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The Foreign Policy of the President of Lithuania towards Poland in the context of security in 2019–2023

Original article

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Abstract

Objectives: The aim of this article is to analyse the Lithuanian foreign policy pursued by the President of the Republic of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda, towards Poland in the years 2019–2023 and to attempt to assess the main directions of its activities in this aspect.

Methods: The use of scientific publications, expert reports, official statements, public speeches and previously published interviews in the Lithuanian or foreign press.

Results:

1. Firstly, the actions of President Nausėda and Duda resulted in the mobilization of other countries to act on behalf of Ukraine and the development of a common position on further actions against the Kremlin in the form of sanctions;
2. Secondly, thanks to the diplomatic means of Nausėda, Lithuania. Poland gradually freed itself from the Russian energy dictatorship, contributing to the political independence of the region;
3. Thirdly, thanks to the same diplomatic measures of Nausėda and Duda, during the NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023, an agreement was reached on the new regional defence plans of the Alliance, fully meeting the expectations of the Baltic states and Poland.

Conclusions: The four years of Nausėda's presidency were full of challenges, including: extraordinary circumstances related to the migration crisis as a hybrid attack by the Belarusian regime in 2021, Russian military aggression against Ukraine in 2022 or the energy price crisis in 2021–2022 and the stationing of the Wagner group in Belarus, which prompted Nausėda to look for new directions in Lithuanian foreign policy - which explains the search for a new path with the countries of the region, especially Poland.

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Introduction

The subject of this article is an analysis of the causes and the degree of changes introduced in foreign policy by President Gitanas Nausėdy towards Poland in 2019–2023. This article attempts to assess the key decisions that have been adopted in the foreign policy of the Republic of Lithuania towards Poland regarding security, as well as to assess their changes and the priorities of the current president. In order to achieve the research goal, the analysis was based on a case study, which allowed us to look at a specific case in detail and draw conclusions about the causes of changes, course and effects of Lithuania's foreign policy. Thanks to this, it was also possible to show how Lithuania contributes to building its position as a regional actor and what means it uses (including political, diplomatic, economic, energy, military) for this purpose. The research hypothesis formulated in this article is based on the assumption that the entire concept of the Lithuanian state's actions towards Poland is based on geopolitical and geostrategic thinking.

The theoretical basis for the analysis of selected episodes is Gustavsson's model , which assumes the existence of different stages of changes in foreign policy. Gustavsson , explaining the changes taking place in foreign policy, developed his own cyclical model of changes, based on the interaction of structures and actors of international relations. In Gustavsson's model , the most important aspect is the signals received from the environment, to which individual political decision-makers must immediately respond. According to Gustavsson's model , each signal coming from the outside may also be limited by various institutional elements. In turn, in practice, such a process may cause changes in foreign policy - from slight (corrected) to extremely profound (changes in the international perspective). As a result, these changes can – but do not have to – affect the international or internal structure (Gustavsson, 1999, pp. 84–85).

The use of authentic sources, such as scientific publications, expert reports, official statements, public speeches and previously published interviews in the Lithuanian or foreign press will make it possible to determine the position, attitudes and values represented by President Nausėda. Thus, this study contributes to knowledge about the practice of international relations by reflecting on the growing role of the Baltic countries.

1. Changes in Lithuanian foreign policy

According to the constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, the head of state will represent the country on the international arena and has the right to co-create foreign policy with the government (Maluzinas, 2022c, 181). After Nausėda assumed the presidential office on July 12, 2019, it is noteworthy that the newly elected president immediately set his foreign policy strategy, guided by his own values and choosing his own courses of action. The president's priorities were to include the ten most important points:

- further implementation of western values: including free market economy;
- EU centralization: support for EU federalization and centralization projects;
- greater NATO involvement in Lithuania, increase in national defence spending above 2.5% of GDP;

- attempt to establish economic and sociocultural cooperation on the Vilnius-Minsk Line;
- possibility of establishing trade contacts with China;
- the possibility of establishing deeper relations with Poland, both from the perspective of national security;
- development of the northern European format: creation of the format of the Baltic and Nordic countries, the so-called NB8;
- Ukraine's integration with Euro-Atlantic and European structures: European plan for Ukraine;
- focussing on economic diplomacy: increasing the share of funds allocated to foreign policy, opening a representative office for commercial attachés;
- climate change: declaration of support for the EU initiative to improve the climate and the position taken in key decisions of the Lithuanian state regarding climate policy.) (Verslo inios, 2019).

