



Weekly Briefing

Lithuania External Relations briefing:

**Lithuania's foreign policy is helping the country to become a regional
advocate and a global networker**

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The start of the political season in the autumn has been unusually hectic for the foreign policy makers in Lithuania making several important steps in the major strategic directions. The efforts resulted in strengthening the positions of the regional leadership in the Baltic region, in taking a more pro-active position in the debates on the post-Brexit arrangements (especially as concerning the external EU borders), and in increasing the international attractiveness of the country as a foreign direct investment destination. The latter leading towards the new type of the prospective cooperation with the G7 countries, including Japan.

Such multiple vectors of the Lithuanian foreign policy might come to some as a surprise given the size of the country, yet they are the outcome of the continuity of the policies, which had been initiated more than two decades ago under the two-terms of the Presidency of Valdas Adamkus (1998-2004 and 2004-2009). President Adamkus having originated from the Lithuanian diaspora in the United States pursued the vision of the global Lithuania being engaged in different political fora and acting (in some cases) as an arbiter if not a bridge between the countries.

The incumbent President Dalia Grybauskaitė further followed up and implemented the vision of the pro-active Lithuania foreign policy in the world. Her experience of working at the European Commission together with the leaders of the major EU countries helped her to forge relations and find a place for the country at the negotiating tables of the high-level EU policy. The pro-active engagement resulted in Lithuania serving a two-years term in 2014-2015 as a member of UN Security Council following Lithuania's Presidency of the EU in 2013, which saw a very active foreign policy as part of the EU Eastern partnership policies.

Until recently, Lithuania's foreign policy efforts on the global stage followed closely the policies of the major strategic allied countries (the key NATO and the EU Member States) and it would be hard to find examples where Lithuania formulated its own position. Yet with the seismic changes taking place within the major countries in the transatlantic alliances (both in the US and the United Kingdom) and the decreasing of the influence of those countries on the global politics saw Lithuania re-emerging with its own opinion. In December 2017 Lithuania was among other 127 countries which voted in the UN General Assembly to declare a unilateral US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as "null and void" while five years ago Lithuania was one of 14 countries which voted against Palestine's membership in the UNESCO organization.

Thus, since the start of the current US administration Lithuania, though adhering to the strategic alliance, has emerged as a reinvigorated actor in this new multipolar power world. The foreign policy-related events that took place during the closing weeks of August and continued into the first part of September attest to that.

Below is a brief summary of the major highlights as related to the advancements made by Lithuania during the analyzed period in strategically positioning for a more pro-active and more globally recognized role.

Strengthening the position of the regional leadership in the Baltic region. Lithuania has always had an ambition to become a leader of the three Baltic countries at a regional level acting as a go-between between the Baltic trio and the neighboring Poland. The geopolitical position of Lithuania was one of the factors that favoured these possibilities. The other was a pro-active role of the President in making the vision of the global Lithuania a corner stone of the foreign policy of the country. Contrary to Latvia and Estonia, Lithuania elects the president by a direct vote and accordingly the president in Lithuania has a much bigger role to play in the foreign affairs than the presidents of Latvia and Estonia who are elected by the parliaments. The constitutional powers make the executive arm of the government in the person of the President in Lithuania a

powerful actor and this has been further strengthened by the international experience and ambitions of the previous and the existing president each of whom strived to become an internationally recognized figure.

Lithuania's regional leadership was recognized and acknowledged towards the end of the summer and the start of the autumn by two highly symbolic and important state visits. Firstly, a ground-breaking visit of Lithuania by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his meeting with prime ministers of three Baltic countries (on 23 August), and, secondly, a visit of German Chancellor Merkel to Vilnius and her meeting with three Baltic Prime Ministers on 14 Sept. These two state visits have highlighted the importance of the roles played by Lithuania, namely as the coordinator mustering the regional support for the major power in the EU (i.e. Germany) and as the facilitator of the dialogue with Israel at the time when Israel's foreign policies are undergoing scrutiny. This was already the third visit of Chancellor Merkel to Lithuania and it confirmed that the bilateral relations are at their peak both countries expressing their shared commitments in the EU. In June last year, President Dalia Grybauskaitė awarded the German chancellor with one of the highest state decorations of Lithuania Grand Cross of the Order of Vytautas the Great. The closer relationships between the two countries are benefitting from the following circumstances: Germany has its NATO troops stationed in Lithuania and, more so, Lithuania has been making military acquisitions from the German defense sector.

