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35th anniversary of the GROM Military Unit. The role of special units in times of hybrid threats

The high dynamics of political, economic and technological changes taking place in the modern world mean that in order to act effectively, one must be proactive and constantly seek new solutions. The military sphere, which uses modern tools, for example, in the form of swarms of autonomous unmanned systems, 3D printing or artificial intelligence, and constantly adapts tactics, techniques and procedures, is no exception to this respect. – In the GROM Military Unit, we constantly analyse changes taking place in the world and security architecture in order to anticipate threats and challenges that the future may bring, and to know whether our current capabilities will allow us to meet them – emphasises **Col. Grzegorz Krawczyk**, Deputy Commander of the GROM Military Unit. In July 2025, the elite Special Forces unit will celebrate its 35th anniversary.

Damian Szlachter: The GROM Military Unit was formed in 1990 and will celebrate its 35th anniversary this year. Please tell us what changes it has undergone during this time and whether any commemorative events are planned.

Col. Grzegorz Krawczyk: during its 35 years of existence, GROM has been reorganised several times. From a unit capable of performing counter-terrorist tasks, it has become a unit capable of independently conducting – within the national and allied system – complex special operations, requiring the involvement of professionals from various fields, such as: CBRNE, JTAC, K9, EOD[1], analysts and reconnaissance or targeting specialists supporting the combat element. Our ability to redeploy task elements has also changed and GROM can now autonomously deploy operators by land, water and air. However, the biggest transformation has been in the command capability. We have moved from a unit administration model to a model of commanding GROM task forces and assigned combat teams, both national and coalition, during special operations conducted in a crisis, below the threshold of war and kinetic special operations during war. The changes are the result of experience gained in various circumstances and areas, mainly in the performance of tasks outside the country, thanks to participation in national and foreign military exercises and those involving non-military formations. Training with the best special forces units in the world, i.e. the British 22 SAS Regiment, the US CAG, Navy SEAL or 10th SFG, is particularly valuable. We also constantly analyse the changes that are taking place in the world and the security architecture in order to anticipate what threats and challenges the future may bring and to know whether our current capabilities will be able to meet them.

As part of the celebrations of the GROM Military Unit, a closed conference will be held on the challenges facing special forces in relation to the geopolitical situation in the world – the current one and the one we may face in the future. There will be national and international experts as speakers. Our aim is to show the broadest possible view of the topics discussed, which is why we have invited representatives from the military and civilian spheres to participate

[1] CBRNE (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosives), JTAC (joint terminal attack controller), K9 – term for combat dogs, EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) – acronym for pyrotechnics (editor's note).

in the meeting. Confirmed speakers include Gen. Austin S. Miller (retired), former commander of CAG and US JSOC Command, and Peter W. Singer, a 21st century warfare specialist. A book on the history of GROM should be published by July. Its co-authors are professional historians associated with the Warsaw Rising Museum, and work on it has taken more than seven years. We have taken care to ensure that the study has an accessible form for the reader. I believe that it will be a very valuable item in the library of every GROM sympathiser and beyond.

In the last dozen years, GROM has intensively supported the development of Poland's counter-terrorist system, including by providing comments on amended legislation, organising training, participating in counter-terrorist exercises, sharing combat experience from areas of armed conflict, supporting the protection of VIPs and diplomatic missions or building the resilience of critical infrastructure facilities to sabotage activities. I have been following this multifaceted activity for a long time and admire it for its professionalism and commitment. How do you manage to combine so many different projects and activities within one unit?

The creation of the GROM Military Unit in the 1990s was guided by one objective – to have a professional unit with the capability to respond to terrorist threats arising from the global situation at the time. Initially, GROM's participation in military operations outside the country was not envisaged, although it did carry out such operations, whether in Haiti or the Balkans. The subordination of the unit to the Ministry of the Interior meant that it could be quickly directed to carry out counter-terrorist tasks at home, but the possibilities for its use in missions abroad were limited. In 1999, GROM was transferred from the structures of the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of National Defence. This was to allow a more efficient use of its potential outside the country and a much better provision of the unit's logistical needs. However, the subordination to the Ministry of National Defence did not change GROM's basic tasks, i.e. readiness to conduct hostage release and counter-terrorism operations.

