



THE THIRD MISSION OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the concept, legal framework, and practical implementation of the Third Mission of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria — their participation in assisting the civilian population in crisis situations, disasters, and emergencies. It discusses the transformation of the Bulgarian Armed Forces after the end of the Cold War, their integration into NATO and the EU, and the role of civil-military cooperation in national and regional security. The study highlights examples of the Third Mission’s application, such as disaster relief, humanitarian aid, and pandemic response, while outlining the challenges related to resources, training, and coordination with civilian institutions.*

KEY WORDS: *Bulgarian Armed Forces, Third Mission, Civil-military cooperation, Disaster response, National security, Humanitarian assistance.*

1. Introduction

In the modern security environment, characterized by complexity, dynamism and interdependence of threats, the armed forces of each state perform a multidimensional role in ensuring national security. The Republic of Bulgaria is no exception to this trend. According to the provisions of the Law on Defense and Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria (LDAFRB), the army carries out its activities within the framework of three main missions:

Defense of the country, Support of international peace and security, Contribution to national security in peacetime.

The last of them, known as the “Third Mission”, is gaining increasing importance in the context of modern societal challenges. It reflects the commitment of the armed forces not only as a guarantor of territorial integrity, but also as an active participant in supporting civil society and institutions in crises, disasters and emergency situations.

The role of the Bulgarian Army in the implementation of the Third Mission is particularly evident in natural disasters, environmental catastrophes, epidemics and humanitarian crises. In these cases, the armed forces demonstrate their adaptability and ability to act outside the classical framework of military operations. This contributes to increasing public trust in the army and to its establishment as a stabilizing factor in society.

This article aims to analyze the essence, regulatory basis, organizational structure and practical dimensions of the Third Mission, as well as to outline the main challenges and prospects for its development in the conditions of the modern security environment.

2. Content and essence of the Third Mission

The third mission of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria — “contribution to national security in peacetime” — has a clearly expressed non-military, socially beneficial and humanitarian nature. It is aimed at supporting the population, institutions and state structures in the event of crises, disasters, accidents, catastrophes or other threats to public order and security.

According to Art. 57, para. 1, item 3 of the Law on the Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria, the armed forces participate in activities related to:

- providing assistance in the event of natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, fires, snow blockages, etc.);
- assistance in industrial and environmental accidents;
- support for state institutions in the protection of strategic sites and critical infrastructure;
- participation in humanitarian and rescue operations;
- assisting society in emergency epidemic situations;
- logistical, engineering and medical assistance to the population.

In essence, the Third Mission is a set of actions of the armed forces aimed at maintaining the stability of the state in peacetime, ensuring continuity of government, protecting citizens and limiting damage from crises.

Particular emphasis is placed on the speed of reaction and the readiness of the army to intervene when necessary. In this regard, the principles of:

- interaction (between the institutions of the executive branch);
- proportionality (use of resources according to the nature of the crisis);
- complexity (participation of different types and branches of troops - engineering, logistics, medical, aviation, etc.);
- transparency and public control are applied.

From the perspective of strategic management, the Third Mission contributes to the overall concept of national security by expanding the understanding of the role of the armed forces - not only as a means of defense, but also as an institution with high public responsibility.

This mission is carried out both at the national and regional levels, through military formations from the Land Forces, the Air Force, the Navy, as well as volunteer reserves and military transport resources. When necessary, joint coordination headquarters are established between the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior and local.

3. Organization and training of the armed forces

The effective implementation of the Third Mission requires a high level of organizational readiness, technical support and professional training. In this context, the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff of the Bulgarian Army develop and maintain crisis response plans, which are updated annually.

3.1. Training and training of formations

The training of personnel is aimed at developing the ability to respond to non-military threats. Regular exercises and drills are conducted with the participation of joint teams from the army, the Ministry of Interior and the Directorate General for Fire Safety and Population Protection, which aim to improve coordination and communication in crisis conditions.

Examples of such exercises are:

- "Retaliation",
- "COOP SEC",
- "Autumn Shield",
- as well as national disaster response exercises coordinated by the State Agency for National Security (DANS) and the National Disaster Protection Headquarters.

An important element in the preparation is also the psychological resilience of military personnel, since activities during natural disasters or humanitarian crises often involve working in a stressful environment and interacting with affected citizens.

3.2. Resource and technical support

The technical and logistical capabilities of the armed forces are a key factor for the successful implementation of the Third Mission. The main resource is the engineering troops, which have equipment for clearing, building bridges, roads and temporary facilities.

Military aviation also plays a significant role through the use of helicopters for evacuation, transport of people and cargo, as well as for extinguishing fires from the air.

The Military Medical Academy (MMA) provides medical teams and field hospitals that can be deployed in affected areas.

Maintaining such readiness requires significant financial and material resources, which is why the Ministry of Defense coordinates its actions with the Ministry of Finance and the European Union to secure funding through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

3.3. Coordination and interaction between institutions

A key element of the organization is the interaction between the army and civilian structures. If the armed forces need to intervene, the Council of Ministers decides on their use, after which the Ministry of Defense provides the necessary forces and means.

Coordination of actions in the field is carried out through the regional and municipal crisis headquarters, which include representatives of the army, police, fire department, health services and local administration. This model ensures effective communication, rapid decision-making and operational coherence.

In recent years, there has been a trend towards expanding joint activities between the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior and non-governmental organizations, especially in the field of volunteering and civil protection. This cooperation strengthens public resilience and the state's preparedness to respond to crises.

