Historical context and military initiatives of Lithuania in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War

Introduction

For more than three years and three months now, there has been an ongoing and unacceptable situation in which Russia has been trying to take Ukrainian land, citing concerns that the country poses a threat to the Moscow regime. Ukraine is perhaps not the only one country which could be a target for the governance of Moscow. Another one may be perhaps Lithuania, a 3 million country. Lithuania is located in the north-eastern part of Europe, and is the southernmost and largest of the three Baltic states which includes Latvia and Estonia. It is immediately interesting to note that both Ukraine and Lithuania were once part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Ukraine and Lithuania are both great nations with a long history, and above all a shared past. These two countries were one and the same in the days of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (XIII-XVIII century). The shared historical past of the Lithuanian and Ukrainian nations has left an indelible mark on the hearts and minds of the government in Vilnius, prompting a deep sense of concern for the challenges currently faced by the Ukrainian people. Like the other Baltic states and Poland, Lithuania has adopted a policy of de-complexity towards Russia, aimed at preventing any Russian invasion. What measures has the southernmost of the three Baltic states adopted? Can the presence of a large Russian minority in Lithuania serve as a pretext for Russian military action or diversification?Before presenting these, the first part of this document will focus on the geopolitical context in which Gediminas's homeland finds itself.

The context

In addition to the historical context referred to above and bearing in mind that Lithuania once belonged to the USSR, making it ideal prey for the governance of Vladmir Putin, Lithuania's geographical location must be also emphasised. This situation further contributes to the complexity of the situation in Lithuania. It is worth noting that Lithuania shares a border with both Russia (approximately 280 kilometres) and Belarus (nearly 700 kilometres). Russia's military buildup and frequent military exercises near Baltic borders have led to concerns about the possibility of escalation or invasion (Dudzińska 2023; Dvorak 2025). Especially as the Russians have an old technique, which is that all wars

began with manoeuvres around the borders', A military exercise called 'Zapad' is due to start again at the end of summer 2025, in which Russia and Belarus will simulate a large-scale conflict with NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) to the west of Belarusian territory.[1] The problem is also driven by the presence of a vibrant russian minority living in some Lithuanian cities (among 5% of the total lithuanian population), like for instance in Visaginas, which do not always follow the position of Vilnius on the Russian-Ukrainian War.[2]

It is particularly relevant in the context of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, being located just approximately thirty kilometres from the border with Belarus. It is important to note that Belarus has been used as a rear base by the Russian army for its operations in Ukraine. It is also interesting to note that the localisation of Seoul, which is about fifty kilometres from the border with North Korea, is also of interest in this regard. Kaunas, the second city of Lithuania, is approximately 100 kilometres from the Russian border, and Klaipeda is 60 kilometres from the Kaliningrad exclave, which is a strategic military region (Strănică 2022: 118). In light of the potential risks posed by Russia's military operations in Ukraine, and given the specific circumstances of the localisation of these cities, it is essential that the three aforementioned Lithuanian cities be prepared to face any potential challenges. For instance, the intelligence services have noted a steady increase in diversions. One of the latest examples is the arrest at the end of 2024 of two Spaniards. They wanted to set fire to a Lithuanian company producing equipment for Ukraine. These Spanish citizens were sqaid to work for Russian authorities.[3] Lithuanian authorities have recently announced the creation of a survival guide for its population in the event of a Russian attack.[4]

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[1] Source : *Zapad-25: Could Russia And Belarus Be Plotting Another Ukraine Invasion?* *https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/zapad-25-could-russia-and-belarus-be-plotting-another-ukraine-invasion* (date of access: 10.05.2025).

[2] *Visagino politikai susiginčijo, ar bendradarbiauti su Rusijos okupuotu Ukrainos miestu*, https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2546409/visagino-politikai-susigincijo-ar-bendradarbiauti-su-rusijos-okupuotu-ukrainos-miestu?srsltid=AfmBOopWUeFjnfgo20rGxLSqAbUePxHo7mICYjoZsIwU9WtbrW8lCiZX (date of access: 19.05.2025).

[3] Source : *Du ispanai Lietuvoje ketino surengti teroristinį aktą*, https://www.laikmetis.lt/du-ispanai-lietuvoje-ketino-surengti-teroristini-akta/ (date of access: 19.05.2025).

