Maven: Center for Military Modernization, February 6, 2024. <https://warriormaven.com/sea/us-navy-receives-first-of-its-kind-medical-trauma-transport-vessel>.

²³ Arturs, Danga. "Latvia and Estonia Take a Step Closer to the Historically Largest Investment in Their Air Defence." September 14, 2023. <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/news/latvia-and-estonia-take-step-closer-historically-largest-investment-their-air-defence-signing>.

develops the capability to independently protect its airspace, the LNAF needs to engage in negotiations with NATO partners for the air defense of key medical infrastructure.

22. Latvia needs to collaborate closely with its allies to reduce military medical challenges if involved in potential military conflicts with Russia. Cooperation with NATO and supportive neighboring countries such as Sweden is crucial, safeguarding not only Latvians but also allied soldiers stationed at Latvian military bases.

Conclusion

23. To sum up, Ukraine's experience is a significant example from which the LNAF must learn and plan how to take the best possible care of the wounded in the territory of Latvia, in case Russia attempts to invade.

24. Based on Ukraine's experience, the LNAF should focus on several aspects concerning investment in medical facilities and technologies. Firstly, Latvia needs to develop medical facilities in Liepaja and Ventspils, as they are strategically advantageous locations in case of war. Secondly, it is important to incorporate new technologies like drones to evacuate the wounded from the frontlines and supply medical necessities to the battlefield, ensuring swift transportation and safeguarding of medical personnel.

25. Additionally, the LNAF must collaborate with NATO member states and neighboring countries to facilitate the successful evacuation of the wounded from Latvia in case it becomes an unsafe place. Therefore, airports and ports in Liepaja and Ventspils must be adjusted for such operations, along with solutions for obtaining ships and planes suitable for evacuating the injured. Moreover, LNAF must communicate with NATO and find solutions regarding the air defense protection of medical infrastructure for Latvia does not have such capabilities yet.

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