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Geopolitical and geostrategic situation of Lithuania in the context of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation - with an outlook to 2019

Original article

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper discusses the problems faced by Lithuania in its current geopolitical and geostrategic situation, as a post-Soviet state that has fairly recently joined the structures of the European Union and NATO. As one of the Baltic States with a relatively small territory and without significant natural resources, it must rely on cooperation with other states and the trade exchange, mainly with the Russian Federation.

Lithuania is a small state, which - seemingly - would be capable of pursuing only regional politics, not geopolitics in the strategic sense.

Methods: Analysys, inference, reductive reasoning, SWOT analysis.

Results: The conducted analysis and rational assessment of Lithuania's geopolitical and geostrategic problems shows that it is increasingly difficult to predict the direction in which the broadly defined policy and strategy of the country will develop in the 21st century and in the far future.

Conclusions: Based on the consideration presented in this paper, it can be concluded that Lithuania, as a member of the European Union and NATO, does not have its own geopolitics and geostrategy, as it is still dependent on the policy of the Russian Federation. This dependence is, to a large extent, due to its geographical location in the Baltic region, through which important communication and transport routes from the Russian Federation to Central and Western Europe run. In addition, almost 6 per cent of Lithuania's population are Russians, in relation to whom the Russian government pursues its own demographic policy by indoctrinating them in Russian schools and universities.

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Yalta-Potsdam order brought about major changes in the region of the former USSR, fifteen republics of which, including the Republic of Lithuania, became independent states.

Initially, “Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia saw their future geopolitical role as a bridge between NATO and Russia. The period of relatively stable cooperation and neutral relations between the Baltic states and Russia was interrupted by Putin's aggressive policy towards the Central and Eastern European states. However, it was the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine that caused a significant drop in the sense of security in the region” (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2017). The relations between the governments of Russia and Lithuania can be described as difficult due to the border, nationality and energy-related issues. In addition, Lithuania's accession to the European Union (1.05.2004) and NATO (29.03.2004) triggered changes in Russia's foreign policy, as the country had lost its grip in terms of political and economic influence over Lithuania and other countries created after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Herasymenko, 2016).

Changes in this region caused shifts in the balance of the existing international order, as well as the need to create new international norms. As Jakub Potulski (2011) rightly observed in his article, “[...] interdependence, globalisation and transnationality have become important elements co-creating the international system and influencing its effectiveness. A new type of international connections is formed, megacapitalism is being born with global trade, money and the world economy...].” In addition, threats related to the depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, international terrorism and mass migrations have also become global. Therefore, in order to understand the politics of superpowers, it is necessary to examine what the long-term goals of geopoliticians are.

The aim of geopoliticians is to “determine the detailed causes and consequences of the rise and fall of states, empires, superpowers, political and military blocs [...] Geopolitics is primarily interested in processes, trends, cycles, cause-effect relationships and conditions” (Sykulski, 2014). This means that in terms of geopolitics, individual events are irrelevant and the past should be considered within the framework of historical processes that affect the resulting international order. From the geopolitical point of view, "there is no present, there is only the past, as a source of knowledge about cause-and-effect processes and business cycles, temporal and spatial trends, and the future" (Sykulski, 2014), which is shaped by it.

As Jan Wendt (2019) notes, “geopolitics starts where we have to deal with political forecasting in terms of the spatial aspect of a given state's economic and demographic potential”. According to Leszek Sykulski (2014), the main spatial factors that are relevant from the geopolitical point of view include: “location, shape of the territory, length of borders, access to seas and oceans (insular or continental nature of the territory), climate and natural resources”. The notion of geopolitical location refers to the impact of a given country's geographic position, (terrain, access to bodies of water, climate, neighbouring countries etc.) on the foreign policy and security of a state (or groups of states). The term encompasses both the description and assessments of geopolitical positioning of that country in the past, at present, as well as the visions and models of its hypothetical future positioning.” The above-mentioned spatial factors are relevant to the situation of the Baltic States (including Lithuania) and the Russian Federation, as the new international order that was shaped in the 1990s brought significant changes to these factors.