Taking up a more pro-active position in the debates on the post-Brexit arrangements, especially as related the external EU borders. The impending Brexit has opened up the prospects for Lithuania to become more vociferous in the EU affairs by becoming a supporter of the cause for the sustaining and expanding the European Single Market by ensuring that the free trade and the free movement of goods and people does not come at the cost of the political wrangling. The prolonged and difficult (and so far fruitless) EU negotiations with the UK as well as the changing political sympathies for Britain in Europe,

made Lithuania as well as other Baltic countries alongside the traditional allies of the UK the Nordics the advocates of the more pragmatic resolution of the post-Brexit relations between the EU and the UK. This is due to the several circumstances: firstly, a large number of economic migrants from Lithuania reside in the UK creating a natural connection between people of both countries; secondly, a tough stance of the UK government against Russia has been widely welcomed in the Baltic capitals looking for the commitment from the major powers to keep Russia at bay. These circumstances have contributed to Lithuania becoming involved and engaged in debating the borders between the EU and the UK. The linkages with Ireland have been further strengthened by the appointment of the seasoned Ambassador in Dublin (who was previously stationed in Tokyo) earlier this year, thus sending out a clear signal that Lithuania has been open to work with the UK and Ireland bilaterally and support the more pragmatic solution. On 5 September, when the Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade visited Vilnius, his Lithuanian counterpart Linas Linkevičius made a very significant statement by saying that „the issue of Ireland is the issue of entire EU“. This was an expression of solidarity with Ireland asking that the political and legal solution to the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland should be the priority. Minister Linkevičius emphasized on this occasion that Lithuania’s main priorities are “the EU's strength, the preservation of the integrity of the single market, our commitment to secure the rights of EU citizens, and new trade agreements between the EU and the United Kingdom that would not be concluded at the expense of the integrity of the EU's internal market”.

Increasing the attractiveness for foreign direct investment and trade leading to a new type of cooperation with some of the G7 countries, including Japan. The global politics have had a limited use of smaller countries in multilateral relations with exception of non-allied countries or the countries pursuing the policies of neutrality. However, the breakdown of the development of the free trade agreement blocks (resulting in abandoning the transatlantic and

trans-pacific free trade agreements) created for smaller and regionally strategically well-positioned countries such as Singapore and, to some extent, Lithuania a possibility to get more leverage and become the advocates and the networkers if not the power-brokers within the multipolar world. Lithuania has been actively promoting its free trade policies aiming to bring more investment into the manufacturing sector and the infrastructure in ports, logistics and transportation hubs in line with its strategy to become one of the most open economies in Europe. This has attracted the interest of other regional powers but also the interest of the major G7 countries, most recently, Japan, which has initiated the 3+1 format of cooperating with the Baltic countries in the areas having a relevance for the two economies. Several official delegations from Japan came to Lithuania and Lithuania was quick to seize the opportunity to become the main host of this four-partite initiative. Several circumstances played to Lithuania's advantage of being the key Baltic country for economic contacts with Japan. Firstly, there is a historical connection between the Holocaust memory and the activities of a pre-war Japan's consul in Kaunas Chiune Sugihara; he helped some six thousand Jews fleeing from the persecution by the Nazis in German-occupied Poland to obtain visa and escape to third countries via Lithuania. Secondly, the increasing interest of Japan to seek economic and trade opportunities with the Baltic region is echoing efforts pursued by China as part of a wider 16+1 initiative. Though 3+1 does not aim to provide an alternative to 16+1, yet it follows the similar approach in creating a hybrid multilateral-bilateral framework for trans-regional and indeed trans-continent economic cooperation.

Such cooperation format create a level playing field and the network-type of policy making framework where the gatekeepers are often not the central nodes but the institutions and the countries positioned at the intersection of different political or trading blocks and systems. This creates an opportunity for Lithuania to become even a more global networker acting on behalf not only the Baltic region but also the rest of the EU.