





Weekly Briefing

**Lithuania external relations briefing:
Lithuania's relations with Belarus enter the uncharted waters
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Lithuania's relations with Belarus enter the uncharted waters

The receding pandemic, which brought the relaxation of the quarantine restrictions and the return of life to normal in May, witnessed quite the opposite development when considering Lithuania's external relations with its closest neighbour, Belarus. As overnight, the relations between the two countries on different sides of the EU and NATO patrolled external border turned from bad to worse and then from worse to what looked like a way of no return. At the end of May, the tensions reached their climax when Lithuania border patrols started observing increased flows of alleged, purposefully trafficked groups of illegal migrants arriving via the Minsk airport from Istanbul and Bagdad to cross into Lithuania on foot and then to reach the rest of Europe.

Lithuania's government turned for help to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), asking for help against what is regarded as Belarus' intended use of migrant flows retribution against Lithuania's tough line taken against Minsk, following the forced landing of a civilian aircraft en route to Vilnius while flying over the Belarusian air space. Thus, as of late May, the Lithuanian-Belarusian border became a new frontier between two unfriendly states.

Below is an overview of the main issues which conditions the foreign policy development between the two countries, trying to identify the main flashpoints which led Lithuanian-Belarusian relations in a downward spiral. Furthermore, it indicates the potential causes that have recently exacerbated the situation to the point where the options for bilateral diplomacy have been almost exhausted.

Belarus has always been entirely dependent on Russia; the latter's financial and military resources kept the close-knit economic and political ties between the two most culturally similar former Soviet republics intact. Yet despite the growing tensions with Russia due to its unceasing engagement in the escalation of the warfare in Eastern Ukraine, Lithuania's relationship with Belarus for a decade (2009-2019) followed a pragmatic, if calculating, approach.

In 2009 the then President Dalia Grybauskaitė met with Alyaksandr Lukashenka during the first and what was to be the last meeting between the heads of two states to discuss the cooperation in energy and transport. At that time, Lithuania considered constructing a new nuclear power plant to increase the energy independence from Russia, while Belarus planned its own. Lithuania even expressed interest in participating in the construction project of a

nuclear power plant whose first plans went back to the 1980s, when a nuclear power plant came to be built in Lithuania next to the Belarus border. It was closed down for safety reasons, following Lithuania's accession to the EU. However, Belarus went forward with the nuclear power plant, situating it next to the border with Lithuania, within 50 km from Vilnius.

During the decade of the ebbs and flows in the Lithuanian-Belarusian bilateral relations, both countries tried to engage each other by following different aims. Lithuania used every opportunity to potentially lessen the dependency of Belarus from Russia by offering its transport corridors for the transit of goods and materials from Belarus and even offering an alternative route to supply liquid gas via its LNG terminal in Klaipėda. At the same time, Belarus was opening up its trade with and via Lithuania, aiming to make it more economically dependent on the supply routes of primary energy sources and the demand for transportation and logistics originating from the economic activities in Belarus and Russia, including the re-export trade flows to Russia.

As long as the relations between the two countries remained detached from the geopolitics of the renewed great power rivalry, the economic ties worked to benefit both. Yet, when Russia stepped in between, and the Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation signed an agreement to build a new power plant next door to Vilnius, the Lithuanian-Belarusian relations have started to slowly but surely deteriorate. Though Lithuania continued to partly engage with Minsk as part of the EU Eastern Partnership cooperation, Belarus abstained from the Eastern Partnership Summit held in Vilnius in 2017. By then, any prospects for finding new grounds for pursuing the dialogue, if not a political collaboration with Belarus on behalf of the EU, became exhausted.

After winning the presidential elections in 2019, President Gitanas Nausėda showed some inclination towards re-charging relations with Belarus. Yet, he made clear that any changes in the relations towards Belarus are possible only if Belarus would stop putting the nuclear power plant into operation. From then on, the relations continued to deteriorate. Lithuania kept blocking the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Belarus. Following the presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020, which resulted in the civil unrest and the harsh crackdown of peaceful protests unleashed by the authorities, Lithuania was quick to declare the results of the election unlawful and jointly with Latvia and Estonia put President Lukashenko with 29 more high-ranking officials on the list of *personas non grata*. The updated list (revised on 25 March) includes altogether 118 public officials from institutions connected with the ministries of interior and justice and regional administrative institutions in Belarus banned from entering the EU. Further, Lithuania blocked payments to Belarus from an EU-

funded cross-border development programme and continued raising the case of Belarus within the EU and NATO and at various international fora to put diplomatic pressure on Minsk to back off from the backlash against the political opposition and the society at large. As a result, at the start of this year, the authorities in Minsk became entirely isolated from the EU.