Quite an accurate summary of this issue is offered by Jan Wendt (2019), who states that “the relations between states and the geopolitical location in a clear way allow highlight the impact of geopolitics on international relations”.

1. Geopolitics of the Russian Federation

When analysing Russia's global position, it is important to point out that the geopolitical order that was formed in the 1990s significantly reduced the country's opportunity for exerting international influence. As Jakub Potulski (2010) observes, Russia lost its status as a global superpower, becoming a regional power with its own regional and civilisational interests. “The internal crisis and changes in the external environment led to a gradual transformation of Russia from a global superpower to a Eurasian regional power” (Cziomer, Zyblikiewicz, 2005). However, given Russia's current geopolitical position, it can still be the basis of its foreign policy.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about significant changes in the international order, as a key player on the international arena, often operating on a global scale, ceased to exist. Russia's internal situation also underwent radical changes that resulted in a civilisational crisis in all spheres of the country's social life.

Russian geopolitics “from the early 1930s to the mid-1980s. [...] was considered a 'bourgeois science', contradicting the principles of Marxism-Leninism, and it was official prohibited to pursue it. During that period it could only be mentioned in negative terms” (Sykulski, 2019). Whereas previously the term tended to be treated as a 'pseudo-science'

(Potulski, 2010), after the collapse of the USSR, the interest in geopolitics in the Russian Federation has been growing, eventually becoming a separate scientific discipline.

The collapse of the USSR led to transformations of the internal and external environment in Russia. The loss of a significant part of the country's territory, important ports, natural resources, infrastructure or land routes connecting it with Europe (Central and Western), had raised questions related to national interests, cultural belonging and the role and place of the Russian Federation in the modern world (Potulski, 2008). The problem of arranging bilateral relations with the independent states that were formed on the territory of the former USSR became an important topic.

The Russian Federation, never fully reconciled with the collapse of the USSR and the loss of its ability to exert influence over the former USSR republics, was forced to accept this state of affairs. As a result, its relations with these countries have been far from good ever since. “In the early 1990s, Russia, as the legal international successor and continuator of the USSR, sought to define and clarify its interests in the post-Soviet region, treated as a separate sphere of influence. This important area of Russia's security zone was dubbed as the ‘near abroad’. Any foreign interference in this strategic security zone came to be viewed as a violation of Russia's vital interests” (Melendovsky, 2017).

The President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, in his speech (2005), described the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”, which for the Russian people became a genuine tragedy.

All these changes meant that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had to face fundamental questions about its territorial scope, vital interests, cultural belonging and the role it should play in the modern world (Potulski, 2010).

In such circumstances, it was necessary to establish a new concept of the country's foreign policy, define the role of the new Russia in the international order, as well as establish relations with the newly independent states.

Despite the mentioned changes, Russia remains a state with a large territory and vast natural resources, with ambitions to rebuild the Russian empire and create a new global superpower. It is aware that through economic measures and energy policy, it can secure its influence over the former USSR states. Russia's energy policy “plays a major role in its bilateral relations with the Baltic states. For this reason, it takes advantage of these states' dependence on energy resources” (Urbanski, 2015). In addition, it should be borne in mind that on the territories of these countries there are important for Russia facilities of trade infrastructure (ports) and transmission of energy resources, through the Druzhba oil

transmission pipeline, which has caused energy dependence of the Baltic States on Russia. “However, with financial support from the EU, these countries have taken steps - with a varying degree of success and, unfortunately, not in cooperation with one another - to make their energy sector more independent on Russia's raw materials” (Hyndle-Hussein, 2015). Due to the problems experienced in 2006 with the suspension of oil transit through the branch of the Druzhba pipeline, which supplied the Mazeikiu refinery, Lithuania started to take steps to reduce its energy dependence on Russia by launching the Klaipeda LNG terminal project.

Leszek Sykulski (2019) defined the strategic interests of the Russian Federation in the context of geopolitics as: “...securing the political influence in the region of the so-called 'near border', which, in a simplified manner, can be defined as the areas of the former Soviet Union [...], expansion of its influence or neutralisation of the countries of the former Warsaw Pact [...], securing Russian interests in the Arctic”.

