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## Participation of the Polish Army in Combating Threats Related to the Pandemic SARS-CoV-2

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** Based on the involvement, which is increasing every week because of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the Polish Army is carrying out a wide range of tasks related to the protection of civilians (including technical solutions originally envisaged only for military purposes). This study attempted to assess the causes and purpose of these activities, identify possible deficiencies, and the potential impact on national security in the future.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The research was carried out based on a detailed analysis of press materials and current monitoring of the announcements prepared by spokespersons of military units and institutions, as well as announcements of the Polish Press Agency. Their verification and formulation of specific conclusions was possible with the use of the answers given to the authors' inquiries and interviews with MUT officers and cadets, who participated in the implementation of tasks related to combating SARS-CoV-2.

**Findings:** The events of the last months in Poland have clearly shown the problem that has been repeatedly raised by persons dealing with national safety and security engaged in the protection of the population. The problem is that such persons are underfunded and are not prepared to carry out the tasks imposed on them to a sufficient extent in a situation of threat to the health and life of citizens. Therefore, in the situation of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in Poland, it was necessary to involve the Polish Army, which, successfully fills the existing gap in the Polish civil protection system.

**Practical Implications:** The authors, by pointing numerous examples, pointed out that such an efficient and comprehensive operation of the Polish Army would not have been possible without the involvement of a new type of armed force, created in 2017, namely the Territorial Defense Forces, for which the actions taken, provide an excellent opportunity to test in crisis conditions the effectiveness of the adopted solutions, as well as to redefine some of the tasks, and thus better ensure the protection of the civilian population and military security of the country in the future.

**Originality/Value:** In the case of the combating SARS-CoV-2 we find that the controversial new type of armed force in Poland – Territorial Defense Forces – should be developed and prepared to assist the civilian population in crisis situations in the future.

**Keywords:** Polish Army, Territorial Defense Forces, fighting threats, SARS-CoV-2.

**Paper type:** Research in Security Studies.

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## **1. Introduction**

The rapid and fast development of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the spring of 2020 worldwide meant that many countries had to face a crisis occurring on a massive scale. Comparing it with other European countries, Poland has quite quickly and efficiently taken action to limit the spread of the pandemic, which allowed it to maintain the level of detected incidence at a level not exceeding 500-600 people per day in the so-called spring 2020 peak. As a result, the health service remained fully efficient and all the most severely ill were provided with specialist medical care. Nevertheless, the first weeks of counteracting the pandemic revealed many weaknesses in the civil protection system.

In Poland, the basic institutions responsible for civil protection and crisis management are government and local government administration bodies. According to Article 137 of the Act of the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 1967 on the universal duty to defend the Republic of Poland, which has been amended many times, the main tasks related to the protection of the population against the dangers arising from military action or natural disasters and overcoming their direct consequences rest with the Civil Defense Formations (Kalinowski, 2017; Kuriata, 2014).

For many years there has been a discussion in Poland about the fact that the financial outlays and existing legal regulations in the field of Civil Defense are insufficient and are limited almost exclusively to the criticized tasks including planning, organization, training and dissemination of knowledge about security. In 2019. The Supreme Chamber of Control (hereinafter: SCC, Pol. NIK) published a report on Population Protection in Crisis Management and Civil Defense in 2015-2018. In conclusion, it was stated unequivocally that there is no effective system of population protection in Poland, both in case of an armed conflict and in a situation of threat in peacetime. It was pointed out that the existing legal dualism consisting in the functioning of structures within the framework of crisis management and, regardless of this, maintaining the Civil Defense formations causes competence chaos.

Moreover, the bodies responsible for the implementation of tasks in the field of crisis management and Civil Defense do not have structures adequate to the existing threats, the procedures developed are flawed, and most importantly, the Civil Defense does not have the appropriate forces (in addition, they are less numerous every year) and resources. As a representative example illustrating this catastrophic state of material reserves, especially in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the content of the Civil Defense storeroom of the municipality of Trzebinia was quoted. These included among others:

- gas masks with filter (290 pieces from 1966 and 1973),
- a chemical agents identification device (17 pieces from 1971, 1973 and 1989),
- a baby protection container (from 1989),

- a Tretiakow meteorological set (4 pieces from 1963),
  - a radiation alarm device (21 pieces from 1971 and 1981),
  - an absorber (200 pieces from 1976-1992),
  - protective gloves (75 pieces from 1957),
  - a PSTN telephone (10 pieces from 1952).
- (Information on the results of the audit, 2018).

