


Strategy of the President of Lithuania Towards Ukraine 2022–2024

Strategia prezydenta Litwy wobec Ukrainy w latach 2022–2024

MARTINAS MALUŽINAS

Dr, Politechnika Koszalińska, e-mail: martinasmaluzinas@gmail.com
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2772-9534>

Abstract: The article analyzes the policy of the President of Lithuania towards Ukraine during the Russian invasion. The purpose of the paper is to analyze and evaluate the rhetoric and strategy undertaken by the Lithuanian president towards Ukraine in 2022–2024. The hypotheses suggest that the Russian threat leads to an intensification of Lithuania's cooperation in the international arena and a change in strategic priorities, especially in the context of Ukraine. The methodology is based on a case study and adaptive theory, allowing us to look at a detailed analysis of the Lithuanian state's foreign policy. The conclusions confirm that the President's active policy toward Ukraine is seen as part of increasing Lithuanian security and strengthening Lithuania's international role.

Keywords: President of Lithuania, Ukraine, European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), security, adaptive theory

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest analiza i ocena retoryki oraz strategii podjętej przez prezydenta Litwy wobec Ukrainy w latach 2022–2024 po rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę. Według postawionej hipotezy zagrożenie rosyjskie prowadzi do intensyfikacji współpracy Litwy na arenie międzynarodowej oraz zmiany priorytetów strategicznych, zwłaszcza w kontekście Ukrainy. Przyjęta metodologia bazuje na studium przypadku i teorii adaptacyjnej, co pozwala dokonać szczegółowej analizy polityki zagranicznej państwa litewskiego. Wyniki badań pokazują, iż aktywna polityka prezydenta Litwy na rzecz Ukrainy postrzegana jest jako element zwiększenia litewskiego bezpieczeństwa oraz umocnienia międzynarodowej roli tego państwa.

Słowa kluczowe: prezydent Litwy, Ukraina, Unia Europejska (UE), Organizacja Traktatu Północnoatlantyckiego (NATO), bezpieczeństwo, teoria adaptacyjna

As political scientists note, understanding relations between Lithuania and Ukraine is impossible without delving into a past devoid of Russian influence, since the roots of contacts between the two countries date back to the

14th century. Successful processes of state formation within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania laid the foundation for building modern relations between the states based on a common historical heritage that unites rather than separates the two sides. At the same time, the twentieth century enriched the historical experience with a new common context – the emergence of independent states and the loss of statehood over a long interval; the struggle against the USSR; the experience of repression and terror; the re-election of independence and the initiation of systemic transformation on the road to the EU and NATO (Betlii 2016).

A new chapter in Vilnius–Kyiv relations opens the prospect of close cooperation with Ukraine as a NATO and EU member country. After 2014, an important element of Lithuanian policy toward Ukraine in the context of strengthening regional security is the consistent promotion of deepened cooperation between Ukraine and NATO. Kyiv's Euro-Atlantic aspirations are supported by Lithuanian political elites of the time and today on all international platforms. According to Dalia Grybauskaitė or Gitanas Nausėda, Ukraine can be one of NATO's key partners (Janeliūnas 2021: 230). In Lithuania's foreign policy conception, this cooperation is understood as an investment that enhances Lithuania's security and the stability of the region. For this reason, pushing Western partners to set a path for Ukraine to join NATO was an important point in the foreign and defense policies of both President D. Grybauskaitė and G. Nausėda. Moreover, President G. Nausėda at the same time hoped that his commitment to Ukraine would allow him to strengthen Lithuania's international position.

For this reason, G. Nausėda's presidency is based on the continuation of long-standing directions for building state security and foreign policy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has prompted the Lithuanian president to devote even more attention to security issues while intending to remain in the vanguard of states supporting Kyiv. Active engagement in support of Ukraine is seen as a tool for enhancing national security and strengthening Lithuania's international position, including through a constructive approach to dialogue with EU and NATO partners. Strengthening Lithuania's cooperation with the EU and NATO is fostered by a common perception of threats.