Although the unit was "plugged in" to the national crisis management system, ready to support counter-terrorist activities carried out either by the Border Guard or the Police, it lacked an efficient overarching system to manage these forces in crisis situations. After 2014, the security situation in our region has changed radically. Analysing the geopolitical situation and bearing in mind the experience of our British partners, as well as the legislation in force in Poland, we concluded that we need to be more proactive at the level of internal security. In 2017, we began intensive work on a concept to increase our effectiveness in this sphere, and included not only terrorist threats but also hybrid threats, which did not receive as much attention as they do now. At that time, however, the latter area was not understood in our military environment, as the possibility of such threats was not anticipated. The concept we developed encompassed a number of areas, including support for the training process of counter-terrorist sub-units drawn from the non-military system, participation in exercises and training on the subject, legal analyses for the effective use of the unit in counter-terrorist operations and recommendations for legal changes. We also sought to enhance our ability to respond more quickly to a crisis. This was reflected in the shortening of the time that elapsed from decision to take action, which further enhanced the ability to maintain an appropriate level of secrecy for special operations and the ability to rapidly redeploy forces to any location in Poland. Thanks to this initiative, an Aviation Team equipped with S-70i Black Hawk helicopters was established at GROM.

Today, more and more advanced technologies are being used in terrorist attacks – swarms of unmanned vehicles, 3D printing, artificial intelligence, satellite internet. How is GROM improving its resources and tactics to meet new challenges and be effective?

Yes, it is true, the security environment has changed a lot, as have the tools to attack. This is one of the consequences of the conflict in Ukraine. Wars have always accelerated the adaptation of different types of technology for military purposes. This was the case, for example, with dynamite, which was originally intended for civilian mining work and a while later found its use in military operations. 3D printers, which were initially used for fun or to make various

things for civilian use, have now become a tool for producing weapons and their components. There is exponential growth in this matter and practically every fortnight, maybe every month, improved or completely new solutions appear. From the beginning, GROM's organisational culture has emphasised creativity and the constant search for the best tools, techniques, tactics and procedures to get the job done. We have built-in mechanisms to support this. Much is contributed in this respect by our multinational cooperation and exchange of experience with foreign partners. It is a process of continuous information gathering and analysis. The next level is self-initiative – we look for solutions to problems, while trying to think outside the box. We also have our own 3D printing workshop and innovation department, where our ideas are embodied and then tested by end users. It is a 360° process, which means that we are in a permanent cycle of observation, analysis, implementation and adaptation to the VUCA world[2]. It would still be worth thinking about the possibility of cooperating or using GROM to support all Polish special services in order to work out optimal solutions, taking into account the experiences of various foreign organisations.

What does the war in Ukraine teach you about the role of special units in contemporary armed conflict? What changes are your partners from NATO countries making in relation to it?

The war in Ukraine is a huge source of information in many aspects of contemporary conflict. It is the first war in the 21st century where it can be assumed that two what we would call militarily equivalent states are fighting each other, and operations are being conducted in almost all domains, i.e. land, sea, air and cyberspace. An analysis of the three years of this war allows many positive, but also negative, conclusions to be drawn about the use of special forces units. Since 2014, NATO has made many efforts to organise Ukrainian special forces along Western lines. After almost eight years of strenuous training, it was possible to establish a special forces command and to certify Ukrainian special units according to Alliance standards. However, the beginning of the war revealed the problem of a complete misunderstanding of the role and tasks of special forces by all-military

[2] VUCA (volality, uncertainly, complexity, ambiguity) – (editor's note).