[4] Source: *Vilnius pristatė evakuacijos planą – numatytas detalus procesas, pagrindinės kryptys bei pagalba gyventojams*, https://vilnius.lt/naujienos/vilnius-pristate-evakuacijos-plana-numatytas-detalus-procesas-pagrindines-kryptys-bei-pagalba-gyventojams (date of access: 10.05.2025).

Military initiatives

In the context of what some perceive to be a growing Russian threat, Lithuania has made significant progress in increasing its defense budget, aligning with NATO recommendations to allocate at least 2% of GDP to defense. It is recommended that consideration be given to the procurement of modern equipment, including new infantry weapons, armoured vehicles and air defence systems, with a view to improving operational capabilities.

This Baltic state has also announced its intention to increase its military spending to 6% of its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) by 2030.[5] It should not be forgotten, however, that Lithuanian governance has failed to take into account other events relating to Russia's expansionist policy, from the invasion of Georgia in 2008 to the unjustified occupation of Ukrainian Crimea in 2014. In any case Lithuania has a high percentage of military expenditure as a percentage of its GDP among NATO members.

In light of recent developments, the Lithuanian authorities have taken the initiative to establish a critical infrastructure protection programme. The aim of this programme is to safeguard key infrastructure, including energy, communication and transportation networks, against any potential acts of sabotage or cyber threats (Warren 2023: 520; Pleskach 2024). So it's no surprise that Lithuania is seeking to separate itself from the Russian energy network with which Baltic states through the BRELL (Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) Agreement signed in 2001. The three Baltic states separated from the Russian grid in February 2025. Preparations for integration into the European grid have nevertheless taken many years, due to a number of technological and financial problems, and the need to diversify their sources of supply in the meantime, notably via undersea cables.[6]

In terms of air defence systems, the Lithuanian government is giving some thought to the potential acquisition of additional NASAMS (Norwegian Advanced Surface-to-Air

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[5] Source: Lietuva nusprendė: krašto gynybai skirs daugiausiai Europoje – beveik 6 proc. BVP, https://77.lt/lietuva-nusprende-krasto-gynybai-skirs-daugiausiai-europoje-beveik-6-proc-bvp (date of access: 15.05.2025).

[6] Source : *Kaip atrodys Baltijos šalių elektros tinklų sinchronizavimas su Vakarų Europa*, https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/verslas/4/2476971/kaip-atrodys-baltijos-saliu-elektros-tinklu-sinchronizavimas-su-vakaru-europa?srsltid=AfmBOoocBw4pPwU34AT6DItQwdtKBMyow9rKlcbCiYtvmwCWMrcG5N_0 (date of access: 15.05.2025).

Missile System) batteries. In terms of air defence systems, the Lithuanian government is giving some thought to the potential acquisition of additional NASAMS (Norwegian Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System) batteries [7] However, given Lithuania's participation in the European missile shield project initiated by Germany within NATO, there is a possibility for a rapprochement with Estonia and Latvia, as both countries have expressed their intention to consolidate their purchases of German IRIS-T SLM systems.[8] In the spirit of cooperation and mutual readiness, there have been numerous large-scale military drills with NATO allies, such as Exercise Saber Strike and NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) rotations, to maintain high readiness. [9] Lithuania also hosts NATO multinational battlegroups, primarily led by Germany and the United States, which serve as a deterrent against aggression. Lithuania hosts Rapid Reaction Forces capable of responding swiftly to emerging threats. Furthermore, in terms of human factors the Lithuanian government is now aiming for an army of 12,000 men excluding a reserve of 38,000 soldiers.[10]

Since its accession to NATO on 29 March 2002, Lithuania has been able to establish substantial connections with the military alliance. Lithuania is playing an active role in NATO's defence planning and strategic exercises, with a view to ensuring interoperability and readiness for example trough the organization of the NATO summit in July 2023.[11] In an effort to enhance border security, Lithuania has introduced advanced technology, increased patrols, and reinforced physical barriers. These measures are intended to prevent illegal crossings and potential infiltration. In an effort to enhance their cyber defence capabilities, the Lithuanian authorities have established a Cyber Emergency Response Team (CERT-Lithuania), which has been integrated into NATO's cyber defence framework. This strategic move is aimed at addressing the challenges

