

Krzysztof Buchowski

- ▶ University of Białystok
- ▶ e-mail: k.buchowski@uwb.edu.pl
- ▶ ORCID: 0000-0003-3222-1994

THE MAIN ISSUES IN LITHUANIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS FROM 1991 TO 2024

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – A synthetic presentation of the main issues in Lithuanian-Russian relations from 1991 to 2024.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – The study was conducted through an analysis primarily of Lithuanian sources and relevant literature, with particular emphasis placed on presenting Lithuania's perspective in its relations with Russia.
- ▶ *Score/results* – After the collapse of the USSR, Lithuania, similarly to the other Baltic states, did not join the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Lithuanian authorities chose to pursue integration with Euro-Atlantic structures in their foreign policy. Russia had long opposed Lithuania's NATO membership, in particular. The main problem in Russian-Lithuanian relations in the early 1990s regarded the presence of Russian military troops on Lithuanian territory. The soldiers were not withdrawn until the end of August 1993. Russia also sought to secure easier transit to the Kaliningrad Oblast, a matter resolved only under pressure from the European Union, which Lithuania joined in 2004. That same year, Lithuania also became a NATO member. Once Lithuania became part of the global West, the country began efforts to achieve economic independence from Russia. After 2014 and then after 2022, Lithuania took a pro-Ukrainian stance and condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – The article demonstrates that the motives behind Lithuania's policy toward Russia stemmed not only from its Soviet legacy but also from the directions of Lithuanian foreign policy and Russia's neo-imperial ambitions.

| **Keywords:** Lithuania, Russia, Baltic region, transit, Kaliningrad Oblast, NATO, Ukraine.

1. Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, former Soviet republics, the independent Baltic states (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia) relatively quickly distanced themselves from the post-Soviet sphere and explicitly declared their aspiration to join the Euro-Atlantic world. Initially, Russia appeared to accept this scenario; however, it soon began counteracting these efforts, aiming to retain control over the region. Russia's tactics only strengthened the determination of the Baltic states. In 2004, they became members of NATO and joined the European Union. The accelerated westernization of the region compelled Russia to adopt a new strategy, which included increased economic penetration and intensified political pressure. Despite changing international conjunctures, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia have consistently remained within Russia's sphere of interest.

Russian policy towards Lithuania exemplifies Russia's attitude towards the entire Baltic region. However, Russian-Lithuanian relations are also characterised by unique specificities. From the Russian perspective, contemporary Lithuania is perceived in three distinct ways:

- as a post-Soviet neighbour with whom Russia has relatively fewer (compared to Latvia and Estonia) problems caused, for example, by the status of the Russian-speaking minority, which nevertheless constitutes an obstacle to land communication with the Kaliningrad Oblast;
- as part of the Baltic region, which remains of constant interest for strategic reasons and consequently an object of constant political-military and economic interventions;
- as part of the Western world, still treated as an adversary.

The following analysis focuses on Lithuanian-Russian relations, primarily from a the Lithuanian perspective. Relations with Russia have carried the greatest significance for Lithuania throughout the period in question. The situation was caused by a number of factors. In the early 1990s, Russian (post-Soviet) troops were stationed in Lithuania. In addition, Lithuania remained almost entirely economically dependent on Russia for a long time. The future of the neighbouring Kaliningrad Oblast, which was being transformed into a massive military base, also appeared uncertain. Concerns were further heightened by Russia's internal instability, foreign policy and the resurgence of imperialist tendencies within its political sphere.

2. The issue of the withdrawal of Russian troops. Energy dependency

The legal foundations of the relations between Lithuania and Russia were established by the treaty signed on 29 July 1991, when the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was striving for independence from the USSR. Official diplomatic relations were established on 9 October of the same year. From the Lithuanian perspective, the most pressing issue in bilateral relations from the outset was the aforementioned presence of 40,000 Soviet (and later Russian) soldiers on Lithuanian territory. In late October 1991, Lithuania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a note to the USSR's Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanding the resolution of the issue. However, Moscow suggested that any potential evacuation of troops from the Baltic states could only commence after the withdrawal of soldiers from Germany and Central Europe, i.e., not before 1994 [Laurinavičius, Lopata, Sirutavičius, 2002: 137, 142].