commanders. Wrong decisions on the use of this type of military resulted in almost all their potential being lost in a few months. And this is the first lesson, for us the most important one. Having analysed the Polish military environment, as a special unit command we are not sure that we would not share a similar fate in wartime. This is our sore point, as we are aware of how much effort and time it costs to select and then train a special forces unit operator (basic training is a minimum of 12 months) and how demanding the process of rebuilding such capabilities is. Therefore, treating special forces as better-trained infantry and assigning them to tasks such as "cleaning" the trenches is a straightforward way to lose these capabilities and have a serious problem recreating them at an appropriate level in the short term. When analysing the course of a conflict, both we and our NATO partners project potential tasks for us during special operations. We can distinguish three phases of a future conflict. The first is likely to be a hybrid action, perhaps terrorist, to disorganise the functioning of critical infrastructure and the state. Here, the role of special operations as a support element to the non-military system in preventing and combating such threats is quite evident. The duration of this phase can be either short but intense or long in order to exhaust forces. The second phase is a dynamic kinetic clash in which tactical manoeuvre will be a key factor. Special operations can be of a different nature in this phase – ranging from the classic task of searching for and destroying high-value and high-reward targets, e.g. air defence systems, ballistic missiles, logistical supplies, operational command and communications systems, to counterinsurgency operations and military support of conventional troops. The latter would consist not of fighting within the ranks of general military subdivisions, but more of advising battalion-level commanders to bring together the entire multi-domain battlefield capability, but with such an element specific to special forces. This view is being considered by many NATO special forces units. The third phase is frontline stabilisation, where static fighting will take place, which is what we are now seeing in Ukraine. The centre of gravity of the special forces tasks can be shifted in this case to the creation and management of resistance movements in areas occupied by the enemy and to striking at the political and economic interests of the aggressor state, both in its hinterland and in third countries where it has such interests. These are lessons from the operational level, very important

for us to create in military and political decision-makers a picture of the correct conduct of special operations in times of crisis and war.

In the area of tactics, techniques and procedures, there are even more conclusions. Someone quite aptly described Russian's ongoing war with Ukraine as a combination of Star Wars and World War I. The widespread use of drones of all kinds has meant that it is no longer possible to fight the way we used to. The drone now functions as binoculars, a rifle and a grenade, but has much greater range than these combat attributes. The use of flying, floating or land-based drones is being explored both theoretically and practically. Some capabilities are already implemented, others are still being worked on. Drones are not a game changer simply because they can destroy military equipment and neutralise the enemy. More relevant is the cost-effect relationship. Drones are relatively low cost and compared to classic precision weapons, i.e. HIMARS or JASSM, equally effective. Their production is less demanding and can be carried out on a mass scale in adventitious ground or in the proverbial garage.

Another important piece of the puzzle is the merging of the worlds of special services and special forces. This can be observed in Ukraine, where both HUR military intelligence and SBU counterintelligence have their combat elements and effectively conduct military special operations. This is why it is important, among other things, for us to participate in special operations conducted by top-level central institutions in order to reduce the potential and operational-strategic capabilities of the adversary on a war-wide scale, not only along the front line. And such action for the benefit of these institutions should be considered the main task for GROM. In the Polish legal area, Special Forces can form task forces with the Military Counterintelligence Service and the Military Intelligence Service, while the possibility of direct cooperation with the Foreign Intelligence Agency (AW), the Internal Security Agency (ABW) and the State Protection Service (SOP) is hindered.

I would like to draw attention to one aspect. One should not delude oneself that the future conflict will be the same as the one across the eastern border of the EU, and try to copy certain solutions one hundred percent. From discussions with our Ukrainian partners, it is clear that warfare is dynamic and techniques, tactics and procedures become outdated very quickly. This sometimes results in changes to tools and procedures even occurring on

a two-week cycle, as I mentioned earlier. This is why it is so important to collect information from the battlefield, analyse it and draw correct conclusions, and then quickly make decisions on what to implement and to what extent.

What in the context of anti-terrorist and counter-terrorist activities, should we reconsider and change at the systemic level in Poland so that law enforcement and military special units can cooperate without hindrance and use their potential in the event of the recognition of terrorist threats and the introduction of a third or fourth alert level?

