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Security as a priority in Polish-Lithuanian relations

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Poland and Lithuania have significantly strengthened their political relations recently, as numerous official visits at the highest level have reflected. Lithuania was visited by the Foreign Minister of Poland, Radosław Sikorski, then President Andrzej Duda, Speaker of the Sejm Szymon Hołownia, and Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Representatives of both countries have confirmed their solidarity in case of any military threat from Russia as well as the will to continue cooperation in the fields of economy, society, and culture. Intensive bilateral relations express a strategic partnership that is important not only for Poland and Lithuania but also for the entire Baltic Sea region. It may also be the first step toward defining the long-term priorities of the northern policy of Poland.

Calendars full of meetings. Since the beginning of 2024, many top-level meetings have been held between representatives of Poland and Lithuania, which prove the intensification of bilateral relations. Particularly within the foreign policy of the newly elected Polish government, Lithuania occupies a priority position. In January, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski met his Lithuanian counterpart, Gabrielius Landsbergis, in Vilnius. It was the second foreign visit of the Polish minister since he began performing this function in December 2023. The foreign ministers of Poland and Lithuania discussed the issues of further support for Ukraine, the security situation, defence cooperation in the region, and the tightening of sanctions against Russia and Belarus. They also emphasised the importance of bilateral critical infrastructure projects – synchronisation of the power grids of the Baltic states with Western Europe, the Rail Baltica, and the Via Baltica. Also in January, Polish President Andrzej Duda arrived in Lithuania and met with Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda in order to celebrate the 161st anniversary of the outbreak of the January Uprising (1863-1864). The leaders of both countries discussed bilateral cooperation in the field of defence, the security situation in the region, and the issue of assistance to Ukraine.

In February, Speaker of the Sejm Szymon Hołownia paid his first official visit abroad to Vilnius, where he met the Speaker of the Lithuanian Seimas, Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen. In addition to security and defence issues, regional cooperation and multilateral formats were discussed. Challenges related to the education and preservation of the national identity of the Polish minority in Lithuania and the Lithuanian minority in Poland were also discussed. In March, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk visited Vilnius, where, together with Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, he raised issues related to security and the economy, and confirmed solidarity and guarantees of cooperation in the event of a threat. The visit of Prime Minister Tusk, who as the Prime Minister of the Polish government last visited Vilnius 13 years ago, was very positively received by public opinion in Lithuania. At the same time, there was another meeting between Gitanas Nausėda and Andrzej Duda, who together observed the NATO Dragon 2024 military exercise in Korzeniewo in the Pomeranian Voivodeship. A series of exercises named Steadfast Defender-24 were intended to test the readiness and efficiency of the Alliance to deter and defend against potential threats in land, air, and sea conditions. In addition to the presidents of Poland and Lithuania, the event was also attended by, among others, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

Strengthening regional security as a priority of Polish-Lithuanian cooperation. At all meetings at the highest level, the main topic of discussion was regional security and support for Ukraine in the context of Russia's aggression. Politicians unanimously agreed that the current Polish-Lithuanian relations are of a strategic nature, and in the event of a situation of direct threat, the countries will provide each other with military assistance. These declarations were even more important after the words of General Ben Hodges, former commander of US land forces in Europe, who, in January 2024, stated that Russia, wanting to test NATO's collective defence, would be more

willing to conduct small-scale operations in the Baltic states than a full-scale attack on Finland. In turn, during the Vilnius Security Forum in February 2024, he assessed that in the event of a Russian attack, Lithuania may be forced to defend itself for at least two weeks. Thus, he made it clear that the guarantees arising from Article 5 of NATO are not automatic but are activated as a result of the internal procedures of allied countries. This second statement by General Hodges sparked an emotional debate in Lithuania, especially when Prime Minister Šimonytė pointed out that Polish legislation limits the participation of the Polish Armed Forces in Lithuania in the case of aggression. Her words raised the question of whether Poland would provide help to Lithuania in a situation of threat. Both Prime Minister D. Tusk and President A. Duda responded to Šimonytė's concerns and assured her that Poland was ready to defend the entire territory of NATO, including Lithuania. They emphasised that Russia remains the main and long-term military threat to the Alliance, and close and solidary cooperation of both countries in the field of security and defence is a priority for Poland. It was also recalled that from 2022, the Polish-Lithuanian plan for the defence of the Suwałki Gap (the so-called Orsha plan) provides that in the event of a military attack, Polish soldiers would also defend the territory of Lithuania.

The background of the current bilateral talks on regional security was the protests of Polish farmers, especially those who had been blocking the road at the Kalwaria-Budziska border crossing with Lithuania since the beginning of March. Although Minister Landsbergis expressed concern that the protests may be called "hybrid actions" directed against the national security of Poland and Lithuania, so far these actions have been peaceful. Polish farmers protested against the uncontrolled inflow of grain from Ukraine, fearing that it was being re-exported from Lithuania to Poland. In turn, in Lithuania, the challenge is the importing of agricultural products from Russia and Belarus. In January, Lithuanian farmers organized protests in Vilnius, where they called, among other things, for limiting the import of Russian grain to Lithuania. In February, Latvia already introduced a ban on the import of grain and other agricultural and feed products from Russia and Belarus (according to data from the Latvian Ministry of Agriculture, the import of agricultural products from Russia to Latvia in the first ten months of last year amounted to EUR 280 million, which corresponded to 12% of the total import of these goods in the EU). Lithuania also plans to introduce similar restrictions.

A contribution to the northern foreign policy of Poland. Poland's intense relations with Lithuania may be the first step in preparing the assumptions for the long-term northern policy of Poland, which Speaker of the Sejm Sz. Hołownia talked about during his visit to Vilnius. Poland's northern policy would be based on an alliance with the Baltic-Nordic partners, and its goal would be to implement Poland's interests in the field of security (the main threat remains Russia and its semi-exclave – the Königsberg Oblast), as well as to develop existing relations and initiate new forms of regional cooperation. This would be achieved through meetings at various levels (heads of state, government, parliament) as well as multilateral formats, including: the Lublin Triangle or what Hołownia called – the Baltic Triangle. The latter becomes particularly important after the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. In the future, the Polish-Baltic-Nordic cooperation could also constitute a pillar of the EU policy in the context of the reconstruction of Ukraine. Poland's northern policy would also be part of shaping the European north-south axis of contacts.

Conclusions. Regional security remains the main area of cooperation between Poland and Lithuania. Poland is directly involved in strengthening the security of the Baltic region, actively participating in the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission and taking part in joint military exercises. Further activities envisage the development of Polish-Lithuanian cooperation in the defence industry. What they have in common is the perspective of perceiving not only military threats from Russia but also hybrid ones – disinformation or illegal migration, supported by the Belarusian regime on the borders of Lithuania, Poland, and Latvia. The countries also agree on maintaining and expanding the package of sanctions against Russia as well as continuing financial and military support for Ukraine. During his visit to Vilnius, Prime Minister D. Tusk announced that he would submit to Sz. Hołownia a proposal for a resolution of the Sejm calling on the European Commission to impose sanctions on agricultural and food products of Russian and Belarusian origin in order to protect the European agricultural market. This idea was also supported by the Prime Minister of Lithuania, I. Šimonytė.

Intensive bilateral relations are an expression of the strategic partnership between Poland and Lithuania, which is important not only for both countries but also for the entire Baltic Sea region. They can also be the first step in defining the long-term priorities of Poland's northern policy. The 30th anniversary of the Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Lithuania on Friendly Relations and Good Neighbourly Cooperation, which falls on 26 April 2024, might be an opportunity to further discuss the future of Polish-Lithuanian relations.