Belarus has been left with limited options to respond to the mounting diplomatic pressure from abroad. At first, some diplomatic wrangling took place; the country dispatched some diplomats from the countries that chose to send out few Belarusian diplomats. Yet it went nowhere as the EU countries put further pressure by refusing to accept the appointments of new ambassadors since the EU Member States does not recognize President Lukashenko as a legitimate office-holder since the last elections declared as rigged. Further, there was some attempt by Minsk to respond with economic measures; Belarus made arrangements to divert some of the transit goods via the Russian ports to decrease the dependence on Lithuania's ice-free port in Klaipėda. Yet, again, it did not produce the expected results; it became apparent that the capacity of the alternative routes is limited. Belarus is bound to rely on the existing trade routes because they are essential to international trade with many other countries outside the EU. Thus, after diplomatic and economic measures did not work, Belarus resolved to take more coercive actions.

The incident on 23 May, which saw the Ryanair aircraft with 170 passengers from 12 countries on board following a route from Athens to Vilnius, forcefully diverted to Minsk under a false pretence only to carry out the arrests of two prominent political activists (Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega) based in Vilnius, finally froze the relations. President Gitanas Nausėda condemned Belarus' actions, demanding the release of the captured passengers and calling on for an international response. "I call on NATO and EU allies to immediately react to the threat posed to international civil aviation by the Belarus regime. The international community must take immediate steps that this does not repeat," Nausėda said. The EU leaders followed the lead of Lithuania's president, demanding the release of two passengers taken from the EU-registered civil airlines' aircraft into custody, and unanimously decided to declare and further enforce the sanctions against Belarus.

To understand the deterioration of the relations between Lithuania and Belarus, one needs to look beyond the traditional approaches in international relations. According to the recent research, as epitomised in Jonathan Renshon's analysis, the conflicts between the states emerge because of a fight for status in an international status community. A status of a state is a function of the unaccountable number of diplomatic interactions with other states and the interactions within the international organisations. There is a clear link established between dissatisfaction

with the state's status and global conflict. It is explained that high-status dissatisfaction resulting from a status deficit is closely correlated with the initiation of international competition. A more significant status deficit of a state within a specific state system can thus lead to a higher probability of initiating conflict at every level of intensity, from low-level disputes to large-scale global war.

According to Renshon, the sources of status for the competing states include several types of attributes such as the size of the territory, the maturity of the state institutions, the government form, the participation in the international community of state through the membership in intra-governmental organizations and endorsement of sanctions in effect. Further, the status can be derived from the capabilities of the individual states as measured through the changes in GDP, the changes in military capabilities and the population numbers. However, the key to understanding where a status deficit can come from is the realization that status and influence is achieved only within the so-called "status communities" or the alliances of the states. The more the country is disengaged from the community of states commanding a higher status within the international order, the more likely it is that it will be found relegated to the lower status communities, and it can cause an aggressive behaviour which, in turn, can lead to a more militarized option on a broader scale.

The traditional approach in international relations would consider Lithuania's foreign policy clashes with Belarus and Russia stemming from the concrete security concerns and arrangements. Yet, if a more network-based approach is taken into consideration, one could additionally argue that in the end, what all three countries have been fighting in their diplomatic wars for is their state status within the international state order. One can view each country as building each other's status at the cost of each other in response to or concerning the dominant community of states – the Western democracies allied within the EU and NATO.

Lithuania has built its international status from within the Western alliances by emphasizing the role in containment strategies against Russia and, most recently, Belarus, resulting in demoting the international status of Belarus. The experts announced that Lithuania's foreign policy became noticed and recognized in Brussels and Washington. At the same time, Russia, which is still a dominant power across parts of the European and Asian landmass, has tried to uphold its status of greater power by undermining the position of neighbouring countries, including Lithuania but, indirectly, also Belarus. Hence, the use of the hybrid warfare approaches and unconventional measures aims to debase the acquired status of the Lithuanian state, such as the recent incident when Belarusian border guards stopped a Lithuanian vehicle carrying diplomatic mail.

However, such a sudden loss of the international status of Belarus and the continuing uncertainty over Russia's role and position within the international system of states involves considerable risks of igniting local conflicts. Hence, Lithuania has made significant steps towards setting the community of the states aspiring to join the EU and NATO to divert the risks. As recently announced, the creation of the Associated Trio initiative of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine aims to advance these three EU Eastern Partnership countries into the EU and NATO. Georgia is the most advanced candidate to join the alliance. Hence, on 11 June, Lithuania signed a joint declaration with Georgia acknowledging the special relations between the two countries. It aims to strengthen Georgia's international status while the relations with Belarus have reached a dead-end.

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