The first Russian-Lithuanian negotiations took place in January 1992, during a visit to the Kremlin by Vytautas Landsbergis, who was then serving as the acting head of the Lithuanian state. The Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, offered warm words to Lithuania. He emphasised that Lithuania's regulations on the status of the Russian-speaking population should serve as a model for Latvia and Estonia, where, according to Moscow, Russians faced discrimination. However, during actual talks with the Lithuanians, it was only possible to agree on the date when the withdrawal of the army would begin (early March 1992). Other issues remained unresolved [*Rusijos Federacijos...*, 2007: 55–56]. The first troops indeed left a base near Vilnius in early March 1992, but the pace of the withdrawal and the lack of binding agreements were unsatisfactory for the Lithuanian side. An impasse soon ensued. Additionally, Moscow officially began to impose new conditions on Vilnius, making the continuation of the withdrawal contingent on facilitating military transit to the Kaliningrad Oblast [Surgailis, 2005: 55–68].

Lithuania, along with Estonia and Latvia, began efforts to internationalise the issue of the presence of Russian troops on their territories. Under pressure from the West, Russia agreed to withdraw its troops by the end of 1994, but firmly refused any discussions on potential compensation for their stay. Furthermore, Russia demanded to retain control over certain strategic military installations [Rachlevičus, 1992]. In response to the unequivocally negative reaction of the Baltic states to these demands, Russia effectively froze negotiations with Latvia and Estonia for some time. However, in the second half of 1992, bilateral Lithuanian-Russian talks continued. There were no strategic military facilities on

Lithuanian territory that the Russian side was particularly concerned about. For this reason, a compromise was reached. Moscow agreed to withdraw troops by the end of August 1993. Due to the pressure from the Russian military, only three out of seven negotiated agreements were signed in September 1992, including a schedule detailing specific timelines for the evacuation of individual units. The Lithuanian side promptly registered the document with the UN and recognised it as the most important act regulating the withdrawal of troops [*Rusijos Federacijos ginkluotųjų pajėgų išvedimo iš Lietuvos Respublikos teritorijos grafikas*, 1992]. By the end of 1992, nearly 80% of the troops stationed in Lithuania had been withdrawn, including all units based in Vilnius.

However, the issue of Lithuanian-Russian economic settlements was more complex. The production of Lithuanian companies went almost exclusively to the markets of the former USSR. Close financial ties between Lithuania and Russia persisted, with the same currency (the ruble) remaining in use until October 1992. Lithuania's economy was dependent on Russian raw materials, especially energy. The Kremlin stressed that Lithuania was in arrears with payments for past and current supplies and demanded payment of the dues under the threat of withholding supplies. The transition to market-based conditions in oil and gas transactions resulted in a drastic increase in prices for individual consumers. According to Moscow's estimates, Vilnius' debts for energy resources reached \$11 billion. In retaliation, Lithuania threatened to suspend fuel transit to the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus [Bartasevičius, 1992]. In Vilnius, it was suspected that the Russian authorities were not so much interested in a new financial settlement as in political concessions. An example of such submission could have been Lithuania's accession to the Commonwealth of Independent States, which Moscow promoted by offering the promise of continued supplies of raw materials and goods on preferential terms. In 1992, the crisis was temporarily averted. However, Vilnius soon began to implement plans for the construction of an offshore oil port in Būtingė, which would allow Lithuania to receive oil supplied by tankers from non-Russian sources.

3. During the period of Lithuanian post-communist rule

At the turn of 1992 and 1993, a change in the ruling government took place in Lithuania. In the parliamentary elections, the post-communist left, the Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (LDLP) emerged victorious, and its leader, Algirdas Brazauskas, assumed the presidency following another electoral success. Moscow

welcomed the new Lithuanian ruling coalition with the hope of concessions from Vilnius. However, despite campaign promises, the post-communists ultimately did not abandon the pro-Western course of Lithuania's foreign policy [Vitkus, 2007: 36–38].

