



The End of Lithuania's Cautious Friendship with Belarus

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Until the post-election protests in Belarus, Lithuania's policy towards that country had been characterised by pragmatism. Since then Lithuanian policy has changed to being increasingly involved—supporting the opposition and becoming one of the main proponents of the democratisation of Belarus. Such a position carries the risk of economic losses, but it is limited and Lithuania includes it in the possible costs of its actions. Lithuania's relations with Belarus are conditioned by Russia's policy, perceived as a direct threat to Lithuanian security. The development of events in Belarus strengthens, in turn, the cooperation between Poland and Lithuania.

Advocate of the Democratisation of Belarus. Lithuanian policy towards the Belarusian regime after the rigged presidential elections in August this year stems both from its own experience as a former republic of the USSR and from the post-Soviet era transformation period. The actions taken by this state today are an expression of the coherence between the authorities and society shaped by the Sąjūdis, the Lithuanian independence movement. The strongest opposition—the conservative Homeland Union—calls on the government to make an even greater commitment to the democratisation of Belarus. Lithuanian citizens, in turn, have expressed their support for the protesters, including creating a human chain from Vilnius to the border with Belarus.

Lithuania was one of the first EU countries to declare support for the protesters and to shelter the Belarusian opposition, including the leader and presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. At the same time, the country began to demand the EU introduce restrictive measures on the regime, arguing the need to combat human-rights violations. Moreover, in August, the Lithuanian parliament, the Seimas, adopted a resolution not recognising the elections in Belarus or Alexander Lukashenka as the legitimate president, and in September it voted in favour of treating the regime's decisions as invalid, especially those limiting Belarus' sovereignty and deepening its dependence on Russia. At the same time, the Lithuanian parliament called on [the international community to support Tikhanovskaya and the Coordination Council](#), a body representing the Belarusian

opposition, in their efforts to repeat the elections. This political act serves to discredit and invalidate Russia's attempts to interfere in Belarus' internal affairs or exert influence on the foreign policy of that state.

These actions towards Belarus are conducive to strengthening Lithuania's position in the EU as a country supporting pro-democratic changes in the region. The Lithuanian position stands out on the EU forum and even among the Baltic States. The authorities in Vilnius were the first not to recognise Lukashenka as the legally elected president. Lithuania criticized the Union's delay in taking joint actions, for example in imposing sanctions. The country has consistently acted as an advocate of Belarusian society and motivates its regional neighbours to do the same. Latvia and Estonia also introduced, and then extended, national sanctions targeting persons supporting the Belarusian regime.

Security. Lithuania, striving for stability in its immediate vicinity, defines the events in Belarus mainly through the prism of national security. In its assessment, the lack of pro-democratic changes in the country would mean the increasing possibility of Russian influence in the region. Meanwhile, Russian policy is identified as the main threat to Lithuania. Lithuania also perceives Russia's involvement in energy projects in Belarus, such as [the construction of a power plant in Astravyets](#), as an immediate danger to regional critical infrastructure. Therefore, the risk that Russia will gain influence in a neighbouring country makes

counteracting it a priority for Lithuania. It does not rule out the Russian-backed suppression of the protests in Belarus. However, the use of force, including a conflict with NATO countries, is considered unlikely. It assumes that Russia will want to increase its control over the Belarusian military, which fits the scenario of gradual integration within the Union State. This premise results from the strong integration of the Belarusian military with Russia's, particularly in logistics, training, and intelligence. This is confirmed [by the recent joint military manoeuvres involving Belarus and Russia](#), carried out close to the border with Poland and Lithuania, and immediately after the presidential elections. Moreover, as part of the September exercises—Slavic Brotherhood, which besides Russia and Belarus was to involve Serbia, but it withdrew at the last moment—their militaries simulated a defence from a threat from NATO states.

Lithuania wants to increase the Alliance's interest in the security of the region and the presence of U.S. troops on NATO's Eastern Flank. This also reveals a strengthening of cooperation with the U.S., evidenced by the September visit by Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius to Washington and his talks with National Security Advisor Robert C. O'Brien and Deputy Secretary for Energy Mark W. Menezes.

The Economic Importance of Belarus. Lithuania wants to engage in the democratisation of Belarus despite the potential for economic losses. In fact, however, the risk of those losses is small, although Belarus generates about 30–40% of the turnover at the port of Klaipėda (and uses Lithuanian Railways). The decline at this port would be visible if Lukashenka fulfilled the threat of diverting goods, for example, via Russia. However, the distance of the Russian or Ukrainian ports means Belarus has no viable alternatives. According to the Lithuanian government, no significant drops have been recorded so far.

Although economic cooperation with Belarus has grown in the last decade, it is not one of Lithuania's leading trade partners. In 2019, Belarus was seventh among Lithuanian export partners, with exchange valued at €1.1465 billion, but in goods produced in Lithuania alone, it was just €160 million (in 2010, €822 million and €133 million, respectively). At the same time, Belarus was the 14th country of origin in Lithuanian imports, accounting for less than €800 million (in 2010, €300 million). Currently, 575 Lithuanian companies

are registered in Belarus, and 250 companies in Lithuania report Belarusian capital.

To strengthen the developing IT sector in Lithuania, the country seeks Belarusian companies and specialists. According to Invest Lithuania, a state-owned investment promotion agency, around 60 Belarusian high-tech companies employing around 2,000 employees are interested in relocating their businesses to Lithuania. However, regulations about, for example, the establishment of a company account by an entity from outside the EU, may prove to be a difficulty. The Lithuanian authorities in turn have announced that they will try to improve such procedures for Belarusians.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Lithuania is leading the support for the democratic transformation in Belarus. Its policy is intended in part to strengthen its position in the EU, including extending influence over the eastern dimension of EU policy. Lithuania's initiatives also are mobilising the countries of the region, especially Latvia and Estonia. These efforts eventually led to the introduction of EU sanctions against Belarus, and the Union is planning a review of its current policy towards Belarus and a support package for Belarusian society.

Security issues will determine Lithuanian-Belarusian relations. The decisive factor will not be the course of events in Belarus but the level of dependence of the Belarusian authorities on Russia, especially as [the scenario of the long-term deepening of integration](#) within the Union State is the most realistic scenario. At the same time, in introducing national sanctions, Lithuania has considered the risk of losses to its economy. However, they are not high, and even the potential costs are not assessed by the government as very burdensome.

Although Poland does not present as demonstrative a position as Lithuania, it is gradually strengthening its cooperation with it to support pro-democratic changes in Belarus. This was confirmed by the joint declaration of 17 September, among others, favouring the coordination of direct aid to repressed groups, for example, by simplifying visa regulations or supporting civil society and independent media, as well as backing initiatives on the EU forum. Therefore, cooperation between Poland and Lithuania may significantly increase not only the scope but also the effectiveness of the aid provided to Belarus.