



Eastern Europe
Studies Centre
Established in 2006

eFP in Focus: NATO's Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in the Baltic States

Stéfanie von Hlatky





Stéfanie von Hlatky is a Full Professor of Political Studies and the Canada Research Chair of Gender, Security and the Armed Forces at Queen's University.

The author wishes to acknowledge the helpful feedback of Dr Emilie El Khoury and Inga Samoškaitė.

On its 75th anniversary, NATO has seized the opportunity to update its policy on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), a commitment that was made during the Vilnius Summit in 2023.¹ A greater focus on deterrence and collective defence is a necessary update as the last iteration of the policy, released in 2018, did not fully articulate how WPS principles would be integrated into this core NATO task. In 2024, the strategic picture has changed dramatically two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and this has informed all the policy updates at NATO. What is distinct about the policy update on Women, Peace and Security, however, is the engagement with the Civil Society Advisory Panel on Women, Peace and Security, which is a consultative body that has been put in place specifically to provide an external input into NATO policies and practices. As the NATO WPS staff drafts the new policy, as tasked by the North Atlantic Council, advice is also being sought internally from both civilian and military bodies, and through an independent assessment which has provided a series of recommendations. In true NATO fashion, the process will culminate through negotiations as part of NATO's committee process (in this case, the Partnership and Cooperative Security Committee), as the member states wrangle over the final wording to be adopted. There is some contestation within NATO over how gender equality and security intersect, as part of the Alliance's core tasks, and the extent to which NATO's approach to WPS should be similar or distinct from the foundational WPS agenda adopted by the United Nations. Indeed, the WPS agenda can be described as a global set of norms to promote gender equality in the context of international security. Although they initially emerged in the UN context, through the adoption of an inaugural UN Security Council resolution, their inception, as well

as much of their in-country implementation, relies on civil society networks. What is clear, however, is that the Russian war in Ukraine has changed NATO's priorities in a significant way, putting deterrence and collective defence at the forefront of the allied pre-occupations, with implications for the WPS agenda.

It is within this context that the Centre for Eastern European Studies hosted a conference on Women, Peace and Security, which sought to bring different national and stakeholder perspectives to the fore. The conference, hosted in Vilnius on 23 November 2023, offered a platform for representatives from governments, civil society and academia to exchange views on the priority WPS considerations, as well as opportunities and gaps in the implementation as countries adopt national and international commitments to advance WPS. With a focus on Baltic security, the workshop featured assessments from enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), with military and civilian personnel from the battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In terms of other participating countries, there was formal participation from both Sweden and Canada, which co-sponsored the conference. Both of these countries have integrated feminist foreign policy principles into their international programming, as have other NATO countries, creating significant momentum within the Alliance.

While at the UN, the focus of WPS has been on the four pillars of participation, protection, prevention, as well as relief & recover, NATO's policy has been articulated around the principles of integration, inclusiveness and integrity.² While these are compatible policy frameworks, NATO's return to a deterrence mindset has created a challenge for the clear articulation of WPS goals when the priority is to stand up to brigades on the Eastern flank, scaling up the

existing battlegroups. By contrast, NATO's Policy on WPS is a lot more specific in terms of how it relates to other core tasks, such as crisis management and cooperative security, and it has been implemented in the NATO missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo. Scholarly research highlights the fact that WPS considerations are integrated into the operational planning and execution of missions, when there is full participation of NATO gender advisors (GENADs) and gender focal points, which is consistent with NATO's gender structure, as well as when there is civilian representation in the leadership structure of the mission, and when there is sufficient representation and participation of women within NATO's deployed force to model the importance of the WPS agenda in the host countries.³

From a NATO perspective, the WPS agenda was shaped by the operational experiences of two longstanding missions: the International Security Assistance Force and Operation Resolution Support in Afghanistan, as well as the Kosovo Force (KFOR). As part of these NATO-led missions, there have been tangible efforts to increase the representation of women in local security forces, to conduct local engagement with women in the host communities and to diversify the targets of civil-military cooperation activities and public affairs initiatives. To some extent, it is fair to say that the WPS policies have been implemented into practice, and even institutionalised, as policy guidance/military directives, personnel and resources have been devoted to supporting these efforts. However, there are important shortcomings to note and learn from:

- The marginalisation of GENADs and focal points within and across missions, as these roles are poorly socialised within national militaries;
- The lack of responsiveness by NATO member states when it comes to increasing the representation of women in missions and operations, despite the stated policy objectives;
- The unintended consequences of engagement activities with women, which undoubtedly improved the intelligence and situational awareness for the mission, but did not necessarily improve the security conditions for women in the short or long term.