In order to pursue its interests, “Russia has for years attempted to keep the Baltic States within its sphere of influence in various areas, from politics to the economy, and its policy in this regard has already had before an aggressive nature” (Hyndle-Hussein, 2015).

2. Geopolitical and geostrategic situation of the Baltic States, including the Republic of Lithuania

At this point, it is worth to take a closer look at the geopolitical and geostrategic situation of Russia's neighbouring countries, mainly Lithuania.

A resurgence of geopolitical issues in the region in question dates back to the late 1960s, with its major intensification at the end of the 20th century. This was due to several reasons: the disintegration of the bipolar world order, the collapse of the USSR, the emergence of a united Europe, changes in relations between the US and Europe, German unification, the revival of ethnic nationalisms, globalisation, and the emergence of new international actors (Potulski, 2010). “These events gave rise to the demand for a kind of geopolitical space to be managed and through which a description of the changed international system could be made and a policy developed to address the challenges posed by globalisation and the formation of a new world order. These factors have led to the rehabilitation of geopolitical terminology in the interpretation of international relations” (Potulski, 2010).

The geopolitical problems of the Republic of Lithuania should be considered in geopolitical and geostrategic terms of a state located in Central (Northern) Europe.

The security situation of Lithuania, which borders Russia, Belarus, Poland and Latvia, depends, to a large extent, on its geographic location, as well as its membership in the European Union and NATO.

The document that defined Lithuania's goals and interests was the National Security Strategy of Lithuania, adopted in 2012, which “in addition to vital interests (such as sovereignty and territorial integrity)” lists “ten basic security interests of the state (from Euro-Atlantic security to the national and ethnic distinctiveness)” (Yakniunaite, 2016). Due to the fact that since the adoption of the aforementioned strategy the external and internal security environment had changed, a new Lithuanian Security Strategy was approved in 2017, which identifies new threats to security, including: “a conventional military threat from the Russian Federation, which is building up its military presence in close proximity to the borders of the Republic of Lithuania, [...] The next major threat are foreign intelligence agents trying to destabilise the political situation in Lithuania. This is followed by the threat of the weakening unity of the Euro-Atlantic community” (study 2019). The document also mentions, issues related to the lack of stability near (and further away from) the borders of Lithuania, terrorism, extremism, information warfare, cyber-attacks, as well as economic and energy dependency.

Accession to the European Union has created opportunities for Lithuania's economic development and the improvement of the standard of living of its citizens, which is visible in numerous areas of economic and social life. Thanks to funding from the EU, Lithuania was able to develop its economy, create new jobs on the market and reduce unemployment. In 2015, more than 80% of foreign direct investments came from EU member states.

The signing of the Schengen Agreement in 2007, which largely abolished the internal borders, allowed the Baltic countries, including Lithuania, to take advantage of free movement of people and goods, creating new opportunities for the citizens of these countries. Lithuanians were finally able to travel within the EU without visas and time-consuming border crossing procedures. The agreement also brought considerable economic benefits, allowing for easier, faster movement of goods across borders, as well as increased tourist traffic and border trade. It also took part of the burden related to the costs of maintenance of the infrastructure of the border points and the personnel employed there off the budget of individual countries.

In 2018 (similar results were recorded for 2019 as well), Lithuania's most important economic sectors included: trade (wholesale and retail), transport, catering services and industry.

The major export market of Lithuania was mainly the European Union countries (59 %), of which 10 % were exports to Latvia, 8 % to Poland and 7 % to Germany. Exports to Russia

accounted for 14 % of total exports, which, from the perspective of the country's economy is not an insignificant amount. The best example was the year 2014, when Russia introduced an embargo on food products from EU countries. At that time, exports of all goods from Lithuania to Russia accounted for 16 %. As a result of the embargo of certain products (mainly agricultural products, such as dairy, meat and vegetables), exports to Russia fell by 3.7 %, which caused considerable losses for Lithuania.

In the case of imports, the situation was similar, with Lithuania importing goods mainly from the EU (69 %), of which 12 % were goods imported from Germany, 11 % from Poland and 7 % from Latvia. Imports from Russia accounted for 15 % (europa.eu, 2018). The following figures show the percentage share of each country in Lithuania's import and export structure (europa.eu, 2018).



