



# Bucharest Nine: Looking for Cooperation on NATO's Eastern Flank?

**SERGIY GERASYMCHUK**

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- The common feature of the B9 countries is their location at the eastern flank of NATO but also the unifying aspect of these countries is their common understanding of threats, orientation towards the US, readiness to invest more in defense and to substitute outdated Soviet weapons with weapons and equipment produced by the US.
- Some of the B9 countries strive to increase their military budget to the level that will extend 2,5% of GDP. For another part even the benchmark of 2% of GDP is unreachable in a short-time perspective.
- Cooperation with the like-minded B9 countries extends Ukraine's cooperation with NATO and provides Kyiv with the additional leverages of influence on Brussels and Washington.
- Poland and Romania make the attempts to demonstrate their leadership in CEE and the Black sea region. Cooperation with Ukraine can strengthen their leadership potential.



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## Introduction

Russian aggression and the annexation of Crimea have shaken Central and Eastern Europe. Those states in the region which were once occupied by the USSR or experienced Soviet influence in the so-called Eastern Bloc were concerned about the revanchist steps taken by Russia. Although most post-Soviet states are now members of the European Union and NATO, Moscow's brutal behaviour and neglect of the basic principles of international law forced the states in the region to come up with additional – supporting – formats of unification and interaction. The goal of this unification is to draw attention to the region and strengthen positions in negotiations with their partners in the EU and NATO as Brussels and Washington take notice of the positions of groups of states rather than individual countries. What is more, potential regional cooperation among states with shared views on risks and threats in the region can create regional security mechanisms which will be tasked with deterring further Russian aggression.

The Bucharest Nine is one of such regional initiatives. It was launched by Poland and Romania, the states which, first, claim the status of regional leaders in Central and Eastern Europe as well

as in the Black Sea region, and, second, directly face the threats originating from Russia (for Poland, above all, these are the risks associated with neighbouring Kaliningrad Region, while Romania is concerned about Ukraine's Crimean peninsula occupied by Russia and the militarization of the Black Sea region provoked by Russia); and, third, they seek to improve the security situation in the region both through regional cooperation and by engaging global leaders, first of all, the United States in the region's security agenda.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the conditions for the creation and development dynamics of the Bucharest Nine; analyse joint declarations made by its participants to identify the priority tasks of this group of states, the extent of their solidarity and sustainability of approaches in their assessment of Russia's behaviour in the region; predict to what extent the Bucharest Nine is prepared to support Ukraine in its confrontation with Russia; analyse the participating states' capacity to increase defence spending, cut dependence on Russia, and strengthen security cooperation with the United States.

The main objective of this study is to identify how and in what format Ukraine could develop cooperation with the Bucharest Nine.

## 1. B9: establishment and solidarity in approaches to Russia and support for Ukraine

The Bucharest Nine (B9) brings together nine NATO member states located on the eastern flank of the alliance: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. It was founded in the Romanian capital, Bucharest, in November 2015 on the initiative of Romania and Poland.

At the Bucharest summit, the aforementioned states signed a Joint Declaration which said in particular that the Bucharest Nine countries join their efforts to secure, where it is necessary, a "robust, credible and sustainable Allied military presence" in the region.

It is noteworthy that some B9 members were part of the Soviet Union in the past (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) or were under the Soviet influence (as part of the so-called Warsaw Pact – Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic).

Given the context, it is not surprising that Russia's aggressive policy and actions in the international arena – the occupation and annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in the spring of 2014 and "Russia's support for separatists" in Ukraine's Donbas – became one of the major factors behind the emergence of this initiative.

Sensing the menace emanating from the Russian Federation and having the negative historical experience of interaction with Moscow, albeit being under the NATO umbrella, the states of the Baltic-Black Sea region realised that it was necessary to form a regional alliance of like-minded countries on NATO's eastern flank and took appropriate political steps. Additionally, the countries sharing borders with Russia on land or in the sea (the Baltic countries, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria) officially requested Allied military presence in their territory, while the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia set an example of political solidarity and support.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from Russia-associated risks, another factor that brings together the participants in this initiative is their willingness to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP (as recommended for all NATO member states and in compliance with the strategic target set at the Alliance's summit in Wales in 2014<sup>2</sup>).

From the time of its foundation to 2019, B9 held seven meetings: three of them at the highest level (heads of state and government), two at the level of the foreign ministries and two at the level of the B9 defence chiefs.