In the summer of 1993 it became increasingly clear that the breakthrough anticipated by Moscow would not occur. In response, Russia restricted energy supplies, citing Lithuania's overdue payments as a pretext. To ease the tensions, a visit by President Brazauskas to Moscow was scheduled for early August 1993. However, the Lithuanian president cancelled the trip as a result of the negative public opinion fuelled by the opposition. The Lithuanian parliament estimated its claims against Moscow (for Lithuania's years within the USSR) at \$146 billion. In retaliation, Russia announced that, by order of President Yeltsin, the withdrawal of troops from Lithuania was suspended and all negotiations with Vilnius were terminated. The tension subsided only after the Lithuanian president's telephone conversation with Yeltsin on 30 August 1993. It was agreed at that time that Russian troops would nevertheless leave Lithuania on the date previously envisaged [Brazauskas, 2000: 276–277]. The following day, the last Russian units indeed departed from Lithuania.

The finalisation of the evacuation of troops opened a new phase in inter-state relations. However, according to Vilnius, the issue of the Kaliningrad Oblast remained unresolved. Lithuania was particularly concerned that the troops withdrawn from Central Europe were being redeployed to Kaliningrad. Moreover, military supplies for Kaliningrad were transported through Lithuanian territory. Vilnius consulted the US and NATO on the issue, hearing that a bilateral agreement taking into account Russian interests was necessary [Laurinavičius, Lopata, Sirutavičius, 2002: 137, 142]. According to the provisional arrangements adopted at the beginning of 1992, Russia should have obtained a formal permission for each passage of military transport through Lithuanian territory. It could also, as before, use the port of Klaipėda to transfer troops evacuated from Germany. However, until the withdrawal of Russian soldiers from Lithuania was complete, Vilnius applied these agreements rather leniently, and Moscow treated the matter with similar flexibility. The situation changed once the evacuation process was finalised. In late September 1993, President Brazauskas called on the international community to support the idea of demilitarising the Kaliningrad Oblast. Lithuania also announced its intention to introduce a series of transit restrictions.

In the summer of 1993, a constitutional crisis began to intensify in Russia, culminating in an open conflict between President Yeltsin and a faction of deputies

in the Supreme Soviet in late September and early October. In early October, military units loyal to Yeltsin launched an assault on the Supreme Soviet headquarters. The final victory consolidated the Russian president's position but also strengthened the military circles supporting him. As a result, the political climate in Russia's relations with former Soviet bloc countries and the ex-Soviet republics that had distanced themselves from the Kremlin, underwent a significant shift. Almost immediately after resolving the internal crisis, Russia began to assert more strongly that the post-Soviet space (the so-called "near abroad") was a sphere of its vital interests, and it would not hesitate to use military intervention if necessary. Among the potential targets mentioned there were the Baltic states [Śmigieński, 2004: 165–168].

In early November 1993, Brazauskas' long-postponed visit to the Kremlin and meeting with Yeltsin finally occurred. The Russian president quite unexpectedly proposed a compromise on the issue of Kaliningrad transit. In return for Lithuanian concessions, he offered favourable economic agreements for Vilnius. Brazauskas deemed the proposal a good offer. The agreement package was signed in mid-November. However, Lithuania's right-wing opposition sharply criticised linking the country's strategic security to short-term economic benefits. As a result of the lively debate, leaders of all political parties concluded that only Lithuania's integration into the West would secure it against Russia. Consequently, the post-communist president was tasked with initiating efforts to secure North Atlantic Treaty Organisation membership [Latvian and Estonian authorities adopted a similar stance] [*Lietuvos Respublikos...*, 1993]. In early January 1994, Brazauskas fulfilled this mandate. At the same time Lithuania started to seek membership in the European Union.

4. In view of Lithuania's efforts to integrate with the West

Although Lithuania's foreign policy in the decade 1994–2004 prioritised integration with the Western world, relations with Russia remained at the centre of diplomatic activity. The basic dilemma concerned not only how to arrange neighbourly relations but also how to neutralise Moscow's negative stance towards NATO's eastern enlargement. At the same time, one of NATO's requirements for future members was the principle of good neighbourliness with Russia [Lopata, 2011: 46].

There was no unified position within the Lithuanian political elite on the attitude towards Russia. The lack of a common vision often led to internal disputes.

While President Brazauskas's strategy toward Moscow (during his presidency from 1993 to 1998 and later as prime minister from 2001 to 2006) can be characterised as moderate, the stance of the right-wing government (in power from 1996 to 2000) was more confrontational. Relatively high praise was given to the diplomatic skills of President Valdas Adamkus. This politician generally balanced pragmatism with firmness during his first term (1998–2002). Nevertheless, the fact remained that Lithuania was incomparably weaker in its relations with Russia and, at times, merely a subject of arrangements between the Kremlin and the West [Hyndle, Kutysz, 2002: 20–60].

