



German-built Panzerhaubitze PZH 2000 155mm self-propelled howitzers are standing loaded on railway wagons in Pabrade in Lithuania

## Resilience on rails

*Rail Baltica is set to connect the Baltic States with the rest of Europe by 2030. The high-speed rail line will link the railway networks of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with Western Europe. This has become even more important after Russia's invasion of Ukraine – both strategically and for military mobility.*

by ALEXANDER WELSCHER

**R**ail Baltica is the project of the century for the Baltic States, and not just in terms of economics. The long-planned high-speed line, which will connect Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with Poland and the rest of the European Union, has been recognised as geopolitically relevant and necessary for the

European security architecture, as was recently highlighted at a high-level event on 18 June 2025 in Berlin. Around 100 representatives from business, politics and diplomacy gathered in the German capital for the seminar “Rail Baltica – A Gateway to Europe’s Future and Resilience” to discuss the current status, strategic importance

and challenges of the trans-European infrastructure project. Organised by the Rail Baltica joint venture RB Rail and the embassies of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in Germany, the event was held in the headquarters of the German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (DIHK) with support from the German Eastern Business



The Baltic ambassadors Giedrius Puodžiūnas (Lithuania), Alda Vanaga (Latvia) and Marika Linntam (Estonia) together with RB Rail CEO Marko Kivila (2nd from right) and other managers.



Association to examine progress on the largest infrastructure project in the Baltic States – the construction of a new 870-kilometre high-speed railway line from Tallinn (Estonia) via Riga (Latvia) and Kaunas (Lithuania) to the Lithuanian-Polish border, fully electrified and built on European standard gauge.

### More than tracks and trains

In their opening speeches, the Baltic ambassadors emphasised the historical and strategic significance of the project. Estonian Ambassador Marika Linntam described Rail Baltica as a “truly European initiative” that is a “key component of the EU’s core infrastructure strategy,” while her Latvian counterpart Alda Vanaga underlined that the new rail link would restore connections between the Baltics and the rest of Europe that had been severed by the Soviet occupation. “We are not just building a railway – we are correcting history. We are eradicating yet another consequence of that past,” she told the German audience, referring to current railway lines that run in the West-to-East-direction and in the broader Russian railway gauge.

Lithuanian Ambassador Giedrius Puodžiūnas highlighted the strategic importance of Rail Baltica for defence and security in the current geopolitical climate. Committing to the timely completion of the project is a contribution to Europe’s collective security and a clear signal of strategic resilience, he said in his remarks. All three diplomats further stressed that Rail Baltica will provide a sustainable alternative for freight logistics and comfortable passenger travel between their countries, increasing overall connectivity and mobility across the region and Europe.

In expert presentations during the seminar, lead project managers from the participating countries presented the current status of the planning, contracting and construction work in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, while RB Rail CEO Marko Kivila outlined the overall progress of the north-south railway axis that has to be newly built from scratch. The subsequent panel discussion also included representatives from project partners such as Deutsche Bahn Engineering & Consulting and explored the role Rail Baltica is set to play in improving connections, reshaping infrastructure, attracting investment and driving regional development.

### More military mobility

The geopolitical reasons for the switch from the Russian broad gauge to the European standard gauge were also highlighted. Designed to serve both civilian needs and military purposes, Rail Baltica will meet the requirements to accommodate the transport of troops and heavy military equipment. The dual-use nature of the rail infrastructure and rolling stock capacity will enhance NATO allies' ability to deploy reinforcements to the Baltic region and enable quicker movement of tanks and armoured vehicles over long distances.

Currently, all incoming (military) freight destined to be transported further than Kaunas has to be reloaded onto trains compatible with the wider gauge or unloaded and shipped onward by road, both of which are time-consuming, resource-intensive and logistically challenging. Not least because the load capacity of the existing road infrastructure is often not suitable for the heavy weight and size of military assets. This is also why direct rail branches between

the Rail Baltica main line and the army bases will be installed.

"Rail Baltica delivers tangible military mobility benefits – in peace and war time," Kivila stated in his presentation, highlighting that in peacetime Rail Baltica could replace a seven kilometre-long military convoy with a single 40-wagon train and would save one day of loading and unloading time per transport from Poland. The RB Rail CEO also argued that the rail standardisation will increase the ability to respond to security threats and, in case of a military conflict, has a daily citizen emergency and freight transport capacity of up to 98,000 passengers and 55,000 tons of cargo.

Based on forecasted military movements, Rail Baltica is projected to provide capacity for both NATO allies' transports and national armed forces. This is expected to improve the economic impact of the project by an estimated €2-4 million per year and enhance the efficiency of military drills, according to estimates by RB Rail. In addition, the railway line is also set to strengthen the military-industrial ecosystem across the region, improving the efficiency of equipment production and maintenance facilities.

### Improving deterrence and defence

The potential of Rail Baltica to significantly accelerate, fortify and streamline NATO's logistic access to the Baltic States has also been highlighted in a report by the US-based Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). "If they are interoperable with Poland and Germany, railways represent the best option for transporting armoured vehicles and other heavy military equipment to the Baltics," the publication states,

referring also to the "unfavourable geographic location" of the Baltic States between mainland Russia and Belarus in the east, and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad to the west. "There is no way around it, the focus must be on improving cross-border military logistics. And that means rail."

In a survey conducted at the end of 2024 by the research agency Norstat on behalf of RB Rail, around two thirds of Baltic respondents considered Rail Baltica to be crucial for NATO operations and for enhancing military mobility and national security in the region. This sentiment is particularly pronounced in Lithuania, where Germany is spearheading the alliance deterrence endeavours by deploying a brigade of the Bundeswehr to the country.

The fact that it is now considered a key project for military mobility has also sped up the construction of Rail Baltica that was long hampered by conflicting national interests, large funding gaps and project mismanagement. Originally meant to be finished this year at an estimated cost of €5.8 billion, the tentative completion date is now 2030 with a quadrupled price tag of €24 billion – with 85 percent of the sum being funded by the EU, and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania paying the rest.

Given the importance of Rail Baltica for the Baltic States' defence, the problem-beset project has gained new momentum – with a push for rapid progress in its implementation now also coming from the highest political level. This was evident not only from the presence of the ambassadors at the seminar but also during meetings of the Baltic Prime Ministers, where Rail Baltica has regularly been at the top of the agenda in recent times.