In November 2016, for the first time since the emergence of the initiative, the founding states held a meeting at the level of foreign ministers with the participation of NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller. The Joint Declaration on the outcome of the meeting said, in particular, that Russia's actions undermine the European security architecture. The ministers said that Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine and its violation of international law, including the annexation of Crimea, were unacceptable. The diplomats expressed support for Ukraine's sovereignty and its undeniable right to decide on its own future and implement its foreign policy without external interference.<sup>3</sup>

As soon as in 2017, the foreign ministers of the Bucharest Nine issued a Joint Declaration in which they confirmed support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders, as well as the non-recognition of Crimea's annexation, and called on all signatories to the Minsk agreements to fully comply with the commitments they signed up to. In their joint statement, the B9 foreign ministers urged Russia to stop its aggressive actions and withdraw its troops from Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

At the June 2018 meeting in Warsaw, the heads of state and government of the B9 member states

1. [https://crimeahrg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/bss\\_2\\_6.pdf](https://crimeahrg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/bss_2_6.pdf)

2. <https://www.lrp.lt/data/public/uploads/2015/11/joint-declaration.pdf>

3. <https://www.mae.ro/en/node/39161>

4. <https://www.facebook.com/AmbasadaUkrainywPolsce/posts/1494661040654917>

issued a Joint Declaration in which they displayed their consistently unchanged views, saying that the Bucharest Nine remains resolved to continue the policy of deterrence and defence against Russia, combined with openness to dialogue, and emphasised their unchanged support for Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations (as well as support for the territorial integrity of Georgia and Moldova). It separately deplored the fact that progress towards resolving the conflict caused by the illegal annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of eastern Ukraine remains stalled.<sup>5</sup>

Another declaration was adopted at the B9 summit of heads of state and government in the Slovak city of Kosice in November 2019. It talked about the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and growing tensions in the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea stemming from the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, its use of military and non-military actions, such as the construction of the Kerch Strait bridge, only to advance its revanchist geopolitical goals. Once again, the B9 leaders expressed their firm support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of our state within its internationally recognised borders.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. B9 defence spending: dynamics and prospects

Obviously, declarations about the need to increase defence spending alone are not enough. NATO countries must have already demonstrated positive dynamics in this regard and, given the context, B9 is generally moving in the right direction.

According to SIPRI, the level of defence spending in the region as a whole and B9 states in particular has been increasing dynamically. For example, Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia and Lithuania increased their defence expenditures by 18% in 2018, compared with a year before, up to 24%, which is on

par with the defence spending of warring Ukraine, which has also increased by 21% over the same period.<sup>7</sup>

At least four out of nine B9 member states – Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – have been paying attention to ensure that their procurement programmes diversify military supplies and lower dependence on Russia.<sup>8</sup>

A more detailed analysis will give us the following picture:

According to NATO's annual assessment, Bulgaria's defence spending was 1.43% of GDP in 2019.<sup>9</sup> However, in 2017, Bulgaria committed to bring defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2024. The Bulgarian Council of Ministers approved the National Plan to this effect.<sup>10</sup> Among other things, it says that the National Plan corresponds to the 2020 Programme and the Bulgarian Armed Forces' Development Plan by 2020. However, the fact that Bulgaria remains relatively heavily dependent on military and technical supplies from Russia still poses a problem. As of 2018, Bulgaria's Air Force had mostly been equipped with Soviet-made Su-25 and MiG-29. Besides, NATO requires its members to have at least one combat-ready squadron of 12 aircraft. In 2018, only seven out of 16 existing aircraft in Bulgaria were combat-ready. Moreover, any aircraft engine replacement is subject to certification by the Russian Aircraft Corporation MiG.<sup>11</sup> It was not until 2019 that the Bulgarian National Assembly (parliament) took a decision to buy eight US F-16 jets to replace the Soviet aircraft, which was later approved by the US State Department.<sup>12</sup>

5. <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-preses/joint-declaration-of-the-heads-of-state-bucharest-9-meeting>

6. <https://www.presidency.ro/en/media/press-releases/declaration-of-the-heads-of-state-bucharest-9-meeting-kosice-28th-of-february-2019>

7. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2019/world-military-expenditure-grows-18-trillion-2018>

8. [https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/pma\\_report.pdf](https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/pma_report.pdf)

9. <https://www.novinite.com/articles/195835/Bulgaria+is+Spending+1.43+of+GDP+on+Defense>