Analysing the above programme of President Nausėda, a new point in Lithuanian foreign policy was a potential orientation towards the Baltic states, as well as Poland, which was not visible during the times of President Dali Grybauskaitė, for whom Poland remained only an element of regional cooperation in the context of emerging threats requiring a unified position of the Baltic states and Poland. Nausėda's main goal was primarily to improve Polish-Lithuanian relations (Janeliūnas, 2019; 2021). Therefore, the new President of Lithuania chose Poland for his first foreign visit, the topic of which was security in the region, cooperation within the EU and the region, as well as military and NATO cooperation. (Euroactiv.pl, 2019).

2. Relations between Vilnius and Warsaw

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3. Relations between Vilnius and Warsaw

From the beginning of his presidency, Nausda, in his official statements and speeches, has often emphasised his desire to build neighborly relations and Polish-Lithuanian relations, pointing to Poland's special position in both the EU and NATO. Furthermore, Nausda declared a new ambitious Lithuanian foreign policy based on the new quality of relations with Warsaw. Moreover, Nausėda, even during his election campaign, saw the need to introduce changes in Lithuania similar to the Polish judicial reforms (Hyndle -Hussein, 2019).

However, due to Poland's military, economic and demographic potential, Nausda considers Warsaw important in terms of territorial defence plans and military cooperation in the context of the changing geopolitical reality (gov.pl, 2021). As a result, Lithuania and Poland conducted joint military exercises in Klaipėda in July 2023, and will organize joint military exercises in the Suwałki Isthmus in 2024 (RP.pl, 2024). Meanwhile, from Warsaw's perspective, Lithuania, which has similar experience to Poland with the communist system, is potentially a good ally in conducting eastern policy towards Moscow, Kiev, or Minsk.

So far, research has shown that the annexation of Crimea by Russia prompted the Lithuanian authorities to devote even more attention to security issues. From its security perspective, Lithuania decided to increase defence spending, including: in order to accelerate the modernisation of the armed forces and increase the potential of military-civilian and allied cooperation within NATO, especially with Poland. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine led to a real change in the perception of Russia as a threat to its own security and that of the other Baltic states (Vilson, 2015, Kojala and Ivanauskas, 2015). The latest reports by Lithuanian analysts presenting the assessment of the threat from Russia indicate that the regime in Moscow has repeatedly, directly or indirectly, signaled its interest in aggression against the Baltic countries, for example under the pretext of "defending the rights of the Russian minority". At the same time, Russia's strategic goal is to weaken or destroy NATO's security architecture (Defence.24, 2019).

Therefore, Lithuania was the first to support the creation of Fort Trump in Poland. The American diplomatic initiative aimed at establishing a permanent American base on the territory of the Republic of Poland was acceptable for many representatives of the Lithuanian elite for pragmatic reasons. A US division deployed in Poland (and cofinanced) in the event of a potential conflict, some of its forces could be directed, for example, to Lithuania, some together with units of the Polish Army, in order to neutralise the threat from Russia (Defence.24, 2019).

Nausėda's choices and decisions regarding building pragmatic relations with Poland were influenced by the behaviour of the then president Valdas Adamkus (1998-2009), who, due to personal tendency, maintained good contact with both President Aleksander Kwańiewski and President Lech Kaczyński (Buchowski, 2017). Moreover, Lech Kaczyński was so far the only politician who defined the vision of Poland's eastern policy.