One could say that at first glance everything works and there is nothing to discuss. After all, we have the Act on anti-terrorist activities, which covers various terrorist incidents and how to respond to them. However when one goes into the details and takes into account the experiences from inter-ministerial exercises, for example the annual Kaper tactical and special exercises, the case is not so optimistic. Above all, there are legal grounds to think about. Although there is a provision in the aforementioned act for the use of Special Forces, the regulations concerning the third or fourth alert level may significantly delay the support of subdivisions of the non-military system (mainly counter-terrorist subdivisions of the Police) by Special Forces. It must be remembered that terrorist attacks are highly dynamic and time is crucial in responding to them, and the statutory provisions mean that it is not possible to act preventively, only reactively. Another problem is that the law does not provide for the management at governmental level of a crisis related to a terrorist action (as in the British model). This is ceded to the ministerial level (abroad, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for this) or even to the service level (counter-terrorist actions being the responsibility of the Police). This makes it difficult to use all the resources needed to solve the crisis, as it is often necessary to involve forces subordinate to different ministries. Operating at sea may, for example, require the participation of units subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (in the case of territorial waters of a third country), the Ministry of Infrastructure or the Minister Coordinator of Special Services. Another problem is inconsistent legislation. There are laws whose provisions do not

correspond to those in the Anti-terrorism Act. An example is the Act on the Protection of shipping and sea ports, in which the leading role is assigned to the Ministry of Defence. A legal dilemma arises as to which act is superior in such situations. The government body managing the crisis could have a casting vote in this case, as the Prime Minister would be at the head of such a group. Such a solution has been adopted in the UK. Another element worth thinking about is to rehearse, in the form of war games, various potential event scenarios. It needs to be tested whether the system of decision-making and force generation adopted is effective and allows for a sufficiently rapid response appropriate to the dynamics of such a crisis. Who should be involved in such war games? In my opinion, to start with, those who are obliged under current laws to solve the terrorist crisis. Well-run war games based on different scenarios would, in my opinion, provide answers to many questions and dilemmas, and would give arguments for legal and organisational changes. Before the law would be changed, the game could also be implemented in a model target group to ascertain whether the proposed changes are effective and to familiarise the government crisis management group with the procedures for action.

An important element of the Polish anti-terrorist system, which took shape after 11 September 2001, was informal cooperation. Its architects emphasised integrating the activities of state institutions and bodies, building mutual respect and trust. Today, there is a different generation at the helm of the various links of the counter-terrorist community in the Republic of Poland, and we see rivalry between different services and units. Divisions were, are and will be there, but the point is to build security beyond them. How do we maintain the unity of nearly 30 operational and tactical level entities?

Very interesting and difficult question. There is no denying it – there are people with strong characters, alpha personalities serving in the force institutions that deal with the broader security of the state, and this certainly presents a challenge in terms of building security across divisions. At the command of the GROM Military Unit, we always emphasise that it is not about who is the best and who will do the job. The most important thing is that we all have a common

goal, which is to provide a safe environment for the development of the country and a sense of security for Polish citizens, both those inside and outside the country. If we all understand this, it will be good, and if we are guided by it in action, it will be very good. We must also remember that our capacity to respond is, on the one hand, fragmented, and on the other hand, sufficient. What I mean by this is that, for example, the Polish Armed Forces have greater potential in the area of aircraft or maritime capabilities, and the Police and the Border Guard can activate their formations more quickly in the event of an immediate need for such force generation. In turn, the special services, i.e. ABW, AW, SKW and SWW, have the knowledge and capabilities to carry out operations. It is economically unjustifiable to develop and maintain capabilities that have already been developed in another ministry, but close and multifaceted cooperation as well as a comprehensive and well-coordinated approach to emerging threats with competences and dependencies defined, are necessary. Another important element in building security is continuous, mutual inter-ministerial education – whether in the form of conferences and working meetings or exercises. Firstly, this will allow you to make and maintain contacts, i.e. networking, and secondly to keep you up to date with who and what you have. This always raises the question of who should organise this. Ministries, commands or individuals? Let me answer simply – anyone who cares about security. At GROM we teach not to be passive and not to wait for someone to do something for us, but to take responsibility and look for solutions if we see that the system does not yet recognise the problem. Hence the emphasis on creativity that I mentioned earlier.

The last and perhaps most controversial proposal is to organise exercises in the form of so-called stress testing, or overload testing. Their scenario is designed to continually subject practitioners to extreme situations. This leads to the system being overloaded and failing. We know from experience that such failures are like a bucket of cold water. It has positive effects and it fosters creative solutions when the practitioners encounter a similar situations in the future.

He was talking: Damian Szlachter