In addition to the weaknesses identified, it is worth noting that, despite many years of legislative works, there is still a lack of a single legal act that would fully regulate the entire issue of population protection in the broadest sense of the term, and the scopes of tasks and structures are scattered in various legal acts. The Civil Defense Plan in force in Poland was developed in 1995 and is completely inadequate to the current situation and needs (Stochaj, 2020; Krynojewski, 2012).

The publication of the NIK report has undoubtedly become a catalyst in ensuring the population security. Based on media reports, it seems that works on the bill on population protection and Civil Defense has been accelerated. Such a legal act would organize the scope of functioning of public administration bodies, public institutions, social organizations, and other entities obliged to perform population protection tasks (Stochaj, 2020).

In turn, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 2020 the President of the Republic of Poland, at the request by the Prime Minister, approved the new National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland. One of the main goals expressed in this most important document from the point of view of national security is to increase the resistance of the Polish State to threats. This is to be done, among other things, by popularizing Civil Defense, by increasing the possibilities of population protection and gathering and maintaining the ability to recover the necessary resources. This entry reproduced as it were from previous documents but published at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic spreading around the world and in Poland, took on a completely new meaning (Strategy, 2020).

Nevertheless, when the pandemic occurred for the above-mentioned reasons, Poland faced a very difficult situation and its control would not have been possible without the significant involvement of the Polish Army, especially its new type – the Territorial Defense Forces.

## **2. The Polish Army vs Covid**

With the spread of SARS-CoV-2 around the world, the military was heavily involved in the fight against the pandemic due to its structures and forces and resources, including the military medical service. Also, in Poland, before the first case of the disease was diagnosed on March 4, 2020, the army was sent to help the population.

The Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland (hereinafter: AF of RP, Pol. SZ RP) consists of the Land Forces, Air Forces, Navy, Special Forces and Territorial Defense Forces (hereinafter: TDF, Pol. WOT). In total, their number is 108 thousand professional soldiers and over 21 thousand TDF soldiers. At the beginning of June, the Minister of National Defense, summing up the army's activities, stated that at the peak of his involvement in civil protection activities amounted to about 9 thousand soldiers and several thousand units of equipment every day.

At the beginning, the involvement of the army was not great and was due to short-term transportation and health care needs. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2020 30 Poles on board a plane chartered by the French authorities had been evacuated to Paris and from there by military air transport to Wrocław, where they were then placed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Military Clinical Hospital. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of February, the same way as before, two more people were evacuated and placed in a hospital for infectious diseases in Warsaw. Moreover, Polish citizens were evacuated from Great Britain, Lebanon, and Kuwait by military planes. Since then, the engagement of SZ RP has been growing every day and had a multidimensional character. The activities were divided into two operations: The "Shield" operation - concerned the protection of borders and support for the Border Guard and the Police, it was headed by the Operational Command of the Types of Armed Forces and the "Immune Spring" operation - the support for public administration executed primarily by the Territorial Defense Forces (Operational Center of the Minister of National Defense, 2020).

As already indicated, the military health service was among the first to fight the coronavirus, providing places in specialized hospitals as well as quarantine facilities and sanitary transport. The help was provided by 2500 military doctors, nurses, medical rescuers, and psychologists. In addition, 14 military hospitals, 5 centers of preventive medicine and the Military Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology were on standby.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, preventing the spread of the virus, the Polish government closed the borders to foreigners, which in turn made it necessary to increase the control, and the Minister of National Defense, by Decision No. 39/MON, directed the military units and sub-units to execute these tasks. Soldiers of the operational forces together with border guards have since then conducted about 150–170 border patrols per day and supported traffic control at border crossings (Decision No. 39/MON, 2020). These activities were conducted until the 13<sup>th</sup> of June when the land borders with the European Union were opened (Decision No 79/MON, 2020). On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, international flights were resumed.

In addition to border controls, by Decision No. 41/MON from the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, the army was directed to help the police to ensure public safety, security, and public ordinance (Decision No. 41/MON, 2020). This task was delegated to the

Military Gendarmerie and TDF soldiers, who carried out over 600 patrols every day throughout the country, including controlling the quarantine.

