

# Crises between Lithuania and the Belarus-Russia alliance

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## Abstract

The qualitative study deals with the tensions and crises between Lithuania and the Russia-Belarus duo. It explores the possibility that Lithuania could potentially be the first target in the event of a Russian operation in the Baltic region. The objective of the study is to demonstrate the importance of Lithuania in the defence of the Baltic region. It predominantly examines the period from the start of the Ukraine-Russia War to the present day. Documents relating to the statements of Lithuanian, Western and Russian leaders were examined to obtain findings as the statements made by the leaders and officials are crucial for identifying clues regarding the course of events. For this reason, a document review was conducted to gather data on the subject. Within this framework, the explanatory/descriptive case study method was employed. The research concludes that, for a variety of reasons, Lithuania will be the first target of the Russian aggression in the Baltic region. It seeks to elaborate in as much detail as possible on the factors underpinning this conclusion. The first of these factors is Lithuania's border with Belarus, which is 680 kilometres long and leaves Lithuania vulnerable to initiatives by the Belarus-Russia duo. The second factor concerns Kaliningrad. It has long been known that Russia is uncomfortable with Lithuania controlling access to the Kaliningrad region. The third factor is the bold and pro-independence rhetoric of Lithuanian state officials. In a sense, the Lithuanian leaders are setting an example for the leaders of the other Baltic states through their rhetoric. Therefore, breaking this resistance could be one of Russia's primary objectives. The fourth factor is Lithuania's population, which plays a significant role in the formation of a notable military force. When considering the populations of the Baltic states, it is evident that Lithuania has the largest population. It seems reasonable to suggest that this situation affords Lithuania the opportunity to establish a more substantial military force compared to the other Baltic states. Additionally, the Suwałki Gap can be seen as another reason for Russian aggression.

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## 1. Crises between Lithuania and the Belarus-Russia Alliance

One of the issues that began to be debated following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine has been the question of where Russia's aggression will stop. A key aspect of these discussions is the question of what Russia's next target will be after Ukraine. It can be said that the Baltic states are among the possible targets Russia might turn to after Ukraine. The three countries comprising Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are generally referred to as the Baltic states. These countries gained their independence in 1991 and joined NATO and the EU in 2004 (Derek, 2025). Should Russia turn its attention to the Baltic region, it is conceivable that its first target would be Lithuania. Numerous reasons can be cited for Russia's focus on Lithuania. The first of these is the initiatives Russia has undertaken towards Lithuania via Belarus and in conjunction with Belarus. It is known that Lithuania's longest border is the approximately 680-kilometre border with Belarus. This situation makes Lithuania more vulnerable to the initiatives of pro-Russian Belarus. In a sense, it could also be said that Russia is still making intensive moves towards Lithuania via Belarus. A second reason for Russia's aggressive moves could be the resolution of the connection issue with Kaliningrad through the capture of Lithuania. Among the reasons for a potential aggressive move by Russia towards Ukraine, the sensitivity of Lithuanian leaders regarding independence could also be cited. When analysing the statements of Lithuanian leaders, it appears that the boldest defiance against Russia has come from them. It is conceivable that Russia will seek to neutralise this approach, which serves as an example to the other Baltic states. Another reason is Lithuania's population. As Mearsheimer also points out, population plays a significant role in the formation of a meaningful land army (Mearsheimer, 2014, s. 135). Lithuania's status as the most populous country in the region affords it certain advantages. Consequently, Lithuania is the first country in the Baltic region capable of forming a significant military force. In other words, it could be described as the most important military force capable of curbing Russian aggression. For this reason, it is conceivable that Lithuania could be the primary target in the event of a Russian aggressive move against the Baltic region.

As the issue is still very much in the spotlight, it is fair to say that there is not yet a great deal of academic research on the subject. One of the most notable studies on the topic is Iva Tsoy's article titled 'Not-so-hidden menace. Kremlin propagandists still feel at home in Baltic states' (Tsoy, 2023). In her work, Tsoy examines the strategy Russia has adopted within the context of its propaganda wars. Tsoy also highlights how Russia conducts its intensive propaganda activities targeting Lithuania via Belarus. It is noteworthy that Tsoy demonstrates, with evidence, that the Russia-Belarus duo act in concert. Tsoy's

study is significant in terms of understanding the nature of the propaganda pressure that Russia exerts on Lithuania.

