

## **Strategic culture and professional military education in Latvia**

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This study addresses the relationship between strategic culture and professional military education in Latvia. The aim of the study is to assess how Latvia's overall strategic thinking is reflected in the education that cadets receive at the National Military Academy of Latvia (NDAL), especially with regard to the teaching which falls under the broad banners of international relations and international security. The time-frame of the study covers Latvia's NATO membership since 2004.

There are three ways in which the relationship between strategic culture which is epitomized by a country's political decision-makers (and which is also reflected in key foreign, security, and defence documents of a country) and professional military education can be conceptualized. First, it is usually expected that strategic culture shapes professional military education. When a country's decision-makers reformulate their most profound understandings of international environment, threats to a country's sovereignty, and means to protect a country from external threats, strategic culture undergoes change. It is expected that these shifts are with a time lag reflected in military education. Second, professional military education may lead the way and shape a country's strategic culture. This is largely about foresight, that is, military education institutions may scrutinize international security environment and identify emerging threats and ways to counter these threats. If analysts get things right, military education institutions can get ahead of the curve and be the first to notice factors that will over time shape strategic culture of a country. Third, a country's military education institutions may want to distance themselves from teaching related to strategic culture almost entirely and focus instead on those elements of professional military education that are less controversial and volatile. Arguably, a country's assessment of international environment may change over time. Thus, recognizing the volatile character of international environment may result in unwillingness to integrate elements of teaching on strategic culture into a country's military education institutions. There is an urge to focus on subjects (for example, such as engineering and mathematics), which are supposed to allow cadets to succeed under any strategic environment. Inevitably, however, there is tension between the aim to distance professional military education from strategic culture because that cannot (and perhaps should not) be achieved in full.

The above three ways in which the relationship between strategic culture and professional military education can be conceptualized, are tested on the case-study of Latvia. Since accession to NATO in 2004, Latvia's thinking about security and defence has made a remarkable U-turn. The prevalent thinking at the time when Latvia became a NATO member state was that Latvia would enhance its security by contributing its military personnel in mainly out-of-area operations. In turn, other NATO member states would take the necessary steps to safeguard sovereignty and independence of Latvia. In other words, Latvia would follow the intellectual lead of its NATO allies when it comes to identifying threats emanating from the international environment – the key threats being international terrorism and rogues states armed with weapons of mass destruction – while Latvia's NATO allies would safeguard Latvia's security and sovereignty if Russia once again decided to challenge the European security order. Since the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the start of the

military conflict in Ukraine, however, this thinking has been replaced by a greater emphasis on developing Latvia's self-defence capabilities. In other words, being a "good" NATO member state ain't what it used to be. Thus, this study aims to find out whether the changes in Latvia's strategic culture were driven by policy-makers, with military education institutions adjusting to the changes in strategic culture; whether military education institutions demonstrated some degree of foresight and anticipated the rather sudden shift in Russia's behaviour; or whether military education institutions tried to distance themselves from issues related to strategic culture, focusing instead on other elements of education that young officers receive at the NDAL.