4. Practical aspects and examples from the Bulgarian experience

The practical implementation of the Third Mission of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria is most clearly manifested in real crises, when the army provides direct assistance to the population and state institutions. These activities not only demonstrate the high level of readiness and professionalism of the armed forces, but also strengthen the public's trust in them as a reliable partner in difficult times. The army continues to be a factor of stability.

4.1. Participation in natural disasters

Over the past two decades, the Bulgarian Army has repeatedly participated in rescue and assistance operations in the event of floods and other natural disasters.

- The floods in Moesia (2014) are one of the most striking examples of the effective implementation of the Third Mission. Military units from the Land Forces actively participated in the evacuation of the population, clearing terrain, building temporary dikes and providing humanitarian aid to the victims.

- The role of the army was similar during the floods in the villages of Biser (2012) and Karavelovo (2022), when military formations provided transport and engineering support, including the use of military equipment to access isolated areas.

- During the winter disasters in 2015, military teams helped clear roads and deliver food and medicine to blocked settlements in the Rhodope Mountains and Northeastern Bulgaria.

4.2. Assistance in fires and accidents

In recent years, the participation of the armed forces in extinguishing forest and field fires has become an integral element of the Third Mission.

Military aviation, using AS 532 AL Cougar and Mi-17 helicopters, carries out a number of aerial extinguishing operations in hard-to-reach areas – for

example, during the major fires in the districts of Haskovo, Sliven and Blagoevgrad (2021–2023).

Engineering units from the Land Forces are involved in extinguishing outbreaks and building firebreaks, while also providing assistance to the Directorate-General for Fire Safety and Civil Protection.

4.3. Role in pandemic and humanitarian crises

A particularly illustrative example of the implementation of the Third Mission was the participation of the armed forces during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022).

Military personnel assisted in the organization of checkpoints, transported medical supplies and equipment, and the Military Medical Academy provided hospital beds, mobile laboratories and vaccination teams.

This commitment demonstrates the army's ability to act in synergy with civilian institutions in crises with a large public scope.

4.4. Support for local authorities and the population

In addition to disasters and accidents, the armed forces regularly assist municipal and regional administrations in preventive activities - strengthening dikes, cleaning ravines, repairing bridges and roads.

In a number of cases, army engineers and logisticians have participated in reconstruction work after catastrophic events, thus strengthening the relationship between the army and local communities.

These examples confirm that the Third Mission is an integral part of the system for national security and resilience, and the Bulgarian Army continues to be a factor of stability and public trust.

5. Challenges and problems

Despite significant successes and accumulated experience, the implementation of the Third Mission of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria is accompanied by a number of challenges and structural problems that limit the effectiveness of the activity in peacetime.

5.1. Insufficient resource provision

One of the most significant problems is the limited funding for activities related to supporting the population. Military formations often have outdated equipment and limited reserves of fuel and materials, which makes it difficult to respond quickly in crises. Funding from the state budget is mainly aimed at the modernization of weapons and defense capabilities, which leaves relatively few resources for peacetime missions.

5.2. Personnel and organizational difficulties

Demographic trends and the aging of personnel pose a human resources problem for the armed forces. The shortage of qualified specialists, especially in the engineering, medical and logistical fields, creates challenges in the implementation of large-scale operations under the Third Mission.

5.3. Lack of unified mechanisms for interdepartmental coordination

Despite the existence of a regulatory framework, the interaction between the army, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Health and local authorities is not always effective. In some cases, there is a lack of clarity regarding command-subordinate relations, which leads to a delay in the response. It is necessary to create a permanent coordination body to guide actions in emergency situations, including with the participation of the army.

5.4. Public perception and communication

Another aspect is the insufficient awareness of citizens about the role and capabilities of the armed forces in implementing the Third Mission. This sometimes gives rise to unrealistic expectations of the army or an underestimation of its functions in peacetime. The development of an effective communication strategy and the strengthening of relations with the media and local communities are necessary steps to overcome this problem.

5. Development prospects

In the context of the new risks and threats facing Bulgaria – climate change, cyber risks, hybrid threats and pandemics – the role of the Third Mission will continue to strengthen. In order to be effectively implemented, systematic efforts are needed in several main areas:

6.1. Modernization and digitalization

The development of technologies for surveillance, communication and early warning will improve crisis coordination. The use of drones, satellite systems and geo-information technologies can support real-time situation assessment and decision-making.

6.2. Improving interdepartmental coordination

It is necessary to develop an integrated crisis management model that will provide a unified information system between the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Health and the regional administrations. This will allow for faster mobilization and effective use of resources.

6.3. Human resource development

A key priority is the training and preparation of personnel, including joint exercises with partner countries and civilian structures. It is important to encourage young people to join the voluntary reserve and to expand opportunities for civil-military education.

6.4. European integration and international cooperation

A promising direction is Bulgaria's closer participation in EU and NATO initiatives related to civil protection and the resilience of societies. Through the exchange of good practices and joint training, higher standards in the implementation of peacetime missions can be achieved.

7. Conclusion

The Third Mission of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria is a contemporary expression of the public and humanitarian role of the army. It is an important element of the national security system, which ensures the connection between the defense capabilities and the stability of the state in peacetime.

The participation of the army in natural disasters, accidents and humanitarian crises is evidence of its readiness to act beyond traditional military functions, protecting the life, health and property of citizens.

Through the effective implementation of the Third Mission, the armed forces strengthen public trust, affirm the principles of solidarity and empathy and contribute to the stability and security of the state.

In the future, the importance of this mission will increase, especially in the context of growing global and regional challenges. Therefore, constant improvement of the regulatory framework, resource provision and coordination between institutions is necessary so that the Bulgarian Army can continue to be a reliable guarantor of the security and sustainable development of society.

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