It can be said that Russia's initiatives targeting the Baltic states, particularly Lithuania, are currently being pursued at the level of a propaganda war. Russia has been waging this propaganda war for many years. However, it must be noted that in recent times, Russia has adopted a very aggressive approach in this regard. Demonstrations in Lithuania, which initially appear to be in response to ordinary events, subsequently turn into actions directed against the Lithuanian government. A demonstration that could be characterised in this context took place in August 2021. Protesters attacked the police, throwing stones, bottles and fireworks. It does not seem possible to characterise these highly violent acts as democratic demonstrations. Following these incidents, the then Lithuanian Minister of Defence, Arvydas Anusauskas, stated that these demonstrations and the violent actions were organised by the neighbouring regime in Belarus. Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda also claimed that these actions were carried out with the assistance of foreign countries. It should also be noted that those engaged in activities against the Lithuanian government did not merely hold demonstrations. An investigation conducted by LRT journalists in May 2022 uncovered a network comprising 105 Facebook groups, YouTube channels and various online platforms operated by individuals within the country. It emerged that this network disseminated Kremlin propaganda, including the spread of disinformation regarding the war in Ukraine (Tsoy, 2023).

Another incident suggesting that Belarus's actions against Lithuania—backed by Russia—are not limited to mere propaganda involves balloons entering Lithuanian airspace via Belarus. In a sense, this incident could also be interpreted as an attempt to test Lithuania's air defence systems. On the surface, it appears that thousands of packets of cigarettes are being smuggled into Lithuania via illegal channels by Belarus. However, Lithuanian officials have not viewed this situation merely as a case of illegal cigarette smuggling. Due to these incidents, numerous flights scheduled to take place over Lithuania have had to be postponed. This situation has put the Lithuanian government on high alert. The then Prime Minister of Estonia, Kristen Michal, made statements in support of Lithuania. Michal described the balloons coming from Belarus as a 'hybrid attack' directed at Lithuania (Shenaway, 2025). It must be noted that the aggressive actions of Russia and Belarus have been a source of concern for all the Baltic states. This has been the case at least since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Following the start of this war, security has become the top priority for the Baltic states. As members of NATO and the EU, these countries are seeking to protect themselves through agreements

with these organisations. Furthermore, it is evident that these countries have increased their military spending. They are also encouraging other NATO allies to station troops and equipment on their territory (Miller, 2016). A significant portion of this military spending is directed towards border reinforcement activities. Lithuania has spent millions of dollars on strengthening its border with Belarus. It can be said that the Lithuanians view the Belarusian border as a tool for Russia's low-intensity aggressive actions against the Baltic states. It can be stated that Lithuania's expenditure on border reinforcement is not without cause. When examining the issues that heavily occupy Lithuanian border guards, cigarette smuggling via hot-air balloons, violations by unmanned aerial vehicles, and waves of migrants attempting to enter Lithuania come to the fore (Guenov, 2025). It should also be noted that the migrant flow is not directed solely at Lithuania. Among the countries affected by this flow are Latvia and Poland. The Belarusian government is effectively using these migrants as a weapon against the aforementioned countries. In other words, it could be said that it is orchestrating the migrants to become a source of disruption in these countries. Migrant flows supported by Belarus have led to changes in the legal frameworks of the countries in question. It can be argued that this situation has also led to a paradigm shift at the EU level. Due to this paradigm shift, migrants who are third-country nationals have begun to be perceived as a hybrid threat (Forti, 2023). It can be argued that Belarus and states adopting a hostile stance aim to achieve economic and political gains by using migrant flows as a hybrid attack tool.

The issue of the 'balloons' has resurfaced following Lithuania's closure of its two land border crossings with Belarus. One of the topics under discussion during this process is Russia's link to Kaliningrad. In a sense, the Kaliningrad issue can be cited as one of the justifications for Russia's aggressive stance towards Lithuania. It is a well-known fact that the Russian side has long been concerned about Lithuania's control over access to Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad is the only oblast (administrative division) of Russia that is geographically separated from the rest of the country. Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, made statements regarding the Kaliningrad region on 29 October 2025. These statements were published on the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website. In these statements, Zakharova expressed that they expected Lithuania not to take any steps that would hinder Russia's transit through Kaliningrad. Zakharova emphasised that there are agreements between the EU and Russia dating from 2002 and 2004 regarding transit through Kaliningrad. According to Zakharova, Lithuania is obliged to ensure unimpeded transit to Kaliningrad. During the same period, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kestutis Budrys also stated that

Lithuania reserves the right to block Russian transit in accordance with its national security interests. The Kaliningrad issue has come under increased scrutiny, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Another reason for the debate surrounding this issue is the allegations of violations of European airspace by Russian unmanned aerial vehicles (Teslova, 2025). It is evident that the Kaliningrad issue has emerged as a sensitive geopolitical matter during periods of heightened tension. Additionally, Another factor that could lead to Lithuania becoming a target is the Suwalki Corridor. The capture of this corridor would geographically disconnect the Baltic states from NATO. It could be argued that the Suwalki Corridor makes Lithuania a more strategic target compared to the other Baltic countries. The Suwalki Corridor is a narrow, 100-kilometer border strip between Poland and Lithuania that serves as the only land route connecting the Baltic states to the rest of their NATO allies (Bugajski, 2018).