In an effort to discredit the Baltic states in the eyes of the West, Russia sought to undermine their credibility as members of the Western civilisational community. Russian propaganda portrayed Lithuanians as anti-Semites and Nazi collaborators. A consistent element of Russian policy involved provoking crises, engaging in wars of statements and diplomatic notes, and publishing propaganda materials. At the same time, the Kremlin repeatedly assured that meeting its demands – such as abandoning efforts to join NATO or pursuing deeper cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States – would guarantee the security of the entire Baltic region. An important aspect of Russia's tactics was an attempt to fracture Baltic unity. Estonia and Latvia were almost always treated worse than Lithuania, with the status of the Russian minority often serving as a pretext. Moscow was only satisfied with the Lithuanian solution of full civic integration [Karabeshkin, 2007: 71–72].

However, Russia had a whole set of recurring arguments with which it tried to influence Lithuania. For example, propaganda was keen to question the status of Vilnius and Klaipėda (eventually annexed to Lithuania under the USSR) and to raise the issue of the unregulated border. The most commonly leveraged issue against Vilnius, however, was the restriction of transit access to the Kaliningrad Oblast. Due to the lack of compromise, temporary solutions regarding transit remained in place. The transit fees, which represented a significant source of revenue for Lithuania [Chelminiak, 2010: 121–123], were particularly troublesome for the Kremlin. At the beginning of 1994 almost simultaneously with Lithuania's declaration of its desire to join NATO, Russia began to demand further transit facilities vigorously. In February 1994 Lithuanian authorities detained an unannounced military transport at the border. The incident and Russia's sharp reaction accelerated Lithuania's efforts, with the involvement of American experts, to develop strict procedures for transporting military goods across its territory. Despite Kremlin's pressure, Lithuania consistently maintained that the new regulations

would be introduced at the beginning of the following year. However, the United States and the European Union member states encouraged Lithuania to reach an agreement with Russia. As a result, in January 1995, the existing conditions for military transit were extended for another year, with the possibility of annual renewal. At the same time, provisional rules for civilian and commercial transit were also agreed upon [Sirutavičius, Stanytė-Toločkienė, 2003: 192–195].

Lithuania's efforts to become a member of NATO and even to participate in the *Partnership for Peace* programme provoked strong opposition from Moscow from the beginning [Vitkus, 2003]. In addition to the attempts at intimidation, the Kremlin consistently offered the prospect of broader cooperation. It suggested that Lithuania and the other Baltic states should join the unified air-defence system operating within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In May 1996, Boris Yeltsin once again proposed the inclusion of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the CIS. However, he again received negative responses.

In 1997, the conclusion of NATO's enlargement process to include Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary coincided with new proposals from the Kremlin. While reluctantly accepting the new reality in Central Europe, Russia categorically demanded a promise from the West that the post-Soviet Baltic states would not become members of the North Atlantic Alliance. In return, it offered Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia its own security guarantees and proposed intensified economic cooperation. Russian diplomacy specifically targeted Lithuania as the first recipient of these proposals. The Kremlin was clearly hoping to extract Lithuania from the Baltic group and subsequently worked on persuading Latvia and Estonia. As an incentive, Russia offered to sign the long-awaited border treaty with Lithuania. To gain Lithuanian favour regarding security guarantees, the Kremlin offered further concessions. The treaty was signed in October 1997. However, in November 1997, during a meeting of the Baltic presidents in Palanga, Lithuania, a joint decision was made to reject the Russian security guarantees. Integration into the North Atlantic Alliance remained the goal. In response, the Russian State Duma indefinitely suspended ratification of the border agreement with Lithuania [Krickus, 2002: 63].

