

Lithuania to Restart Military Conscription Amid Russian Aggression Fears

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Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaitė

VILNIUS — Lithuania plans to restart military conscription, which it ended in 2008, to address growing concerns about Russian assertiveness in the Baltic region, President Dalia Grybauskaitė has said.

"Today's geopolitical environment requires us to strengthen the army, and do it as fast as possible," Grybauskaitė said after a meeting of the country's defense council.

The Baltic states are concerned that Russian annexation of Crimea and support for rebels in east Ukraine may be a foretaste of it reasserting itself in other former Soviet territories.

Latvia's defense minister has suggested increasing army numbers by 2,000 to 7,000 men, but there are no plans to introduce the draft. Estonia has maintained conscription.

Lithuania's new conscription would apply to men between the ages of 19 and 26 with exemptions for certain categories, such as university students and single fathers and would

recruit about 3,500 men per year. It would be up for renewal after a 5-year period.

Lithuania's parliament still needs to approve the plan.

The Baltic states spent much of the last century incorporated into the Soviet Union, and upon independence in 1991 quickly sought to join NATO and the European Union.

Lithuania borders the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad where Moscow carried out a military drill in December with 9,000 soldiers and more than 55 naval vessels.

NATO has increased the number of fighter planes patrolling the Baltic skies, intensified military drills and agreed to set up command centers there to protect the region in the event of any threat from Russia.

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