The rhetoric of the Lithuanian government during the periods of tension is also noteworthy. When examining this rhetoric, two key points stand out. The first is the sensitivity of Lithuanian leaders regarding their independence. The second is the boldness of their rhetoric.

In a post on his social media account in December 2023, Nausėda described Russia as a terrorist, stating that its brutality and bloodthirstiness knew no bounds. In the post, Nausėda also addressed the Ukrainians, urging them to remain strong and emphasising that Lithuania stood with them (Nausėda, 2023). In a statement in March 2024, Nausėda also addressed Russian President Putin, using the words, 'No one here is afraid of you' (Syta, 2024). It is also noted that Nausėda touched upon Russia's aggression in his speech at the UN General Assembly on 23 September 2025. In his speech, Nausėda highlighted that the effects of the war launched by Russia against Ukraine are being felt across the globe. Nausėda also emphasised that this war has led to crises in energy, migration and food security. He further stated that this war has also exacerbated global poverty, hunger, environmental destruction and climate change. Nausėda argues that everything began with the 2014 invasion of Crimea and that this has, over time, evolved into a systematic campaign of war crimes aimed at the occupation of the whole of Ukraine. One of the key points in Nausėda's speech is his emphasis on Ukraine's independence. Nausėda emphasises that Lithuania will not recognise Russia's illegal occupation and annexation of Ukraine. According to Nausėda, Ukraine's borders are not subject to negotiation, and attempts to redraw them by force are unacceptable (Nausėda, 2025).

Another factor suggesting that Lithuania could be Russia's primary target among the Baltic states is its population and military strength. Lithuania has a population of 2.883 million, Latvia has a population of 1.879 million, and Estonia has a population of 1.365 million. Lithuania is the most populous of the Baltic states. It also possesses the largest military force among the three Baltic states. Lithuania's military force comprises 25,300 active-duty, 7,100 reserve, and 18,400 gendarmerie personnel (Mix, 2019). It could be said that, due to its population, Lithuania is in a more favourable position than the other Baltic states when it comes to establishing a significant military force. This could also be interpreted to mean that Lithuania would be capable of offering the most significant resistance in the event of a Russian attack on the Baltic region. The fall of Lithuania could, in a sense, be seen as the fall of the Baltic region. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Russian strategists are well aware of this situation. The possibility of war in the region is being voiced by many. Statements regarding the likelihood of war and the existence of a pre-war period in Eastern Europe are also being made by Western leaders such as Donald Tusk (Kirby, 2024). It is also evident that those speaking of the possibility of war are not limited to Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. The possibility of a conflict between NATO and Russia in Eastern Europe is being expressed by the Russians themselves. Russia's Ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, has made statements on the matter. Antonov speaks of the danger of a direct military conflict between NATO and Russia in Eastern Europe (TASS, 2024). The statements made by Lloyd Austin, the US Secretary of Defence at the time, on this matter are also noteworthy. Austin emphasises that should the war spread to the Baltics, this would draw NATO into the conflict (Slisco, 2024).

## **2. Conclusion**

When it comes to Lithuania, it is evident that Belarus and Russia are acting in concert. For the time being, this is at least the case in terms of the information war directed at Lithuania. On this basis, it can be argued that Russia would act in concert with Belarus in any military initiative directed at Lithuania. Although Belarus's contribution to a potential military operation may not be explicitly stated, it would not be a stretch to suggest that it would act in this manner in practice. It would be a serious misconception to view Russia and Belarus as two separate countries acting independently of one another. Even if the war between Ukraine and Russia were to end in peace, there is no guarantee that the Russia-Belarus duo would cease their aggressive initiatives towards the Baltic region. The possibility remains that, following the war in Ukraine, Russia might regroup and, after a certain

period, engage in more aggressive actions directed at the Baltic region. It appears that, following Ukraine, the Baltic region is one of the strongest candidates to become a flashpoint between Russia and NATO. For academics concerned with the EU security, the question of how the security of the Baltic region—and particularly that of Lithuania—can be ensured remains a subject for research. Another topic worthy of further research is what measures the EU could take to safeguard Lithuania's security.

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