Fig. 1. Exports of goods to Lithuania in 2018, own elaboration.
Source: https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries/lithuania_pl (accessed on: 1.10.2021)

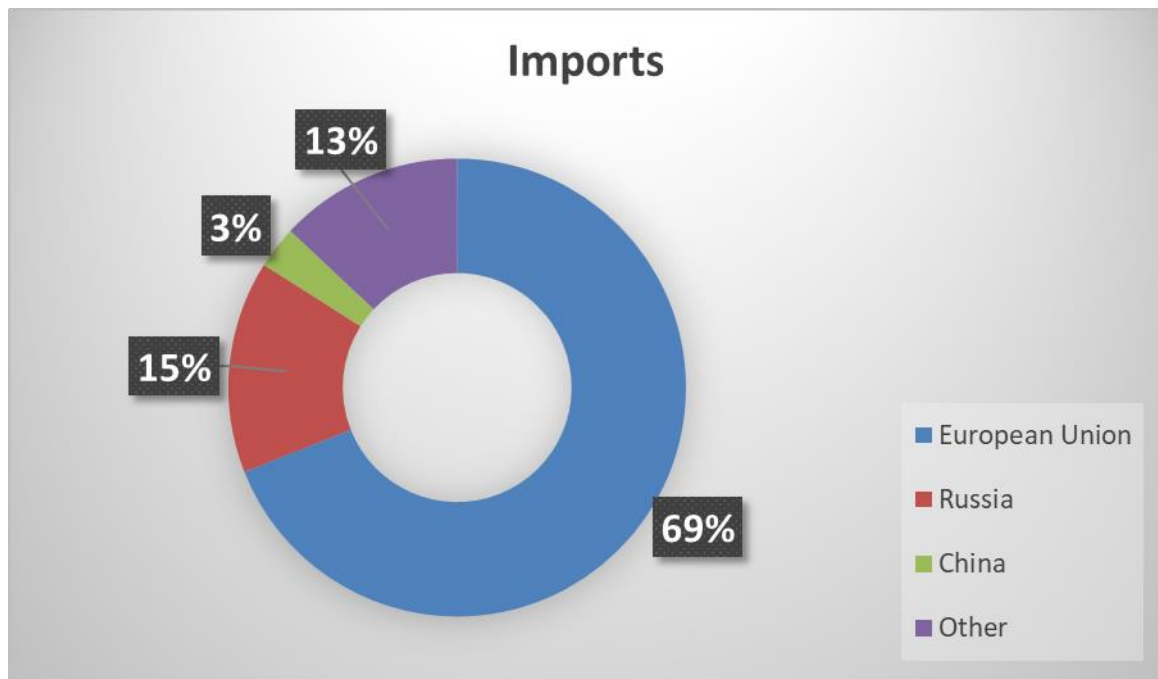


Fig. 2. Imports of goods from Lithuania in 2018, own elaboration.
 Source: https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries/lithuania_pl (accessed on: 1.10.2021)

Lithuania's contemporary threats are mainly related to the possibility of military aggression from Russia by the forces stationed in the Kaliningrad region, which is one of the most militarised areas of the Russian Federation (see Figure 3). "It is estimated that approximately 25,000 Russian soldiers are stationed in the region, which is more than the entire Lithuanian Armed Forces, including volunteer self-defence forces (a total of approximately 20,000 people)" (zbiam, 2018). Although, a direct military attack on Lithuania by Russia, which would lead to a conflict between Russia and NATO, seems unlikely, Lithuania has nevertheless started to build up its defence capabilities.