10. [https://www.mod.bg/en/doc/cooperation/20181009\\_National\\_Plan\\_EN.pdf](https://www.mod.bg/en/doc/cooperation/20181009_National_Plan_EN.pdf)

11. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/bulgarias-soviet-jets-trojan-horses-in-a-nato-air-force/>

12. <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/06/04/bulgaria-f-16-fighter-sale-approved-1-7-billion/>

Taking into account the positive economic indicators, Estonia has decided that its defence spending in 2019 will amount to more than 2.1% of GDP.<sup>13</sup> This increase in its defence budget is in line with Estonia's fiscal strategy for 2019-2022.<sup>14</sup> In theory, provided its defence expenditures grow to 2.5% of GDP, by 2026 Estonia will be able to put in place the minimum required air defence system (medium range) and quality tanks in line with the country's defence needs.<sup>15</sup> At the moment, Tallinn is more reliant on Allied support. Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid said that even 2.5% of GDP spent on defence would not ensure the adequate defence potential of the state without the support of NATO and EU allies.<sup>16</sup>

The Latvian budget for 2019 allocates 2% of GDP to defence spending.<sup>17</sup> However, a year earlier, in 2018, Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said that Latvia's strategic goal was to achieve the target of 2.5% of GDP on defence expenditures.

Lithuania reached the level of 2% of GDP on defence spending in 2018. It sees its strategic task in bringing this figure up to 2.5% of GDP by 2030. According to Defence Minister Raimundas Karoblis, reaching this threshold would allow Lithuania to develop capabilities to deter potential enemies.<sup>18</sup> Among other things, the money will mostly be used to build short-range and medium-range air defence. Lithuania's President-elect Gitanas Nausėda described this as a priority.<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that from 2009 to 2018 Lithuania demonstrated the highest increase in defence budget, which amounted to 156%.<sup>20</sup>

13. <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/estonia-government-boosts-defense-spending-in-2019-budget-bill/>

14. <https://www.valitsus.ee/et/uudised/government-approved-state-budget-strategy-2019-2022>

15. <https://news.err.ee/848196/paper-estonia-no-longer-nato-darling-for-defence-spending>

16. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-security-estonia/estonia-calls-for-eu-to-spend-more-for-defense-in-border-states-idUSKCN1G2005>

17. <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/news/pabriks-spending-2-gdp-defence-we-are-significantly-strengthening-combat-capabilities-latvian>

18. <https://www.reuters.com/article/lithuania-defence/lithuania-commits-to-spending-25-pct-of-gdp-on-defence-by-2030-idUSL5N1VW1G2>

19. [https://www.baltictimes.com/lithuania\\_needs\\_more\\_air\\_defense\\_capabilities\\_\\_president-elect\\_nauseda\\_told\\_nato\\_chief/](https://www.baltictimes.com/lithuania_needs_more_air_defense_capabilities__president-elect_nauseda_told_nato_chief/)

20. <https://emerging-europe.com/news/emerging-europe-sees-big-increase-in-military-spending/>

As of 2019, Romania's defence spending has reached 1.92% of GDP and there are reasons to expect it to increase to 2% of GDP shortly. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that there were plans to hit this target as soon as this year.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Romania's defence expenditures are expected to increase by 2.2% annually in 2019-2023. Romania is also expected to buy 36 US F-16 fighter jets to replace the outdated MiG-21. Bucharest may have an ambitious goal to transform the Bacau-based Aerostar company into a maintenance hub for F-16s (including for other states in the region and B9).<sup>22</sup> The purchase of the US missile system Patriot is also on the agenda. However, Romania's ambitions are undermined by poor planning and delays in the implementation of modernization and military procurement programmes.<sup>23</sup>

In 2018, Slovakia decided to replace the Soviet MiG-29 with 14 US F-16s. In addition, in 2019, the Slovak government decided to bring defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2022, two years ahead of the previous plan. It is noteworthy that shortly after the head of the Slovak government, Peter Pellegrini, made a respective statement, he was invited to meet US President Donald Trump<sup>24</sup>. At the meeting, the sides confirmed the high level of allied bilateral relations. NATO also welcomed Slovakia's decision to increase defence spending.