The army, especially the logistic services, took part in providing supplies of personal protection equipment to hospitals, medical institutions, kindergartens, but also to Social Welfare Homes and local government units. As the Polish Minister of National Defense said in his speech of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June: We organized almost 800 transports with protective suits, masks, visors, gloves, disinfectants, and medical materials to about 2 thousand such facilities. [...] During only one night, from the 31<sup>st</sup> of March to the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, soldiers from the logistics brigades organized the transportation of 3 million pairs of protective gloves and other personal protective materials to 16 provinces. Transports of protective equipment were delivered to Poland under NATO's SALIS program, as well as by CASA and Hercules pilots of the Polish Air Force (Błaszczak, 2020).

An important aspect of the activities of the Polish Army was also the disinfection of hospitals, Old People Shelters and streets and bus stops. By June 2020, the army had disinfected more than 423,000 square meters of surface area, 1,600 people and 2,000 vehicles, including transport aircraft with personal protective equipment (COMON). It should be noted, however, that comparing it with the activities of e.g. Spanish troops, where as much as 55% of the activities were targeted at disinfection, the scale of these activities was not great, but as shown by the development of the so-called first wave of the pandemic in Poland, sufficient to reduce the threats (Operación 'Balmis', 2020).

The support of the Polish Army was also provided by residents and employees of Social Welfare Homes (SWHs, Pol. DPS) and people from the so-called group of the most needy, who, as in the whole of Europe, have been one of the biggest sources of disease and spread of the virus. The military forces helped to organize both evacuation and recovery of the SACs, as well as were providing packages of food and necessities. By June 2020, soldiers helped in 536 Social Assistance Centers out of 824 functioning in Poland, including 28,000 smear coronavirus tests (Operations Center of the Minister of National Defense, 2020). Soldiers and military medical students collected biological material for testing also in the homes of quarantined persons, from employees of kindergartens and nurseries, and in the situation of a sudden increase in the number of miners' illnesses, 21 mobile sampling stations Test&Go were launched. According to official data, by June military laboratories had performed over 33 thousand tests for SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus

Due to the numerous involvements in the struggle against the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the recommendations of the Chief Sanitary Inspector of the Polish Army were implemented in the army. Soldiers and civilian employees of the army were obliged to observe strict rules of hygiene, and participation in training courses and mass events was limited or suspended. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the

epidemic state in Poland until the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, 181 soldiers and 66 employees of the Ministry of National Defense were identified as infected with the virus. One of the first infected was General Jarosław Mika, General Commander of the Armed Forces. According to the Ministry of National Defense, one soldier died, who had also been curing for a long time for cancer. It is not known exactly how many soldiers were sent to quarantine. All we know is that in March it was over 900 soldiers, including 357 cadets of the Military University of Technology, who were isolated after being diagnosed with the disease in one of the female cadets (Kozubal, 2020).

The armies are involved in the fight against the spread and effects of Covid around the world. The lack of detailed data currently makes it impossible to make a reliable analysis of the degree of involvement and effectiveness of such actions, as well as to compare the actions taken in individual countries. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn in the context of Polish Army involvement. As of the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 2020, Spain has been facing the biggest wave of the diseases in Europe. There were 311,916 cases of the disease, of which 28,422 people died. According to the data as of the 21<sup>st</sup> of June, 188,713 military men were involved in actions against the pandemic - Operation "Balmis", including the Guardia Civil soldiers (a military formation of a police nature). In the United Kingdom, 295,372 cases were reported at the same time, of which 45,312 people died. The British Ministry of National Defense (MOD) reported that in May nearly 7,000 soldiers were sent to fight the COVID pandemic and 20,000 were on constant alert. In Poland at a comparable time it was 40,782 cases and 1636 deaths. The army's involvement gradually increased to reach more than 9,000 soldiers, who were directed to fight against the spread of the pandemic and its consequences at its peak. Currently (summer 2020) it is about 3 thousand soldiers and over a thousand units of equipment.

**Table 1:** Forces and resources of the Polish Army to counteract the effects of SARS-CoV-2

Date:	Soldiers and military personnel	Equipment units
03/17	2 391	490
03/21	3 379	545
03/25	5 235	836
04/01	6 350	834
04/03	8 580	1 071
04/07	8 780	1 248
04/09	9 224	1 288
04/16	9 492	1 412
05/07	9 784	1 765
05/11	8 721	1 779
05/18	8 083	1 640
05/27	7 811	1 708

**Source:** Author's own elaboration based on data by Ministry of National Defense.

### **3. Territorial Defense Forces**

In 2017 there was initiated the formation of the Territorial Defense Forces which were utilizing the potential of local communities in various regions of Poland, especially in the east part of the country. To enter the service, it is required to be of legal age, Polish citizenship and very good reputation. After passing the medical commission and preliminary tests, the candidate is directed to the military training ground. There, within sixteen days, he/she undergoes a general military training, culminating in his/her military oath. Then each TDF soldier begins a three-year training cycle. Visiting is required at least once a month, during one weekend.