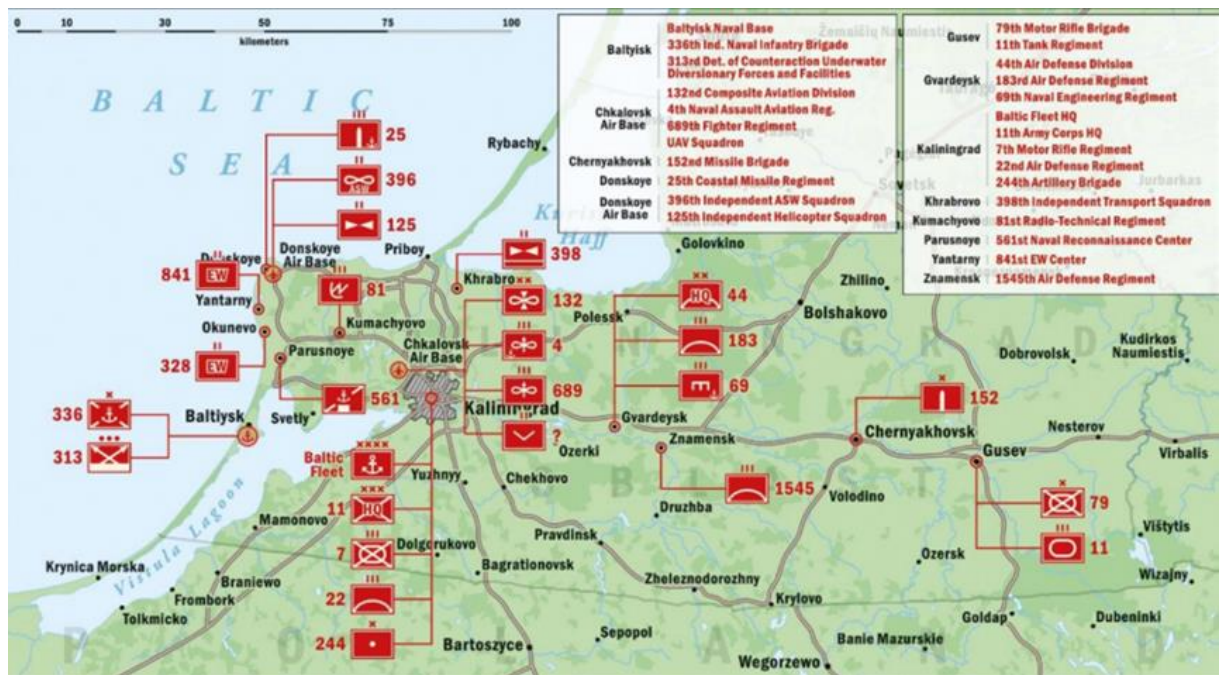


Fig. 3. Russian military forces stationed in the Kaliningrad region

Source: <https://www.overtdefense.com/2021/01/22/kaliningrad-gambit-nato-preemptive-strike-scenario/> (accessed on: 12.12.2022)

On 5 February 2019, the Department of State Security and the Department of Operational Services under the Ministry of National Defence presented a report with assessment of threats to Lithuania's national security. The report “focuses on the ongoing espionage policy of Russia and Belarus” (kurierwilenski, 2019). It points out intensified militarisation in the Kaliningrad region, with more equipment and soldiers deployed. “The authors of the report also indicate that the intelligence activity of Russian and Belarusian services in Lithuania is likely to remain at a high level. In the near future, these countries will increasingly often conduct intelligence operations with non-conventional means. However, the major targets of these operations will still be persons connected with Russia or Belarus by business, family or ideological ties” (kurierwilenski, 2019).

According to the report, Russia will seek to incite disenchantment with democracy, discrediting institutions of power and state authorities.

“By manipulating the freedom of speech in Lithuania, Russia spreads propaganda belittling Lithuania's statehood. The Kremlin presents its propaganda as an alternative opinion, supposedly based on the criteria of objectivity and the need to keep the society informed. Reacting to any attempts by Lithuanian institutions to restrict propaganda, Russia unjustifiably accuses Lithuania of censorship and restriction of freedom of speech” (Kurievilsky, 2019).

In Lithuania and other Baltic states an information warfare aimed at spreading disinformation among the population has been going on for years, the ultimate objective

of which is to destabilise the region and to incite resistance of the local population to the presence of NATO forces. “The main platform used for the information warfare waged by the Russian Federation is the Kremlin-controlled media functioning in the information space of the Baltic states. The tools used to spread propaganda include popular, formally local or EU-registered TV stations, a number of news portals and a network of newspapers” (warsawinsittute, 2017). In 2014, the Lithuanian President at the time, Dalia Grybauskaitė, suggested amendments to the Media Law in an attempt to limit broadcasts of Russian programmes on Lithuanian television, but the Lithuanian Seimas rejected them.