At the beginning of the 21st century, while the Kremlin gradually came to terms with the imminent NATO membership of Lithuania and the other Baltic states, Russia continued to express its dissatisfaction. It has consistently stressed that the Baltic States' participation in NATO infringes on its interests and, therefore, reserves the right to control the Alliance's future actions in these countries. While Russia's stance on the Baltic states' NATO aspirations remained unequivocally

negative, its tone regarding their prospective accession to the European Union was markedly different. From Russia's perspective, EU integration was advantageous, as its still-strong economic ties with the Baltic region provided a foothold for broader economic and political expansion in Europe. Kremlin-affiliated companies sought to secure a dominant position, particularly in the fuel-energy, transmission and transportation sectors, which in practice could grant influence over other areas of the economy as well. In Lithuania, Russian companies initially aimed to participate in the privatisation of key energy firms. In the early 2000s, during Vladimir Putin's first presidential term, economic pressure from Russian firms intensified further, employing tools such as manipulation of energy supplies and pricing. Russian capital began aggressively pursuing control over strategic Lithuanian energy enterprises.

On the eve of Lithuania's accession to the European Union, the issue of civilian transit to Kaliningrad resurfaced. Both Moscow and Brussels pressured Vilnius to regulate the matter. In late December 2002, Lithuania and Russia reached an agreement under which Russian citizens could travel through Lithuanian territory using simplified transit documents which were cheaper and easier to obtain than standard visas. Although Moscow was not fully satisfied with the agreement, it ultimately acknowledged that Lithuania's EU membership would also bring economic benefits to Russian citizens in the Kaliningrad Oblast. Following a recommendation from President Putin in May 2003, the State Duma ratified the border treaty with Lithuania despite protests from some deputies [Daniliauskas, Stanytė-Toločkienė, 2004: 309–349].

In the autumn of 2003, on the eve of Lithuania's accession to NATO and the European Union, a scandal erupted involving Lithuanian President Rolandas Paksas (2003–2004). During the investigation, unclear connections between the president, his inner circle and Russian business interests – possibly even criminal networks – came to light. Around the same time, the polling and subsequent electoral success of a party led by Viktor Uspaskich, a naturalised Russian citizen in Lithuania, revealed that Russian influence in Lithuania was deeper and more extensive than previously thought. The press revealed that employees of Lithuanian diplomatic missions in Russia were almost repeatedly recruited by the Russian secret service. In February 2004, three Russian diplomats were expelled from Vilnius on charges of espionage and for allegedly attempting to influence the investigative commission examining accusations against the president [Gubrynowicz, 2007: 150]. These events and the surrounding atmosphere heightened Lithuania's sense of threat from the Kremlin and reinforced the conviction of the

need for countermeasures. At the end of March 2004, Lithuania officially became a member of NATO, and in early May it joined the European Union. During this period, the Lithuanian Seimas completed the impeachment process, removing President Paksas from office. In the subsequent snap presidential elections, Valdas Adamkus once again emerged victorious.

5. Lithuania's first decade in the EU and NATO

During Valdas Adamkus's second term (2004–2009), Lithuania pursued the principles of the so-called “new foreign policy.” According to this doctrine, Lithuania's task was to seek to root “Western values” throughout the post-Soviet area. In this context, the only guarantee for the success of this endeavour was the active involvement of the United States in addressing the issues of Central and Eastern Europe. It was therefore concluded that Vilnius should strengthen its cooperation with Washington and Warsaw, the latter being regarded as having a favourable reputation across the Atlantic [Vaščenkaitė, 2011: 35–37].

The benchmark and primary measure of the effectiveness of Lithuania's *new foreign policy* were, of course, its relations with Russia. The fundamental objective was to establish a lasting strengthening of Vilnius's position vis-à-vis Moscow. All available means were subordinated to this goal and concessions were categorically ruled out. The Lithuanian authorities negatively interpreted the Kremlin's policy at the time. It was seen almost exclusively as aggressive intentions towards the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. The perpetually tense atmosphere in bilateral relations with Russia contributed to a growing sense of threat within Lithuanian society, which was further fuelled by politicians and certain media outlets.

From Moscow's perspective, Vilnius's diplomatic initiatives in the post-Soviet space were significant only to the extent that they had tangible support from the United States and EU member states. The Kremlin held an extremely negative view of Lithuania's *new foreign policy* and actively worked to counter its effects. At the same time, Russia made it clear that it did not consider any of the Baltic states as equal partners in its relations with the West. In the long term, Moscow continued to view *Pribaltika* as its foothold within NATO and the EU [Kempe, 2005: 4; Bukowiecka, 2012: 202–203].