After becoming president in 2019, neither G. Nausėda nor his advisors had a clear and defined strategy in foreign policy toward Ukraine. However, the pursuit of pragmatic relations with Kyiv has become a relatively enduring issue in Lithuanian foreign policy even under D. Grybauskaitė

(2009–2019), with whom she has repeatedly personally sought cooperation, mainly for economic as well as political reasons, supporting its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures (Buchowski 2017: 102). This foreign policy goal also marked a change in orientation (away from Russia's sphere of influence) and became long-lasting. This was facilitated also by the absence of contentious issues in bilateral relations.

Developments in the international situation in 2014–2024 – Russia's annexation of Crimea and the escalating relations between it and the West, and the resulting Russian invasion of Ukraine – prompted the Lithuanian president to focus even more on national security issues. From a security perspective, Lithuania decided to increase defense spending, including accelerating the modernization of the military and increasing the potential for military-civilian and NATO-allied cooperation. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine have led to a real change in the perception of Russia as a threat to its own security and that of other Baltic states (Gritėnas 2017; Janeliūnas 2019, 2021; Kojala, Ivanauskas 2015; Kuczyńska-Zonik 2019; Malužinas 2022b, 2023a, 2023b; Vilson 2015). Lithuania treats the war in Ukraine as a strong national interest: if Russia is stopped in Ukraine, it will not be able to do any harm to it. In this new geostrategic environment, Lithuania has been able to adopt a multi-pillar foreign policy, diversifying its foreign relations beyond its immediate neighbors (US, UK, Taiwan, EU Germany, and France, among others).

The purpose of this study is to analyze and evaluate the strategy undertaken by the President of Lithuania towards Ukraine in 2022–2024. The starting point of the considerations carried out are three hypotheses: H1: the Russian invasion of Ukraine has contributed to greater activity and intensified political cooperation between Lithuania, Ukraine, and NATO countries; H2: the Lithuanian president, by undertaking a coherent, active and effective policy towards Ukraine, based not only on self-interest but also on regional interests, contributes to international security; H3: Lithuania treats the war in Ukraine as a strong national interest: if Russia is not stopped in Ukraine, it will be able to cause damage to Lithuania. As a result, national decision-makers are making difficult decisions about which military capabilities should be transferred to Ukraine and which must remain for Lithuania's use. To accomplish the research endeavor, the analysis was based on the case study method, which made it possible to look at a specific case in detail and draw research conclusions as to the causes, course, and

evaluation of the strategy undertaken by a political actor in the face of Russian threats.

In addition, this analysis adopts the concept of adaptive strategy (grand strategy) developed in the neoclassical realism view by Colin Dueck. It involves the state implementing a new strategy of action (grand strategy). Adaptation, on the other hand, involves responding to changes in threat perceptions. According to C. Dueck, international pressure forces a certain behavior on a political actor (Dueck 2005: 198–199). In addition, strategic adaptation depends on the political-military culture of an actor. Analyzing the Lithuanian state, its strategic adaptation consisted of expanding alliance commitments, increasing foreign aid to Ukraine, and adopting new diplomatic initiatives.

1. The President of Lithuania in foreign policy – the legal dimension

The institution of the President of the Lithuanian State does indeed have constitutional foreign policy powers, however, they can only lead, set goals and act in the area in question together with the government, namely the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania.

According to Article 84 point 1 of the 1992 Constitution of Lithuania, the head of state is the highest and most important representative of the Republic of Lithuania, who resolves issues in foreign policy and together with the executive branch directs this area of state activity (Article 84 point 1). Based on the provisions of Article 84 point 2 of the Constitution, the President signs international agreements and submits them to the Parliament of Lithuania for ratification. The president's order in this regard requires parliamentary approval to be valid. On the other hand, under Article 84 point 3 of the Constitution, the President, upon the proposal of the Council of Ministers, appoints and dismisses Lithuania's diplomatic representatives in other countries and to international bodies and institutions. Pursuant to the same Article 84 of the Constitution, the President accredits and receives diplomatic representatives of third states and confers diplomatic ranks and degrees (Malužinas 2022b: 175).

