

Eastern Europe's armies struggle to enlist young people with war not far away

VALEC, Czech Republic, Aug 9 (Reuters) - As instructors shout commands, dozens of students taking part in a pilot Czech army programme aimed at boosting flagging enlistment numbers crawl through forest scrub carrying combat rifles and learning proper shooting positions.

Like most former Soviet-satellite states now in NATO, the Czech Republic has missed recruitment targets for years and struggled to maintain troop levels. This has left army units understaffed and unable to reach combat readiness, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, on eastern Europe's fringes, a stark reminder of Moscow's potential threat to the region.

Around 80 Czech high school students chose to spend part of their summer learning about army life at the four-week training programme being conducted in a closed military zone 94 km (58 miles) west of the capital Prague.

But General Karel Rehka, the Czech armed forces chief, has called the current system unsustainable.

He told Reuters the programme run by the 4th Rapid Deployment Brigade - an army unit operating at just 50 percent of capacity due to a dearth of soldiers - gives students an early taste of army life.

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