President Adamkus's involvement in mediating Ukraine's Orange Revolution during 2004–2005 provoked irritation in the Kremlin and led to a series of anti-Lithuanian reactions [Rutkowski, 2009: 251–252, 262]. One notable display

of this animosity was the lack of an invitation for Lithuania's president to the July 2005 celebrations of the 750th anniversary of Kaliningrad's founding. In the autumn of 2005, a high-profile aviation incident captured Lithuanian public attention. A Russian Su-27 military aircraft, flying from St Petersburg to Kaliningrad, crashed near Kaunas. The pilot catapulted himself before the crash and was detained by the Lithuanian security service. The aircraft violated Lithuanian airspace, exposing vulnerabilities in NATO's air-defence system for the Baltic states [Jurgelevičiūtė, 2007: 269–271]. Moscow increasingly exploited its hegemonic position in the energy market, which significantly worsened Lithuania's economic situation. In 2006, the Lithuanian government finalised the sale of the Mažeikiai refinery to the Polish company "Orlen" instead of the Russian "Lukoil," much to the Kremlin's displeasure. Almost immediately the decision was taken to turn off the tap on Russian oil supplied by pipeline to the refinery. In response, Lithuania announced plans to renovate the railway line used for transit to the Kaliningrad Oblast. Such incidents became more frequent, prompting commentators to describe Lithuanian-Russian relations as a "Cold War" [Bačiulis, 2008].

Another wave of anti-Russian sentiment surged in Lithuania following the Georgian conflict in the second half of 2008. Vilnius had already repeatedly acted as an advocate for Georgian interests. After the outbreak of hostilities in Ossetia, Lithuania, like many other states, condemned Russia's actions as an act of aggression. Within the EU Lithuania called for freezing the recently resumed negotiations on a new agreement with Russia and even called for the introduction of sanctions. In the autumn of 2008, after Georgia's defeat in the conflict and the establishment of a ceasefire, the situation in the Caucasus calmed. At that time, Lithuania's centre-left government noticeably softened its anti-Russian rhetoric. However, President Adamkus remained the guardian of the hard line towards Russia in Lithuania. Despite the growing economic crisis and the evolving political situation, his attitude remained unchanged [Nekrašas, 2011].

In May 2009, economist Dalia Grybauskaitė won the presidential election in Lithuania. The new president was of the opinion that Lithuania's deepening economic troubles were the result of, among other things, its previous political strategy towards Russia. Grybauskaitė observed that Lithuania had effectively lost the support of both the United States and Poland, a shift stemming from the U.S.-declared "reset" in relations with Russia. As a result, Vilnius faced the challenging task of independently mending its relations with Moscow. Initially, Grybauskaitė was a strong advocate of seeking an agreement. On her initiative, the Lithuanian and Russian presidents made their first official telephone contact in

eight years. In February 2010, during the Baltic Sea Action Summit, she also met with the then-Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The short conversation was almost exclusively about economic issues. However, efforts to secure concessions, such as reducing the exorbitantly high gas prices, were unsuccessful. The Russians made it unmistakably clear that, while they were interested in cooperation, it would only be on their terms.

After this failure, Dalia Grybauskaitė began to vigorously insist on introducing projects involving the Baltic States' energy independence from Russia. She also sought to pursue a solidarity-based and more assertive European Union policy towards Russia. Lithuania also re-engaged in supporting pro-Western civic initiatives in Belarus and Ukraine. Gradually, Grybauskaitė became one of Moscow's harshest critics in international forums. She accused Russia, among other things, of neo-imperialism and attempting to destabilise the situation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The response was expressed in repeated attempts by Russian propaganda to discredit the Lithuanian president.

6. Decade 2014–2024

From late 2013 into 2014, the conflict in Ukraine began to escalate. In the spring of 2014 the crisis around Crimea erupted, followed by Russia's announcement of the peninsula's annexation. Relations between Russia and the West significantly deteriorated. These developments were increasingly anxiously observed by the Baltic states which feared a potential repetition of the Crimean scenario on their own territories. Dramatic events occurred at the peak of another Lithuanian presidential campaign. Dalia Grybauskaitė skilfully seized the opportunity, capitalising on the growing societal fears of Russia. Aligning herself with the prevailing sentiments of the majority of voters, she employed strong nationalist, patriotic and combative anti-Putin rhetoric. The concerns stemming from the unfolding situation in Ukraine played a significant role in helping Grybauskaitė secure her re-election.