2. Lithuanian president's actions to counter Russian aggression against Ukraine

On February 23, 2022, when President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin made a public address in which he announced the recognition of the independence of two separatist parastatals established after 2014 on the part of the Ukrainian Donbas occupied by Russian forces – the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic (DRL, LRL) – the President of Lithuania, together with the President of Poland Andrzej Duda, decided to go to Kyiv. During a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, the Lithuanian leader publicly declared that “Lithuania will not recognize any attempt to violate the territorial integrity of Ukraine, just as we will never recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea. Moreover, in the face of aggression, Ukraine will not remain alone” (Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidentas 2022a).

Such a declaration by the Lithuanian president in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its violation of international law was based on his perception that Russian actions against Ukraine pose a direct threat to the security of Lithuania and the region. In addition, the Lithuanian president's conception of the foreign policy included the conviction that if Russia took control of Kyiv, Lithuania and the rest of the Baltic States could be next in line. For President G. Nausėda, this meant not only the need for stronger support for Ukraine but also convincing NATO partners to engage more actively with Ukraine, taking into account the growing Russian threat to stability and security in the region (Delfi.lt 2022).

Another major change in the international environment that required the Lithuanian president to make greater diplomatic efforts in favor of Ukraine was the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. From that point on, with the intensification of Russian hybrid attacks on Lithuania, President G. Nausėda established an agenda of being one of the harshest critics and advocates of imposing sanctions on Russia for its invasion and a precursor of military aid to the invaded Ukraine. On February 25, 2022, at an emergency meeting of the European Union (Brussels) and NATO (Warsaw), the Lithuanian president presented a four-point action plan in response to Russia's attack on Ukraine:

1. Condemn the aggression of Russia and Belarus in its organizational invasion of Ukraine.

2. Withholding Russia's membership in international organizations (stripping it of its mandate in the G20 and the UN Security Council).
3. Tightening sanctions, disconnecting Russia from the SWIFT system, and stopping the development of the Nord Stream 2 project.
4. Providing Ukraine with international political and military support (Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidentas 2022b).

A consequence of the aggression against Ukraine was the Lithuanian president's announcement of strengthening cooperation with the US, Poland, and Germany – Lithuania's strategic security partners – and seeking further strengthening of NATO's eastern flank and assistance to Ukraine. The strengthening of bilateral and trilateral relations was fostered by a common perception of threats. To this end, on February 26, 2022, in Berlin, in a meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, G. Nausėda declared the formation of a broad coalition to support Ukraine. After all, stressing that "Ukrainians are fighting not only for their own, but also for the freedom and democratic values of all Europe, we must do everything we can to stop Russia's aggression. We are here to form a broad coalition and save an independent, democratic Ukraine" (Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidentas 2022c).

Moreover, the Lithuanian president's strategy included actively supporting Ukraine on its path to EU and NATO integration. At the same time, G. Nausėda hoped that his active involvement in Ukraine would allow Lithuania to strengthen its international position, as well as that Ukraine (after joining NATO) would become one of the guarantors of Lithuania's security, alongside Poland. After all, the president promoted this concept, perceiving it as an instrument for stabilizing his neighborhood. Here are some of the premises:

1. Ukraine has the potential to become the largest and structurally most powerful country (due to its demographic, territorial, and military potential, among other things) in the Central and Eastern European region, attracting the attention of all three Baltic geopolitical actors due to its geopolitical location.
2. Without the inclusion of Ukraine in geostrategic schemes, it is impossible to transform the relationship between the EU and Russia, and in some cases between the US and Russia or the US and the EU.
3. Lithuania and Ukraine's geostrategic interests (especially vis-à-vis Russia and the US) and their substance coincide (unlike Lithuania and

Belarus). It should also be noted that this alliance would strengthen Lithuania's position and reputation in the international arena.

4. Ukraine's strategic partnership with Lithuania is beneficial to Lithuania in these aspects. Lithuania could become an effective geopolitical link between Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia.
5. Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic States can be extremely closely related economically regarding common defense and security, thus forming a single geopolitical supra-region (Motieka, Statkus, Daniliauskas 2005).

For this reason, on March 10–11, 2022, at an informal meeting of the European Council, G. Nausėda raised the issues of Ukraine's European integration and sanctions against Russia. According to the president,

Ukrainians are fighting for their freedom. For our freedom as well. For the freedom of all Europe. The democratic future of Europe today is being decided on Ukrainian soil. We have done a lot to help Ukrainians, but we can do even more. Symbols in this struggle are very important, so the European Union must send a clear and unambiguous signal to the people of Ukraine that Ukraine belongs to the European family (Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidentas 2022d).