After each year of training, a training camp takes place, which is intended to match the soldiers and test their skills. The service lasts six years and can be extended. After completing training and courses, soldiers can apply for a change of form of service, from territorial to professional. Currently there are 15 TDF brigades and two training centers in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland. In total, over 21 thousand soldiers serve in this type of troops. Ultimately, 53 thousand soldiers will serve in its structures, including 5 thousand professional soldiers.

The Territorial Defense Forces started to counteract the effects of the epidemic on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March, two days after the first case of coronavirus infection was detected in Poland. Six days later, the formation changed its functioning model from training model to anti-crisis model, and then proceeded to activities codenamed “Immune Spring”. The activities of the TDF, supported by cadet military academies, including the Military University of Technology, focused primarily on supporting voivodes, local governments, and direct assistance to those in need. During the four months of the operation, 16.5 thousand TDF soldiers took part in it, which at this stage of formation constitutes about 70% of all such Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland. 80% of them were voluntary soldiers.

One of the main areas of TDF involvement was support for medical facilities. According to the TDF command, 361 hospitals and 79 medical facilities were supported during the operation. Soldiers were primarily conducting a triage, measuring the temperature of patients and staff, setting up tents and containers used as field rooms, delivering meals, providing transport, helping to change the character of the facilities to the so-called “one name facilities”, or people with the necessary qualifications provided direct assistance. TDF organized also smear collection teams at SACs and the “test&Go” stations. In total, soldiers collected 69 198 smears. It is worth mentioning that by the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June the TDF soldiers and cadets had donated 5,531 blood doses, which makes 2,486.9 liters of blood (Operation Summary, 2020).

TDFs were highly active with direct support of veterans and elderly people. Various forms of assistance, from food deliveries to transport for specialized research, were provided in nearly 10 thousand cases. TDF, which has already been

mentioned, also took care of 436 SAC facilities (over 50% of the existing ones in Poland). As part of these activities: smears were taken from residents and staff; a triage was carried out; residents were evacuated to designated medical facilities (six facilities were completely evacuated); decontamination of rooms, equipment and vehicles used for evacuation was performed; various types of training were conducted and the ability of evacuated Social Assistance Centers to operate was restored (TDF Support, 2020). Colonel Rafał Miernik, commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> Wielkopolska Territorial Defense Brigade, during a press conference organized in the second half of May, summarizing the activities in the Wielkopolskie Voivodeship, emphasized that his subordinates helped in conducting research and supporting all social care facilities, additionally he highly rated the level of cooperation with local government units (Matyszczak, 2020).

During the peak period of the disease in Poland, April-May, apart from supporting medical facilities, TDF activities focused on supporting the police, which absorbed about 30% of TDF personnel directed to their activities. From March 6 to June 22, soldiers took part in 70,623 joint patrols with police officers to monitor the quarantine and in 25,317 preventive patrols (Summary of joint actions, 2020).

TDF also supported the assistance activities of the operational forces by providing assistance at border crossings. The activities were attended by 1,365 TDF soldiers deployed at 129 check points. TDF soldiers were also sent to 14 airports. Their activities consisted in measuring passengers' temperatures and collecting passengers' location cards. In total, TDF soldiers checked 113,879 passengers in 1,294 planes (Operation Summary, 2020).

An important area of activity was also direct support for local governments. The TDF soldiers were directed to help in the Sanitary Government Agency, to distribute protective masks for the inhabitants, and to support municipal offices.

During the activities, 42 tons of food was transported to Social Welfare Centers and non-profit organizations. More than 250 thousand packages with food, hygienic and disinfecting agents were delivered directly to those in need. The support was provided to 173 non-governmental organizations, including one of the largest aid organizations in Poland - Caritas. Educational institutions were also helped. Above all, they were prepared to work under the new sanitary regime. In addition to staff training, a disinfection system was organized, and the necessary materials were provided. Such assistance was provided to 4,362 educational institutions. Soldiers often joined local initiatives such as sewing masks or creating visors (TDF Support, 2020).