Hungary also set itself the goal of achieving the defence spending target of 2% of GDP by 2024. However, Budapest has been trailing behind in B9. In 2018, it managed to increase the spending from 1.1% to 1.4% of GDP only.<sup>25</sup> In the meantime, bilateral security relations between Hungary and the USA became more dynamic in 2019. In particular, in February 2019, they signed an agreement on

21. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/14/politics/nato-defense-spending-target/index.html>

22. <https://www.romania-insider.com/aerostar-bacau-maintenance-f16>

23. <https://jamestown.org/program/romania-faces-major-defense-hurdles-in-2019/>

24. <https://www.foreignbrief.com/daily-news/slovakias-prime-minister-to-visit-the-white-house-after-2-defence-spending-pledge/>

25. <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungary-to-further-increase-spending-on-defence/>

cooperation to supply Hungary with US military equipment. There are plans to buy the US missile system Patriot.<sup>26</sup>

Poland's plans probably look most ambitious. Its Technical Modernisation Plan provides for the purchase of new submarines, helicopters, missile systems (including Patriot), and 32 F-35 jets to replace MiG-29 and Su-22<sup>27</sup>. Back in 2017, the government adopted legislation to guarantee a 2.5% increase of defence budget by 2030, while defence spending in 2020-2023 is expected to reach 2.2%, with a further gradual increase later on.<sup>28</sup> Relations between Poland and the United States with regard to defence policy have been developing dynamically. In June 2019, US President Donald Trump decided to deploy an additional 1,000 American soldiers in Poland<sup>29</sup> (in addition to 4,000 who were in Poland on rotation). The cost of accommodating the soldiers is covered by Poland. However, despite Poland's economic potential and ambitions, experts doubt Warsaw's ability to carry out its plans in a timely manner. For example, there are already concerns that Poland may be late with the implementation of the Technical Modernisation Plan for 2017-2026.<sup>30</sup>

In 2019, Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis confirmed preparedness to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP.<sup>31</sup> Like other B9 member states, the Czech Republic will spend some of this money to replace Soviet military equipment. However, the Czech situation is not much better than that in Hungary and, according to alternative estimates, its defence spending will not exceed 1.7% of GDP by 2024<sup>32</sup>, whereas by 2019 it has only reached 1.17%.

26. <https://www.intellinews.com/hungary-and-the-us-sign-defence-cooperation-agreement-and-agree-on-acquisition-of-military-equipment-156255/>

27. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/eyeing-increased-us-presence-in-the-region-poland-revamps-military-spending/>

28. <https://www.defence24.com/poland-about-to-increase-its-defence-expenditure-up-to-the-level-of-25-of-gdp-a-new-bill-introduced>

29. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/13/trumps-polish-message-to-nato/>

30. [https://defence.nridigital.com/global\\_defence\\_technology\\_jun19/from\\_russia\\_to\\_nato\\_the\\_logic\\_behind\\_poland\\_s\\_military\\_modernisation](https://defence.nridigital.com/global_defence_technology_jun19/from_russia_to_nato_the_logic_behind_poland_s_military_modernisation)

31. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-czech-defence/czech-pm-says-defense-spending-rising-to-reach-nato-target-idUSKBN1QT1B9>

32. <http://www.avascent.com/2019/05/czech-republic-beginning-the-defense-modernization-curve/>

To sum up the aforementioned, it can be said in general that the B9 states have displayed positive dynamics in terms of increasing defence spending. However, in some cases, the 2% target has not been reached and sometimes there are doubts it can be achieved by 2024. Similarly, some governments of the B9 member states openly say that even 2.5% would not be enough to deter Russia and neutralise the risks originating from it. At the same time, the B9 leaders have been taking efforts to offset the existing problems by means of close cooperation with the United States as well as in regional formats involving all or some member states of B9.

### 3. Prospects for cooperation with B9 states in regional formats and in NATO framework

Having directly faced Russia's open military aggression, Ukraine launched large-scale military cooperation with its western neighbours, primarily with B9 member states. As a result, in spring 2014 Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland signed an agreement to create the joint Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade headquartered in Lublin, Poland. The formation of the Brigade was completed in spring 2015.