The report also mentioned a new threat to Lithuania's security, related to the espionage activities of Chinese intelligence services, which through its involvement in various areas of life in Lithuania, seeks to “obtain non-public and classified information not only about Lithuania, but also about the institutions of the European Union and NATO” (Kurierwilński, 2019).

Since Lithuania's accession to NATO, the state authorities have not paid much attention to defence-related issues. Expenditure on defence was kept at the minimum level of 2 per cent of GDP required by NATO. The Baltic states, including Lithuania and Latvia, “spent little on defence over the years. After the 2008 crisis, Lithuania reduced its spending in that area to 0.8 per cent of GDP, while Latvia to 0.9 per cent of GDP. In 2014, due to the developments in the region, both countries pledged to increase their defence spending to 2% of GDP in 2020. In 2016, Lithuania's defence spending amounted to 1.49% of GDP...” (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2017). Initially, this frugality was related to Lithuania's economic problems. However, the armed conflicts on Russia's borders made the Lithuanian authorities realise that the country should be ready to counter the aggressor's attack before help comes from NATO, pursuant to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

According to specialists, the possible scenario of a military aggression by Russia would most likely involve an attack on the Baltic countries, which have limited armed forces/ To prevent this, at the 2014 NATO summit in Newport, it was decided to establish high readiness forces designed to be able to deploy at short notice to a threatened area (the so-called spearhead forces), while at the 2016 Warsaw summit it was decided that the main objective would be to strengthen NATO's eastern flank by deploying four battalion groups, stationed as part of a rotational system in these countries. In turn, the 2018 NATO summit in Brussels resulted in the so-called four 30s plan, under which 30 troop battalions, 30 squadrons of aircraft, and 30 warships should be ready for deployment within 30 days in the event of a potential threat.

The crisis in Ukraine mobilised Lithuania to strengthen its armed forces through the gradual increase in defence spending to the required 2% of GDP and the formation of high readiness forces. In addition, compulsory military service was reinstated in 2015 (previously abolished in 2008), the size of the army was increased and weapons were purchased (defence24, 2016). In 2019, the Lithuanian government decided to further increase the size of the army between 2019 and 2028 and adopted a long-term development programme for the Lithuanian armed forces. Such policies should be a priority for all Baltic states, as the expansion and modernisation of the military as well as cooperation with NATO creates opportunities to effectively deter a potential aggressor.

However, the Baltic states should also be ready to respond to contemporary hybrid threats that “exploit the synergy created by multiple actors and activities” (Hagelstam, 2018). Due to the possibility of multiple forms of attack, hybrid warfare blurs the boundaries between military and other types of conflict.

Lithuania and Estonia have made great efforts to ensure adequate measures to respond to this type of threat. For example, Lithuania has formed high readiness emergency response troops consisting of 2,500 elite soldiers, ready for deployment in less than a day throughout the country” (Wiech, 2020).

A resurgence of geopolitical issues in the region in question dates back to the late 1960s, with its major intensification at the end of the 20th century. This was due to several reasons: the disintegration of the bipolar world order, the collapse of the USSR, the emergence of a united Europe, changes in relations between the US and Europe, German unification, the revival of ethnic nationalisms, globalisation, and the emergence of new international actors (Potulski, 2010). “These events gave rise to the demand for a kind of geopolitical space to be managed and through which a description of the changed international system could be made and a policy developed to address the challenges posed by globalisation and the formation of a new world order. These factors have led to the rehabilitation of geopolitical terminology in the interpretation of international relations” (Potulski, 2010).

Although, in theory, Russia recognises that the countries of the former USSR, including, Lithuania should have the right to their own political model and national traditions, at the same time, it is opposed to the transfer to those regions of values created in other parts of the world that function in other political systems. In addition, it expresses concern over the need to protect the natural resources and related infrastructure located in the region from being exploited by external states.