During her second term (2014–2019), the Lithuanian President consistently expressed a negative view of Kremlin's policies, often using sharp language. She did not even hesitate to call Vladimir Putin a terrorist or compare him to Stalin and Hitler. On the international stage, she called for military support for Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions on Russia [Hyndle-Hussein, 2015]. Grybauskaitė repeatedly emphasised that Moscow's aggressive policies posed a grave threat to

the security of the Baltic states and Europe as a whole. The Lithuanian president imposed the tone of Lithuanian discourse on Russia. Amid heightened anti-Russian sentiment, Lithuania reinstated mandatory military service and increased defence spending. A part of legal measures was implemented to limit the effectiveness of Russian propaganda in electronic media. Projects aimed at making Lithuania independent from Russian raw materials and the Russian market were accelerated (e.g., the construction of its own offshore gas terminal in the Baltic Sea and investment in renewable energy sources). The Lithuanian government also sought to rebuild closer ties with Poland and, most importantly, to repair relations with the United States while advocating for the deployment of NATO forces along the so-called eastern flank. Grybauskaitė viewed the 2016 decision to station limited NATO forces in the Baltic states as a personal success. In response to her anti-Putin stance, the Kremlin once again made Grybauskaitė a target of constant propaganda attacks. Tensions continued to arise over Lithuania's efforts to restrict the activities of Russian capital within the country and Vilnius's initiatives to sever remaining ties with the post-Soviet economic system definitively.

In 2019, independent candidate and former banker Gitanas Nausėda, known for his pro-Western pragmatism, won the Lithuanian presidential election. The Lithuanian right-wing triumphed in the 2020 parliamentary elections. The new balance of power did not herald an imminent re-evaluation in relations with Russia. Developments in 2020–2021 were particularly unfavourable for any potential détente. Lithuanian authorities, much like their Polish counterparts, strongly supported the Belarusian opposition's efforts to overthrow President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. These actions drew dissatisfaction from the Kremlin, which backed Lukashenka. Ultimately, Lukashenka's retention of power strengthened Russian influence in Minsk, leading to an increased Russian political and military presence near Lithuania's border – an exceptionally troublesome development from the Lithuanian perspective. In Vilnius, the so-called migration crisis on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border, which escalated in the second half of 2021, was interpreted as a manifestation of a new type of threat from the East.

The beginning of 2022 brought another crisis triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Lithuania, along with the other Baltic states, unequivocally condemned Russia's actions and pledged support for Ukraine. Political relations between Vilnius and Moscow were effectively frozen, although Lithuania continued to contend with geopolitical and economic realities. In cooperation with Riga and Tallinn, Vilnius took concrete steps toward severing ties with the post-Soviet BRELL electricity transmission system [Świsłowski, 2024]. Lithuania committed

its modest resources to supporting Ukraine, pledging to allocate 0.25% of its GDP annually for this purpose. In September 2024, Lithuanian authorities further deepened cooperation with Kyiv by signing a memorandum on defence collaboration. In 2024, Gitanas Nausėda won re-election as president, while the parliamentary elections resulted in a leftist coalition taking power. However, there are no indications of any forthcoming revision of Lithuania's current policy toward Russia.

7. Conclusions

In the early years following Lithuania's restoration of independence, the most pressing issue in its relations with Russia regarded the presence of Russian troops on Lithuanian territory. Lithuania placed significant importance on the withdrawal of these forces, which was finally achieved in 1993. The regulation of transit to the Kaliningrad Oblast and Lithuania's economic dependence on Russia were equally critical. Additionally, in the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia attempted to obstruct Lithuania's integration with the West. Despite these efforts, Lithuania pursued a consistently pro-Western foreign policy, which irritated Russia. After Vladimir Putin came to power, Russia unsuccessfully sought to gain control over Lithuania's energy sector. Following Lithuania's accession to NATO and the EU, its foreign policy focused on aligning with U.S. policies in Eastern Europe, prompting a hostile response from Russia. In 2009–2010, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė attempted to repair strained relations, particularly by seeking closer economic ties. However, these efforts failed due to Moscow's unwillingness. From 2014 onward, Lithuania became one of the most vocal critics of Russia's policies on Ukraine. Lithuania's engagement in this direction deepened further after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Lithuanian-Russian relations remain tense.

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