



# Lithuania's Approach: Push Back Autocrats and Engage Democratic Activists

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## Re-established Independence, Economic Decoupling

Lithuania and Russia have a history of complicated relationships going back to the times of Late Middle Ages' rivalry between the Grand Duchy of Moscow and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century resulted in occupation by the Russian Empire until 1918 and more recently Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union from the 1940s to 1990. Following Lithuania's declaration of the re-establishment of independence on 11 March 1990, Moscow responded with an economic blockade in an effort to pressurise Vilnius into suspending its newly regained independence. The relationship's nadir at that time was reached on 13 January 1991 when the Soviet authorities used force by sending tanks to a TV tower in Vilnius, which resulted in 14 people being killed.

This period of tension ended in August 1991 following a failed coup d'état in Moscow. Domestic political and economic reforms in Lithuania, including external trade liberalisation, and a 'return to Europe' resulted in reducing economic ties with Russia, whilst new relations and growing interdependencies were forged with Western partners. Furthermore, the use of energy supplies by Moscow as a tool for exerting political pressure acted as a strong incentive for Lithuania's political elites to reduce economic links. Russia's strategic use of energy supplies as well as the funding of intermediaries was seen in Lithuania as an instrument of blackmail and corrupt influences in domestic politics.

In addition to removing barriers to trade and investment with European countries, the US and other Western economies, successive governments in Lithuania mobilised efforts to continue reducing links with Russia, instead integrating into energy and transport systems of Northern and Central Europe, often with the

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involvement of EU institutions and their funding. However, despite Lithuania's accession to the EU and even after the introduction of EU economic sanctions which followed Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 as well as Russia's countersanctions, Russia still remained one of Lithuania's most important bilateral trade partners (first for exports and third for imports in 2020).

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### **Short Period of Cooperative Relationship Ended by Authoritarian Turn in Russia**

In the early 1990s there was a short period of cooperation between Lithuania and the Russian Federation. Russia's President Boris Yeltsin condemned the January 1991 killing of civilians in Vilnius and supported Lithuania in its efforts to re-establish independence, at the same time trying to increase his own autonomy vis-à-vis authorities in the Soviet Union before its final demise. Lithuania was seeking external support for its independence and emphasised the importance of democratic reforms in Russia. The Lithuanian–Russian Treaty on the foundation of inter-state relationships signed on 29 July 1991 was a manifestation of this cooperation. A good working relationship between Yeltsin and the Lithuanian leadership contributed to the withdrawal of Soviet troops by 31 August 1993, before similar withdrawals took place from other Baltic States and East Germany.

However, later relations between Lithuania and Russia cooled down. Lithuania's demands for compensation for the damage done to the country during the Soviet occupation were received with hostility in Moscow. Vilnius became increasingly worried by the military build-up in the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation—an enclave surrounded by Poland and Lithuania. Russian transit to the Kaliningrad region through Lithuania became one of the most important issues in Lithuania's EU accession negotiations, eventually resolved after the introduction of a facilitated regime with the participation of EU institutions. It was only then in August 2003 that Russia finally ratified a border treaty with Lithuania, even though it had been signed back in late 1997. Bilateral relations deteriorated in particular once Yeltsin had been succeeded by Putin, who increasingly centralised control domestically and projected Russia's influence abroad, especially in its neighbourhood.

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### **Persistent Disagreements Regarding History and Current Issues**

Thus, since the early 2000s Lithuanian–Russian relations have been characterised by strong divergences in how both countries interpreted the recent past, especially the period since 1940, and current issues such as NATO and EU enlargement together with Russia's behaviour in its neighbourhood. For Putin, the collapse of the Soviet Union represented the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century. For Lithuania, the Soviet Occupation (following the previous Nazi Occupation) is seen as the most tragic event, which led to many of its citizens being deported to Siberia, the killing of elites and economic deprivation. Regular Russian military exercises,

often jointly with Belarus, are another source of concern for Lithuania. For a number of years the Lithuanian authorities have pointed to authoritarian Russia as the most important external threat to the country's security. At the same time, Lithuania has welcomed Russian democratic opposition activists, hosting regular conferences and other events.

Bilateral relations deteriorated still further after the Russia–Georgia conflict in August 2008 and especially after the annexation of Crimea and aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Lithuania has been one of the most vocal supporters of EU sanctions towards officials and economic sectors in Russia. These events have also led to the mobilisation of all major political actors in Lithuania to increase defence funding, whilst the population has shown strong solidarity with Ukraine (and more recently with opposition activists in Belarus). In any event, a key priority within Lithuania's foreign policy has been support for the Eastern neighbouring countries in their domestic political and economic reforms as well as their closer relationship with the EU and NATO.

Importantly, for Lithuania accession into the EU was not only about a symbolic return to Europe and the economic benefits of membership. It has also been important in distancing the country from Russia and indirectly increasing its security by integration with the EU. Since its accession, Lithuania has been actively trying to 'Europeanise' relations with Russia to reduce the asymmetry of bilateral power relations, for example, in disputes with Gazprom regarding its gas price setting policy. Geopolitics was also behind the importance attached by Lithuania's elites to the country's NATO membership and its strategic relationship with the USA. Lithuania's population strongly supports membership in both the EU and NATO. Successive Lithuanian governments have been strong transatlanticists and therefore wary of EU defence cooperation initiatives which might weaken the role of NATO. This was illustrated by opposition to the initiative of Berlin and Paris in June 2021 to upgrade the EU's relationship with Russia. Lithuanian officials consider that any attempts at high-level dialogue with an authoritarian Russia would be counter-productive as they would be understood by Moscow as a sign of weakness, thereby encouraging its aggressive policies against neighbours and attempts to undermine rules-based order.

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## **Waiting for Democratisation in Russia?**

Geopolitical concerns play an important role in Lithuania's policies both vis-à-vis authoritarian Russia and in driving its attempts to upload bilateral issues onto the EU. Previous attempts at a pragmatic dialogue with Russia initiated by Lithuania's officials are considered a failure. Meanwhile Russia's aggressive policies and violation of international norms are seen as a vindication of the country's suspicious attitude towards authoritarian Moscow and expose some EU Member States' naiveté. The dominant view is that only democratisation of Russia can reduce tensions and allow for any normalisation of political relations.

This strategic approach of pushing back, containing authoritarian Russia and engaging the country's democratic opposition, seems justified, but its effectiveness could be increased. Lithuania should more actively engage in coalition building with other EU Member States and be more attentive to their concerns. It should lead efforts in increasing the resilience of democratic societies, for example, against cyberthreats and disinformation, along with integration within the EU in areas such as energy and the digital market. It should assess the existing decision-making rules in the EU on issues such as sanctions and support for human rights with a view to making it more effective. Finally, Lithuania should be more active in outlining the future vision of a relationship with Russia, should it ever become a democratic country.

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The IIRPS at Vilnius University is one of the most prominent social sciences institutions in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region. The Institute is an academic institution specialising in social and political sciences. IIRPS is also a member of TEPSA.