In short, the implementation of WPS in NATO and other militarised contexts has prioritised a focus on women's participation as a means of improving operational effectiveness, rather than on improving gender equality as a pathway to achieving a more just and peaceful society. For example, in the NATO directives on Women, Peace and Security, a close

link is made between gender and the use of force in that "integrating a gender perspective contributes to understanding the application of fighting power". It talks about gender as a "leverage", a "capability" and a "force multiplier".⁴ This is in misalignment with the original intent of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, which is to respond to conflict in a way that is sensitive to its differentiated impacts on subgroups and populations, while understanding that women's roles in particular have been marginalised in the design of national and international responses to conflict. Men, for their part, tend to be over-represented when we look at combat deaths. On paper, NATO's policy acknowledges this fact, as it states that there is "a strong correlation between gender equality and a country's stability."⁵ In practice, the operational effectiveness argument tends to dominate the articulation of an official policy, as well as military training and practices.

As NATO's focus has shifted away from out-of-area operations, to bolster the Eastern Flank through an enhanced Forward Presence, it is important to note the ways in which the war in Ukraine is informing the NATO discussions on WPS, to make sure that special attention is given to the differentiated impacts the war is having on the population. It is also important to point out that "Russia's male-dominated and patriarchal model causes insecurity within and beyond its borders, [and] causes disorder on a global scale. This model is profoundly ineffective across the board."⁶ In a recent piece, I noted that "President Vladimir Putin is not only attempting to redraw international boundaries by force, but is also normalising rape and other forms of conflict-related sexual violence as tools of war."⁷ Russia's blatant disregard for international rules, norms and conventions poses a challenge for NATO. As the alliance continues to support Ukraine in its efforts to defeat Russia, it also needs to figure out how to transcend its traditional focus on conventional and nuclear capabilities to a collective defence and deterrence that considers societal resilience, which relies on the full participation of women." In fact, as was discussed in the latest book by Hudson, Bowen and Nielson,⁸ gender equality is the cornerstone of lasting security, and is necessary for achieving greater stability on both regional and international scales."⁹

Recognising this experience, the eFP presents an interesting and relatively new theatre within which to assess the implementation of NATO's WPS Policy. To start, all the Baltic states have their own national action plans on Women, Peace and Security, and have adopted corresponding policy frameworks across different state institutions. For the Baltic states, all

of which host NATO battlegroups in their territory, it is interesting to see how NATO's WPS framework interacts with these national initiatives, but also how the different troop-contributing countries of the battlegroups bring their national policies, training approaches and military practices into the mix. In this sense, the Canadian-led battlegroup in Latvia might be quite different from the UK-led battlegroup in Estonia, when it comes to incorporating gender perspectives, as set out by the NATO guidelines and directives. The eFP context is very different from the mission contexts of other current and past NATO operations, in that the host countries are NATO allies, so have much in common as like-minded democracies. Indeed, they have their own WPS commitments, as previously mentioned, and have a fairly high representation of women in government and in the defence sector. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has precipitated renewed questions and much public debate on increasing the defence capacity, including military personnel, and even exploring the conscription of women into the armed forces. Some of these debates occurred years earlier in the Nordic countries, with Norway and Sweden opening the door to women being drafted, which improved the representation of women in the armed forces, changed the military personnel policies to be more inclusive, and introduced day-to-day measures, such as shared barracks for men and women.