The goal of this military unit is long-term military cooperation among the three countries. It is worth noting that two of the founding states – Lithuania and Poland – are NATO members participating in the B9 initiative (with Poland being the co-author of the concept). It would be fair to recall that the creation of the Brigade was a result of the earlier cooperation between Ukraine and Poland (UkrPolBat) and between Lithuania and Poland (LitPolBat)<sup>33</sup>. There is a practice when servicemen from certain Ukrainian battalions undergo training at LitPolUkrBrig. During such training officers of the armed forces of Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland share battlefield leadership experience at the level of battalions.<sup>34</sup>

33. <https://litpolukrbrig.wp.mil.pl/en/91.html>

34. <http://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2019/06/06/litpolukrbrig-oficzeri-litvi-polshhi-ta-ukraini-provodyat-spilni-navchannya/>



Ukrainian military units' foreign interaction was not limited to the mentioned two countries. Since the onset of the armed aggression against our state, multinational exercises with the participation of other states have been given a boost. The regular Sea Breeze exercise is held in the Black Sea. Ukraine has hosted the exercises in this format since 1997. The Sea Shield exercise is also a regular one.

In 2002, Ukraine, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary formed a joint engineer battalion, Tisa, and initiated exercises for the unit under the name Light Avalanche (the latter three countries are members of the B9 initiative now). The unit is intended to prevent and quickly respond to flooding, provide professional help during natural disasters in the Carpathian region.

Together with Romania, Ukraine launched the Riverian joint exercises. First held in 2018, these were the first joint exercises for marines and coast guards of the two states<sup>35</sup>.

One of the largest military exercises is Rapid Trident. Training in this format has been held annually in Ukraine since 2006. Because of Russia's armed aggression, the scale of the exercise has only been growing.

Manoeuvres and joint exercises, including with NATO member states, are held not only in the sea or on land but also in the air. A bright example of such exercises is Clear Sky. There are plans to make it annual since practice facilitates interoperability between the air forces of all participating states. Nine countries took part in the first exercise. These were Ukraine, Belgium, Great Britain, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and the USA.<sup>36</sup>

As we can see, even before B9 was formed, Ukraine developed fruitful cooperation with some of its participants. In recent years, the re-

gional component of cooperation with NATO has been maintained, while the global one has been strengthened, which, along with Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO enshrined in the Constitution and given the shared perception of Russian threat, creates conditions for deeper cooperation with B9.

It also makes sense to recall that like its neighbours from B9, Ukraine is looking towards increasing defence spending. In 2019, it reached the record amount of 212 billion hryvnyas. Ukraine's defence expenditures are regulated by the National Security Strategy and the Concept of the Development of Ukraine's Security and Defence and must amount to at least 5% of GDP, which is twice as much as in the bold plans of many B9 members.

Cooperation with the United States is also a point of contact creating conditions for Ukraine's closer cooperation with B9.

Also, we should not forget that the emergence of B9 was the response of Central and Eastern European states present in the EU and NATO to the Russian aggression against Ukraine (the occupation and annexation of Crimea, the occupation of certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions). B9 members are aware that Russian revanchism is gaining momentum, Moscow may not limit its appetites to Ukraine and will continue to try and destabilise the situation in the Central and Eastern European region as a whole.

B9 is also conscious of the fact that the key conditions for ensuring security in the region include strengthening transatlantic solidarity, cooperating with the United States, increasing one's own defence spending and supporting Ukraine. All B9 member states share a joint view on these matters regardless of the fact that the dynamics of bilateral relations between Ukraine and some member states of B9 is unsatisfactory, which opens a window of opportunities for Ukraine to cooperate with both individual member states and the Bucharest Nine as a whole.

35. <https://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/news/Na-Dunai-proyshli-pershii-spilni-ukrainsko-rumunski-navchannya-Riverine-2018/>

36. <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/ua/news/bagatonacionalni-navchannychiste-nebo-2018-zaversheno>

Ukraine's cooperation with B9 in the area of regional security and defence policy is to some extent a response to the non-NATO status of Ukraine, with the country's political-and-legal status being that of a partner only, not a member state. Based on the current military-and-political positioning of B9 member states, Ukraine could initiate negotiations on the preparation and sign-

ing of a framework agreement on mutual assistance in countering Russian military expansion. Thus, B9 would become B9+1 or B10. The formation of B10 would, in some way, ease political tension within NATO in terms of its policy of containing Russia and, at the same time, would strengthen the security and defence positions of NATO states' eastern flank.



### About the author

**Sergiy Gerasymchuk**, Deputy Chairman of the Foreign Policy Council Ukrainian Prism

### Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Kyiv Office  
01004 Ukraine, Kyiv, Pushkinska 34

Responsible:

Marcel Röthig | Director, FES Kyiv

Tel.: +38 (044) 234 0038 | Fax: +38 (044) 451 4031

<http://fes.kiev.ua>

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