Nausėda's intention was to implement a concept called new foreign policy, which consisted in tightening economic cooperation with Poland, especially in the field of energy. It is worth mentioning that among the presidential advisers was Jarosław Niewierowicz, a Lithuanian Pole, former Minister of Energy of Lithuania (2012-2014) (Jedynka.polskieradio.pl, 2019). It should be noted that President Nausėda's agenda, just like in Grybauskaitė, includes the desire for Lithuania to become independent from Russia and to increase the self-sufficiency and competitiveness of its energy sector. In the case of Lithuania's strategy, it assumes the development of gas infrastructure, the priority of which was the construction of the Polish-Lithuanian GIPL gas pipeline (with a capacity of 2.4 billion m³ annually from Poland and 1.9 billion m³ from Lithuania) (Gaz system, 2020). On 5 May 2022, the Polish-Lithuanian gas pipeline GIPL was officially opened.

Another goal of the new president was to strengthen cooperation of the Baltic region in the B4 group format - Poland and the Baltic states in emergency situations. It should be noted that Nausėda plays a reactive role in this respect, - the first impulses and undertakings are the result of his initiative by organising regular meetings with the leaders of the three Baltic states and Poland and coordinating the region's cooperation at the highest level. As a result, in 2021 Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia adopted a common position regarding the situation on the borders with Belarus and the instrumentalisation of illegal migration by that regime (Forsal.pl, 2021), in 2022 a common position of Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland regarding oil price cap (Interia.pl 2022) or the proposal of Poland and the Baltic states for the 13th package of EU sanctions against the Kremlin in connection with Russia's aggression against Ukraine (radiomaryja.pl, 2024).

It is also noticeable that in the first year of Nausėda's presidency, there was a significant change in the intensity of communication with Poland. Nausėda began to transform his position into the closest partner who demonstrates unconditional loyalty. This was confirmed by Nausėda's reaction when, in 2020, he did not take part in the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the German Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Jerusalem and decided to pay tribute to the German victims in Warsaw. Moreover, by analyzing diplomatic communication in traditional media and social media, mim. Facebook, Platform pl, 2023).

Nausda's loyalty was also proven by regularly avoiding direct criticism of Warsaw and Lithuania's refusal to agree to EU sanctions against Poland in disputes over the rule of law. From the beginning of the Warsaw-Brussels dispute, Nausėda carefully balanced the balance between the EU and Poland, not siding with critics of the government in Warsaw, as other leaders in Brussels did. The EU budget arrangements were supported by Vilnius. Nausėda, on the other hand, assured that Lithuania will support Poland in finding a consensus (15min.lt, 2020).

Regular foreign visits to Warsaw during the term of office of the Lithuanian president are also a characteristic condition of Polish-Lithuanian relations, which is the tendency to personalise them. As the Lithuanian and Polish media noticed, Nausėda and Duda "established" a good relationship, characterized by mutual respect, but above all, great mutual sympathy, which is well presented in the media (tv3.lt, 2021).

According to Jasina, Vilnius and Warsaw are currently implementing many joint projects, often within the EU and NATO. Both countries have a number of interests in several strategic areas: state security and gas supply issues (Jasina, 2019). According to the Lithuanian Ambassador in Warsaw, Eduardas Borisovas, the greater the presence of American troops in Poland, the stronger it strengthens the security of the entire region (Przegld Batycki, 2019). According to Lithuanian experts, the reorientation of Lithuanian foreign policy was largely influenced by the German government's push for the Nord project. Stream 2. Resistance to the gas pipeline was another element that brought Lithuania closer to Poland (Maluzinas, 2022d; 2023a).

Nausda of the Act on the spelling of non-Lithuanian surnames in Lithuanian identity documents in 2022, which was a breakthrough decision regarding the demands of the Polish minority, guaranteeing the strengthening of its rights in Lithuania. This issue was the source of many years of conflict between Vilnius and Warsaw (Verslo Žinios, 2022), which was positively received and appreciated by Warsaw. These episodes show that Nausėda tries to be quite flexible in choosing methods of personal communication and leadership, often based on national interests and the need to adapt to external circumstances.

Nausėda in building strategic relations with Poland. When assessing Poland's foreign policy since PiS took power, a deterioration in relations with Germany, Ukraine and France was noticed. By far the most noticeable area of conflict was the dispute with the EU. As a result, this led to the deterioration of relations and even conflict between Poland and other countries, deterioration of Poland's image and even a decline in the country's credibility in the international arena. Poland's cooperation options were limited to the Baltic states.