When it comes to implementing NATO's military directives as part of the eFP, what we should see are gender advisors and gender focal points advising military commanders about the gendered implications of their activities, but that is not being systematically done across battlegroups. In this respect, the enhanced Forward Presence stands apart from other missions because the command structure is not NATO-led; instead, the battlegroups are led by "framework nations". Because of this, as was apparent through the comparative exchanges during the conference, there is less consistency in the implementation of WPS guidelines than there might be for traditional NATO operations. The battlegroups also clearly suffer from retaining an institutional memory from one 6-month rotation to the next, which is common across mission contexts, but this problem is exacerbated within the eFP because there is no model or common approach to running a battlegroup, under standardised NATO guidance. Much is left to the discretion of the framework nation and the contributing nations, as well as the host country. One notable exception in terms of preserving an institutional memory might be seen in Latvia, where the Canada-led battlegroup is supported by Task Force Latvia, and there is a headquarters in Riga, the capital, where longer-term planning, ena-

bled by postings for up to 3 years, can institutionalise the practices and lessons learned more readily. Through Task Force Latvia, the commander can look after the communication of NATO frameworks and expectations more intently than a battlegroup commander could achieve alone, supported by the expertise of a GENAD, a legal advisor (LEGAD) and a political advisor (POLAD). Interoperability was also highlighted as a common challenge and, while it is often understood to be a technological challenge, it has important cultural components as well. One of the most obvious ones is tied to language. Although the working language is English, there are different levels of proficiency in the NATO context, but the challenge is replicated in different levels of understanding – and national commitments to – WPS. While NATO provides common training on WPS to institutionalise this policy framework, it is not mandatory for the eFP, like it might be for other NATO missions; therefore, the level of awareness is low. Moreover, not every battlegroup is supported by gender advisors or focal points, although other functions, tied to public affairs and civil-military cooperation, seem to take up this role.

In the past, however, there is evidence that WPS considerations were integrated into different aspects of eFP activities by battlegroup commanders. When running military exercises, for example, a gender advisor or a focal point might advise the Commander on how to include gender perspectives as part of the training scenario. According to a former commander of the Canadian battlegroup in Latvia, one of the exercises entailed an enemy attack that resulted in internally displaced people, where a gender-aware response needed to be planned out by the soldiers.¹⁰ Here, the experiences witnessed in Ukraine are especially instructive given the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022.¹¹ This means that, in practising similar scenarios in the Baltics, one would have to account for the potential perpetration of SGBV by Russian troops. Other examples might include the civil-military cooperation activities of the battlegroup, whereby battlegroup commanders or soldiers are participating in community-based activities, which includes engagement activities specifically tailored for women. Given that the eFP is predominantly a deterrence and collective defence mission, however, it is fair to say that translating NATO or national WPS guidance into tangible implications for the battlegroups has not been easy. Another topic that came up during the conference is sexual violence, as a consideration relevant for managing day-to-day life in the battlegroup. The management of such incidents is complex, as there are multiple chains of command involved (NATO is notified, but the national chains of command of the per-

petrator and the victim would both come into play). NATO has a code of conduct and so do its member states, but NATO has also more recently (in 2019) adopted a policy on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, which also articulates a zero-tolerance policy for sexual violence perpetrated by NATO soldiers targeting local populations. Although there have been no verified accounts of such incidents, these types of scenarios have been raised in Russian disinformation, designed to undermine the credibility of NATO battlegroups in the Baltics.

WPS is also an agenda that encourages civil society engagement. On that front, a network for women in international security has emerged in the Baltics. The network includes the participation of current and former government officials, as well as representatives from different civil society organisations. This network is focusing its advocacy on government policy and engagement with international organisations, as well as education and professional education activities to advance women's leadership and participation in the security and defence realm. However, the involvement of men in discussions on WPS remains lacking, and it is here where military experience might prove instructive given the appointment of male gender advisors in several mission settings or headquarters. By normalising the idea that both men and women share responsibilities in the promotion of gender equality in society, just like in government or in the armed forces, we might see more an effective implementation of WPS norms, policies and military directives. The war in Ukraine is also instructive, as it has precipitated some important aspects of societal development, as wars often do. While it is true that the majority of refugees who have fled Ukraine are women and the majority of the combatants are male, there has been a whole-of-society mobilisation in the war effort, as well as an increased coordination between the civil and military branches of government, industry and civil society. This approach to defending the homeland has been closely observed in the Baltic states, but in many other NATO countries as well, as allies have adopted total defence force concepts.¹²