#### **4. Conclusions**

At the peak of the pandemic in spring 2020 in Poland, the involvement of the Polish Territorial Defense Forces was as high as 5.5 thousand soldiers per day,



which constituted 50-60% of the involvement of the entire Polish Armed Forces in activities related to counteracting the effects and spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. During the Operation “Immune Spring” they were supported by cadets from military academies - 1,824 people, including 1,131 cadets from the Military University of Technology (All-Military Team of MUT, 2020). Based on interviews conducted with this expert group by the authors in July 2020 and on the available press materials, materials from social media and also materials produced in the TDF headquarters, it is possible to make a qualitative analysis and evaluation of actions taken by this formation.

Undoubtedly, the degree of involvement of TDF in the prevention of the pandemic was very high and generally deliberate. Since the soldiers of this formation act locally and come from local communities, they were able to establish positive relations with the population of the area with great ease, they moved better in the field and had a very good understanding of local conditions of various types. Nevertheless, despite the great commitment of TDF forces and resources, they often turned out to be too small and even the allocation of cadet support was not always sufficient: The disproportion of tasks to forces and resources was very high.

Many times, there was a shortage of people and it was necessary to make phone calls around people and ask if they would be present at a given day and hour to execute specific tasks. There were a lot of tasks, which involved long hours of work, sometimes 10–12 hours, and sometimes more. You worked 7 days a week every day, literally no time to rest. The forces were also not always properly available, which, however, was rather incidental or resulted from an incorrect information flow.

When analyzing the map of TDF activities and the voices of MUT cadets, it is also worth noting that there has been too little military presence in the smallest and difficult to reach due to the location and available infrastructure of the towns. Nevertheless, if the same kind of support were to be provided by the operational troops, the whole operation would probably have gone much slower and would not have covered such a vast area.

An important issue influencing morale and engagement was also the food provisioning and accommodation. While the former generally did not raise any major controversy, the latter was often raised. The main points were pointed out to poor housing conditions, sometimes lack of necessities of everyday use, and even total lack of interest on the part of superiors.

The cooperation between TDF and the public was good, especially in larger towns. Where the population was smaller, the local population was more often mistrustful and incomprehensible of the army’s actions, although there were no major incidents because of it. The cooperation with other services (here an article about the police) and cadets from military universities also worked well: Although they

did not have to do anything with us, they organized trainings for us, they showed us weapons that we often see only in textbooks at the university.

The most controversial issue is that of assessing the professionalism of the staff of this new type of armed forces. One can find in press releases and social media very negative opinions, many of which are politically inspired. Nevertheless, the opinions of the TDF cadets cooperating for many weeks with the soldiers of this formation are also diversified. Undoubtedly, professional TDF officers are clearly positively assessed: as a rule, they presented a high level of professionalism and a friendly attitude. Most of them served in the past in the operational troops, except for junior officers.

However, the junior officers could also count on positive ratings. The TDF staff made a very positive impression on me - they were young people, full of enthusiasm, who show that they want to create a new army. The cadets also generally evaluated the entire formation as positive from the perspective of counteracting the pandemic: Despite all the “hate speech” you can meet on the Internet about TDF soldiers, when you sit with them, talk to them, see how they work, you can really change your mind about them. A very large part of them are really good people and not “Sunday soldiers”, who are there only for money. Of course, there were also some not very good soldiers, but there were more of those fine soldiers who really brought something to the army and help civilians. It should be noted that the voices were also not fully critical: The TDF soldiers did not make a good impression on me, [...] the lack of any subordination to a higher rank soldier. Each order had to be explained to them several times, because they simply did not understand. For them, wearing a uniform is a fun and at the same time a way for these young guys (they were 19 years old and over) to earn money (daily rate 186 PLN). Anyway, they were only happy with how much money they were taking away. This was apparently their key goal - to earn money.

Taking into account many years of neglect in the field of functioning of Civil Defense in Poland and the specificity and use of the Territorial Defense Forces during the ongoing pandemic, the Forces created, which should be emphasized, only from 2017, it should be stated that further development of this formation is the optimal solution for population protection in crisis situations. It is to be hoped that the experience gathered will help to reduce the existing imperfections and make better use of this formation in subsequent crisis situations.

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