4. Lithuania and Poland towards Russian aggression against Ukraine

Intensification of Polish-Lithuanian cooperation occurred after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Nausėda and Duda decided to actively support Ukraine in the political and military dimension through joint diplomatic efforts, which was reflected in the organization of government consultations from 2022 and the regularity of mutual state visits Warsaw-Vilnius, Vilnius-Warsaw and Kiev (tvn24.pl, 2022). At the NATO and EU forums and other formats, both presidents developed a common position and strategy towards

Ukraine, convincing allies that NATO should secure it by all available means. He sees Russian aggression as a threat to his security and that of the other Baltic countries. Therefore, he is seeking to strengthen NATO's eastern flank by maintaining sanctions against Russia and Belarus, but also by extending them. Both presidents also hope that their commitment to Ukraine will allow them to strengthen their own international position (Maluzhinas, 2023b).

Lithuania's goal, like Poland's, is to strengthen their country's security and deterrence. Therefore, in 2022 in Vilnius, representatives of both armies signed an agreement on tightening military cooperation. The document specifies, among others: priority directions of cooperation between Poland and Lithuania and the principles on which bilateral military exercises will be organized (polska-armna.pl, 2022). Both Lithuania and Poland are exposed to Russian and Belarusian hybrid actions aimed at undermining bilateral cooperation and discrediting NATO (Piotrowski, Raś, 2017, 1-2). Therefore, in the same year, Lithuania and Poland signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of cybersecurity (wojsko-polskie.pl, 2022).

Both countries also cooperate in combating threats below the threshold of war, including those related to Russia's propaganda activities. Despite limited resources and options, Lithuania and Poland remain actively engaged in supporting Ukraine. This cooperation is perceived as a tool to increase regional security and strengthen the international position of both countries, including: through a constructive approach to dialogue with NATO and EU partners.

Conclusions

The four years of Nausėda's presidency were full of challenges, including: extraordinary circumstances related to the migration crisis as a hybrid attack by the Belarusian regime in 2021, Russian military aggression against Ukraine in 2022 or the energy price crisis in 2021–2022 and the stationing of the Wagner group in Belarus, which prompted Nausėda to look for new directions in Lithuanian foreign policy - which explains the search for a new path with the countries of the region, especially Poland.

Nausėda's decisions regarding building strategic and flexible relations with Poland were also influenced by the attitude of former Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus (Grybauskaitė's predecessor), but they were also supported by the joint plans of both state leaders regarding territorial defense (e.g. the Isthmus of Suwalki) and the Baltic Sea (within the Group Northern and Exercise Baltops, a Northern initiative Coasts and SUCBAS), as well as energy cooperation (e.g. cooperation between Klaipėdos nafta and PGNiG). Nausėda sees these goals as elements that strengthen Lithuania's security (Raś, 2021, 2). It can be seen that Nausėda plays a reactive role in this respect. It was he who actually initiated the first impulses and steps. The best proof of this is the number of official visits to Poland (15 trips in 2019-2023).

Taking into account the impact of "structural factors" on small states, which prompts political entities to react and initiate changes in decisions and actions, Nausėda formula contributed to the creation of a new concept of community of interests in the Baltic subregion. This was evidenced by regular meetings between the leaders of the three Baltic states and

Poland to coordinate key decisions regarding foreign and security policy. The best manifestations of cooperation were the meetings of the Three Seas Initiative in Tallinn (2020), Sofia (2021), Riga (2022), Bucharest (2023), and regular visits of the presidents of the Baltic states and Poland to Ukraine.

Referring the actual research results to the originally assumed research goals, it can be concluded that:

1. Firstly, the actions of President Nausėda and Duda resulted in the mobilization of other countries to act on behalf of Ukraine and the development of a common position on further actions against the Kremlin in the form of sanctions;
2. Secondly, thanks to the diplomatic means of Nausėda, Lithuania. Poland gradually freed itself from the Russian energy dictatorship, contributing to the political independence of the region;
3. Thirdly, thanks to the same diplomatic measures of Nausėda and Duda, during the NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023, an agreement was reached on the new regional defence plans of the Alliance, fully meeting the expectations of the Baltic states and Poland.

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