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The international role of Lithuania towards the crisis in Belarus

Lithuania has become the greatest advocate for the Belarusian problem, not only regionally but also globally. Its quick response and strong voice in favor of democratic processes in Belarus are determined by its experiences related to the Lithuanian resistance to the Soviet regime and its security concerns in the region. Despite the tense bilateral relations, the historical heritage and moral responsibility empower Lithuania to commit more strongly to the aspirations for independence of its southern neighbor. Thus, its position and credibility as a responsible partner in international relations have been increasing.

Initiator of activities and an example for the international community. Lithuania has become the most active state for supporting democratic processes in Belarus. It was the first state in Central Europe to recognize the threat of governmental violence against protesters and took active measures at the regional and European levels ("[IEŚ Commentaries](#)", no. 235). Lithuania initiated the process of including the situation in Belarus into the UN Human Rights Council's agenda, and President Gitanas Nausėda called on the UN Secretary-General António Guterres to draw attention to the scale of the problem of human rights violations. In recent weeks, Lithuania has also been one of the most involved member states within the EU – it called for solidarity with Belarus and proposed establishing an EU fund to help victims of repression in Belarus.

Due to the absence of an adequate response from the EU, on August 18, the Lithuanian Seimas adopted a resolution refusing to recognize Alexander Lukashenko as the legitimate leader of the Republic of Belarus and called on the European Commission and the member states of the EU and NATO, not to recognize the result of the presidential elections in Belarus and to impose sanctions on its officials. There was a cross-party consensus to solve the issue.

The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has submitted a list of 118 Belarusian officials responsible for the falsification of the electoral process and the use of violence against demonstrators. Finally, the so-called President Lukashenko's blacklist was approved jointly by Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia and contained 30 names of people banned from entering the Baltic states, including the President of Belarus – Alexander Lukashenko, his son – Viktor, the Minister of Internal Affairs and deputy ministers, as well as the Members of the Central Election Commission. In response to Lithuania's actions, President Lukashenko announced to take retaliatory sanctions, and Russia accused Lithuania of destabilizing the situation and violating Belarus' sovereignty.

About 50,000 Lithuanian inhabitants united in brotherhood and empathy towards Belarus standing from Vilnius towards the Belarusian border, following the model of the "Baltic chain" of August 23, 1989. Several hundred Latvians and Estonians, and many social organizations around the world, also joined the demonstration. Vilnius University has offered free studies and scholarships to Belarusian students coming to Lithuania as a gesture of solidarity.

However, there was a thorn in Lithuania's side. A few politicians representing the Polish minority in Lithuania, namely, the member of the political party of AWPL-ZChR, Zbigniew Jedinskij, and the leader of the party, Valdemar Tomaševski, have stated that the Belarusian police "defends the constitution" and the categorical voice of the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius towards the Belarusian authorities prevents dialogue.

Lithuanian political identity and common heritage. Vilnius has already become a direction for representatives of the Belarusian opposition seeking asylum and a center for democratic opposition leaders from Eastern European countries. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the leader of the opposition in Belarus, arrived in Lithuania

shortly after the presidential elections while several dozen protesters took advantage of the facilitation of border-crossing procedures and came to Lithuania “for humanitarian purposes” (“[IEŚ Commentaries](#)”, no. 235). As early as 2004, the liberal European Humanities University moved to Vilnius, as did many Belarusian non-governmental organizations. The international forum of Konstantinas Kalinauskas was established in the city as a platform to discuss the democratic future of Belarus.

The promotion of democratic values and the support of post-Soviet nations seeking their sovereignty seem to be a part of Lithuanian political identity. Security issues are also of significance; for Lithuania, the liberal regime in Belarus and the weak Belarusian-Russian relations could improve its security perception. Moreover, from a long-term perspective, Belarus may share Lithuania’s counteraction against Russia. The geographical proximity, historical experiences, cultural similarities, and social ties determine Lithuania’s commitment and constitute the principles of its foreign policy towards Belarus.

The experiences of the Soviet regime empower Lithuania to support Belarusians at the international level, demanding free and fair elections. According to Lithuanian public opinion Belarus’ current situation resembles Lithuanians’ aspirations for freedom in the late 1980s, when the independence processes were initiated. As a result, Lithuania was the first Soviet republic to declare independence.

The common heritage – the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – may, in fact, be both a stimulus and a barrier to further cooperation. Interestingly, apart from the white-red-white flag, the protesters have adopted the symbol of Pogon (Pahonia), which both the Belarusian People’s Republic and modern Belarus (1991-1995) used previously. It was also a symbol of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania where the official language was Ruthenian until the late 17th century. From the Lithuanian conservatives’ point of view, this is a reason to raise concerns about Belarusian attempts to appropriate the Lithuanian heritage.

Bilateral relations frozen. Despite the relatively friendly attitude toward Belarus at the beginning of Dalia Grybauskaitė’s first term of her presidency, bilateral relations have remained tense for years. Political dialogue at the highest level was suspended due to the close cooperation between Belarus and Russia. Lithuania blocked the framework agreement between Belarus and the EU and severely criticized the Zapad-2017 military exercise, accusing both Belarus and Russia of threatening its sovereignty and national security.

Currently, it is the Astravets nuclear power plant in Belarus, the construction of which began in 2013, that is the biggest obstacle undermining the bilateral relations. Despite strenuous efforts, Lithuania did not manage to block the investment, which caused mutual misunderstanding between the Baltic states. President Gitanas Nausėda, who announced the resumption of dialogue with Belarus, was supposed to give a new impetus to the bilateral relations, especially as a consequence of the change of the US and EU policy towards this country and the deterioration of relations between Belarus and Russia. The Lithuanian “red lines” refer to security matters (including the Astravets nuclear power plant) and respect for human rights while they define the Lithuanian *raison d’état*. The greater openness of economic and cultural cooperation, and intensive social communication, would however, establish additional rapprochement opportunities between Lithuania and Belarus.

Conclusions. Lithuania’s hitherto efforts have been aimed at drawing the international community’s attention and exerting pressure on it to take more decisive action on the Belarus problem. In the Lithuanian case, the state’s small territory and weak potential seem to be an advantage for its relationship with the Belarusian society. Because of its consistency and determination, Lithuania was recognized by the international community as a reliable partner. As a result this recognition has increased and its political position.

Lithuania’s activity is based both on global interests, such as the promotion of democratic principles and peaceful settlement of international disputes, and on security perception and national interests. The effectiveness of its foreign policy resulted from the political decisions and practical measures. Lithuania was among the greatest supporters and initiators of sanctions against Belarusian officials. Although it is important from the point of view of mutual solidarity, the decision to impose the sanctions will not stimulate the process of stabilization of the post-election situation in the country. Only the EU joint commitment could be more painful for the Belarusian authoritarian authorities. While a decision regarding sanctions has been made on the

European level, it will take longer to coordinate the details and finally delay the EU's response. In practice, quick response of medical and social assistance towards oppositionists coming to Lithuania, and, in the longer term, support for Belarusian students in Lithuania, seems to be particularly important.

Without a doubt, Lithuania's reaction toward the independence aspirations of the Belarusians is positive despite the statements of some politicians representing the Polish minority in Lithuania, which are contrary to the Lithuanian *raison d'état*. Moreover, they are against the principal interests of the Polish minority in the country (such as minority and human rights protection), suggesting that the minority supports the Belarusian authoritarian regime. It seems these statements sought to gain the support of the Russian-speaking citizens in Lithuania in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections (October 11/25). As a consequence, however, the AWPL-ZChR tactics may strengthen the stereotype of Poles in Lithuania as Kremlin supporters.