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[7] Source : *Lithuania acquires more NASAMS air defence from KONGSBERG*, https://www.kongsberg.com/newsroom/news-archive/2024/NASAMS/ (date of access: 15.05.2025).
[8] Source : *Lithuania Eyes Acquisition of IRIS-T Air Defence Missile System from Germany*, https://armyrecognition.com/news/army-news/army-news-2024/lithuania-eyes-acquisition-of-iris-t-air-defence-missile-system-from-germany (date of access: 15.05.2025).
[9] Source : *NATO Multinational Battle Group*, https://kariuomene.lt/en/our-allies/nato-multinational-battle-group/23570 (date of access: 15.05.2025).
[10] Source: *Number of professional soldiers in Lithuania's army is rising too slowly – president*, https://balticnews.com/number-of-professional-soldiers-in-lithuanias-army-is-rising-too-slowly-president/ (date of access: 10.05.2025).
[11] Source : *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm (date of access: 19.05.2024).

posed by hybrid threats and cyberattacks. On a societal basis, several initiatives were taken to educate citizens on civil defence, emergency preparedness, and resilience. The Lithuanian army is also participating to joint exercises especially in cooperation with the Polish Army in the Suwalki Gap, intelligence sharing, and policy development. The Suwalki Gap is a 70-kilometre-long border strip between Lithuania and Poland. On one side it is bordered by Belarus and on the other by the Kaliningrad exclave. If Russia were to attack, for instance from both sides, capturing this corridor would sever the land link between the Baltic States and the rest of NATO (Elak 2016).

From the legal aspects, Lithuanian authorities implemented laws to counter hybrid threats, espionage, and disinformation campaigns by regularly revising national security strategies to address evolving threats and ensure comprehensive preparedness (Uksaitė 2025: 132). In 2022, the value of trade between Lithuania and South Korea amounted to 204 million dollars with a focus on sawn wood and Polycarboxylic acids.[12] In this context, it would be interesting to consider the potential role that South Korea could play in Lithuanian military strategy. In 2024, Vilnius recognised South Korea as a strategic interlocutor in Asia.[13] However, Lithuania has not yet acquired some South Korean equipment, in contrast to Poland.[14] Given that this is a strategic area and taking in account the geopolitical context, it is possible that some data will not yet be available to the public.

The overarching objective of these initiatives is to collectively deter Russian aggression, reinforce Lithuania's sovereignty, and contribute to the security architecture of the Baltic region and the NATO alliance. Furthermore, Lithuania has announced its intention to withdraw from the Ottawa Convention, which prohibits the use of anti-personnel mines (Malużinas 2023: 160).

Conclusion

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[12] Source : *Lithuania/South Korea*, https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/ltu/partner/kor#:~:text=Latest%20Data&text=In%20February%202025%2C%20Lithuania%20exported%20%247.67M%20to%20South%20Korea,an%20annualized%20rate%20of%208.1%25 (date of access: 15.05.2025).

[13] Source: *Lapkričio 26 d. Pietų Korėjoje lankėsi Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidento vyriausiasis patarėjas Kęstutis Budrys*, https://kr.mfa.lt/naujienos/1/lapkricio-26-d.-pietu-korejoje-lankesi-lietuvos-respublikos-prezidento-vyriausiasis-patarejas-kestutis-budrys:44 (date of access: 15.05.2025).

[14] Source: *A. Armonaitė su Pietų Korėjos verslo milžine aptarė galimybes veikti Lietuvoje*, https://eimin.lrv.lt/lt/ziniasklaidai/naujienos/a-armonaite-su-pietu-korejos-verslo-milzine-aptare-galimybes-veikti-lietuvoje (date of access: 10.05.2025).

Lithuania finds itself in a situation that may prove untenable in terms of its position in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Although the official population of Lithuania is in no doubt that it condemns Moscow's military operation, the fact remains that, with a Russian-speaking minority, the government of Vilnius must remain vigilant to the aspirations of this population. Indeed, it may turn out that they want to draw closer to Moscow, which could be seen as a reason for Putin's regime to attack the country, despite the presence of NATO forces. Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingryda Simonite, although a conservative, advocates a firm stance towards Moscow. The Russian authorities have criticised her for her Russophobic attitude.[15] These factors could therefore provoke a Russian reaction, not necessarily through armed confrontation, but through acts of diversion.

While Lithuania has increased its defence expenditure, ensuring sustained funding to meet modernisation goals and operational readiness remains a concern, especially in the context of broader economic pressures and a high inflation. In this context, a partnership with South Korea could be the answer, given that a similar partnership has already been developed between Warsaw and Seoul. The proximity of Lithuania to Poland may also enable these three countries to establish military synergies, although these would unfortunately require a considerable amount of time for implementation.

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