The conference was also productive in terms of sharing experiences and best practices from different national contexts. While deploying a gender advisor might be a common practice for some states, it is not necessarily the case for all NATO countries. In fact, this practice is not yet institutionalised in the armed forces across the Baltics. For example, in the German-led battlegroup in Lithuania, there is no deployed gender advisor, although there is one in Potsdam that may provide advice to the battlegroup commander. Nevertheless, the CIMIC team does

perform tasks that respond to the WPS agenda by establishing relationships with local civil society organisations, including women's groups. By participating in, or co-organising events in activities in the host country, closer ties are being developed which facilitate the longer-term acceptance of the battlegroup's presence. In these activities, even if there is no formal role for a gender advisor or a gender focal point, it is understood that the engagement activities must reach different segments of the population. Similarly, a LEGAD (military position) or a POLAD (civilian position) might take on some of the roles and responsibilities of a gender advisor when such a position is not part of the deployed force or supporting headquarters. Finally, women who are deployed might be called upon to provide "a woman's perspective" when the mostly male command team is grappling with questions in relation to employment equity. When it comes to the appropriateness and safety of military installations at the battlegroup level, for example, the battlegroup personnel will turn to women for advice, when possible. In the battlegroup, women's representation is below 5% and often hovers around 2%, so women play this informal role in bringing up problems with installations, or providing advice on how to better adapt bathrooms, equipment and sleeping quarters to the presence of women.

To conclude, an important takeaway from the conference is to keep the dialogue going across battlegroups when it comes to WPS practices, with a number of objectives in mind:

- This ongoing dialogue should be focused on how to integrate gender-based analyses as part of the battlegroup activities;
- Baltic states and contributing eFP countries should set realistic and transparent goals about women's representation and participation within the multinational battlegroups;
- Concerted strategies should be developed to improve community-based engagement and key leader engagement, which involves eFP commanders, GENADs and key partners from the host eFP country.

These three recommendations would go a long way in harmonizing eFP battlegroup practices when it comes to implementing the WPS agenda. While NATO has adopted policies and military directives on WPS, the battlegroup template is based on the framework nations concept, which has led to different practices of the NATO WPS guidelines. A more fulsome assessment is therefore needed, as the battlegroups scale up to brigades. In both civilian and military spheres, discussions about diversity, inclusion, as well as gender-responsive analysis and programming are an integral part of NATO's contribution to international peace and security.

Endnotes

1. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm
2. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_91091.htm
3. Stéfanie von Hlatky, *Deploying Feminism: The Role of Gender in NATO Military Operations* (Oxford University Press, 2022).
4. NATO Bi-Strategic Command Directive 040-001, *Integrating Gender Perspective into the NATO Command Structure*. https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Bi-SCD_040-001.pdf
5. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_09/20180920_180920-WPS-Action-Plan-2018.pdf
6. <https://ras-nsa.ca/women-peace-security-agenda-nato/>
7. <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14926.doc.htm>
8. <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-first-political-order/9780231194662#:~:text=The%20First%20Political%20Order%20is,for%20global%20security%20and%20development>
9. <https://ras-nsa.ca/women-peace-security-agenda-nato/>
10. von Hlatky, *Deploying Feminism*.
11. https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/siteassets/english/swedint/engelska/swedint/nordic-centre-for-gender-in-military-operations/thematic-analysis_ukraine_ncqm_june23.pdf
12. <https://www.mqup.ca/total-defence-forces-in-the-twenty-first-century-products-9780228019299.php>

The publication was prepared in the framework of EESC project "*From Diplomacy to War Trenches: war in Ukraine and Changing Attitudes towards the Role of Women in International Relations and Warfare*", supported by the Swedish Institute through the Embassy of Sweden in Vilnius (Grant No. 300590785).