One of the major problems for Russia's foreign policy is the need for a new ideological space through which Russia's position as a superpower, at least in the context of the former USSR countries, could be maintained. In terms of international relations, this meant, for example, using the Russian language as a lingua franca, consolidation or reconstruction of extensive cultural, scientific and educational cooperation with the major centres of the Russian Federation, as well as ensuring the operation of central (Moscow) television in Russia's sphere of influence. Such measures allowed for the preservation of a number of important channels to ensure the dominance of Russian civilisation over the area of the former USSR, as well as strengthening of Russia's own statehood and culture, in the context of an increasingly competitive influx of foreign cultural output from the outside world (Potulski, 2008).

Despite the fact that “Russia is no longer a superpower, due to its potential (in terms of resources, economy and intellectual output) and geographical location, it is capable of co-creating and influencing numerous processes that are taking place in the world” (Kokoshin, 2002), including in the Baltic States.

Conclusions

Based on the consideration presented in this paper, it can be concluded that Lithuania, as a member of the European Union and NATO, does not have its own geopolitics and geostrategy, as it is still dependent on the policy of the Russian Federation. This dependence is, to a large extent, due to its geographical location in the Baltic region, through which important communication and transport routes from the Russian Federation to Central and Western Europe run. In addition, almost 6 per cent of Lithuania's population are Russians, in relation to whom the Russian government pursues its own demographic policy by indoctrinating them in Russian schools and universities.

One of the trends with a significant impact on the geopolitics and geostrategy of Lithuania is the phenomenon of globalisation in the informational, political, military, economic and cultural dimensions. These trends have a major impact on the development of Lithuania and other countries around the world. Based on the considerations presented in this paper, it can be concluded that the Republic of Lithuania has the following strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats:

Strengths:

- Lithuania's active participation in the collective and regional security system, including NATO and the EU;
- growing importance of information technologies (e.g. the Internet);

- strengthening of the national economy through inflow of foreign capital;
- development of modern technologies to increase economic opportunities;
- significant development of tourism and opening up to new tourist destinations;
- modernisation of working and private life spheres based on the development of new technologies;
- a change in approach (diversification) to securing energy, gas and oil supplies;
- growing importance of critical infrastructure and its protection to ensure state security;
- strengthening of national traditions and sentiments developed by generations of Lithuanians.

Weaknesses:

- lack of systemic solutions to the political and economic changes that are taking place;
- shortage of skilled labour in the economy (mainly in modern services);
- insufficient number of systemic solutions in the national security system;
- problems related to the national minorities of the former USSR;
- economic difficulties related to the system of governance;
- dependence on the Russian Federation for energy supplies;
- depleting peat deposits used for energy production;
- difficulties in extracting mineral resources such as limestone, chalk, gypsum, dolomite;
- low environmental awareness of citizens of Lithuania.

Opportunities:

- growing prestige and position of Lithuania on the international arena;
- strengthening of partnership and cooperation with western countries;
- participation in the security system of the Baltic States as part of NATO;
- development of international trade and expansion into new markets;
- cultural intermingling resulting in greater openness among the societies of Eastern and Western Europe;
- openness to new technologies;
- possibility of specialisation in terms of new energy sources;
- promotion of the country by spreading environmental awareness among the citizens;

- more efficient use of natural resources, mainly wood, peat and fossil fuels.

Threats:

- growing threat of terrorism, including international terrorism and cyber-terrorism;
- possibility of annexation of part of Lithuanian territory by the Russian Federation;
- increase in organised crime on a regional scale;
- growing conflict between supporters and opponents of changes;
- danger of Lithuania becoming involved in an international conflict - economic or social;
- partial or total disintegration of the EU;
- material and moral consequences of the coronavirus pandemic;
- growing problem of international espionage (mainly Chinese);
- risk of disruption of gas, oil and electricity supply;
- growing unemployment caused by the replacement of workers by machinery;
- dwindling natural resources and dependence on other countries;
- risk of natural disasters on Lithuanian territory.

The conducted analysis and rational assessment of Lithuania's geopolitical and geostrategic problems shows that it is increasingly difficult to predict the direction in which the broadly defined policy and strategy of the country will develop in the 21st century and in the far future.

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