3. Rhetoric and strategic alliances of the Lithuanian president

At the same time, G. Nausėda's communication style in the international arena changed completely after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A significant change occurred in communication with NATO allies, which turned into a rhetoric of pressure and demands. This was aimed at convincing partners that NATO should secure Ukraine with all available means. The change in the security situation led to an intensification of cooperation with Alliance partners and Ukraine. This translated into the frequency of mutual contacts in 2022–2024, including four visits to Berlin – the President met with German Chancellor O. Scholz; seven complex visits to Kyiv – meetings with Ukrainian President V. Zelenskiy; ten visits to Warsaw – meetings with Polish President A. Duda. The talks focused on policy toward Russia and further aid to Ukraine. In addition, the Lithuanian president intensified strategic cooperation with Poland, including in the B3+1 format, which also includes Latvia and Estonia. The strengthening of the four-party relationship was fostered by a common perception of threats.

Gitanas Nausėda's strategy emphasized the importance of strategic regional cooperation on NATO's eastern flank and in the Baltic basin, this was to deepen security cooperation and make joint diplomatic efforts to mobilize international support for Ukraine (Dudzińska 1.03.2023). In 2023, at the UN General Assembly, G. Nausėda stressed that "the unity of the Baltic States and Poland in matters of security and support for Ukraine is extremely valuable. By representing our interests together, we will much more quickly achieve the desired result – a maximally secure eastern flank of NATO and a victory for Ukraine" (Lrt.lt 2023).

4. Intensification of policy in the EU and NATO forums

During G. Nausėda's presidency, Lithuania's policy toward the EU and NATO saw a tangible change, both in the intensification of efforts and the level of action. The Lithuanian president has clearly defined the fundamental goal of Lithuanian foreign policy: "Lithuania will support Ukraine until victory and will seek to maintain the attention of the West in an attempt to 'maximally limit' the Kremlin's ability to continue the invasion" – as a matter of the highest priority" (Wilno.tvp.pl 2022). Consequently, this required a significant intensification of efforts to increase Ukraine's importance and status in the EU and NATO. The maximum intensity of these efforts was reached in 2022–2023, both in the run-up to and during the period of the NATO summit in Vilnius. What has changed, however, is not only the effort of Lithuania's diplomacy but also the way Ukraine is represented in the EU and NATO forums (Malužinas 2023b: 155).

First, Lithuania has played a significant role in coordinating the sanctions policy against Russia. In April 2022, Lithuania's Foreign Ministry declared the Russian ambassador *persona non grata*, while in late April 2022, it downgraded diplomatic relations with Moscow after revelations of the massacre of civilians in Buča. After all, it also expelled a Russian *chargé d'affaires* official in response to the Russian president's announced annexation of occupied Ukrainian regions. In May 2022, Lithuania completely abandoned Russian gas supplies in favor of more expensive LNG. In February 2023, the Lithuanian president, along with the leaders of Latvia, Estonia, and Poland, sent a letter to EU bodies regarding the use of frozen Russian funds to rebuild post-war Ukraine (Dudzińska 1.03.2023). Eventually, the G7 countries and

the EU froze some €300 billion in Russian central bank assets after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Second, the Lithuanian president has begun to widen the circle of direct ties and support between EU and NATO leaders. The establishment of the NATO–Ukraine Council, which gives Kyiv special status and the possibility of regular consultations and is expected to facilitate faster integration into NATO, the adoption of a package of support for Kyiv that consists of three elements, and the announcement by the G7 countries of long-term support for its security on a bilateral basis – could be considered the most important, “practical” result of these efforts during the 2023 meeting of all NATO leaders in Vilnius, which was based primarily on their own political interests (Lorenz 2023).

Some decline in the Alliance's efforts – an adjustment change in the international arena – can be seen after 2023 when the definitive Ukrainian counter-offensive failed and financial aid from key countries (the US) and the EU was withheld: in the US, among others, a \$61 billion package was blocked by Republican Party congressmen, and in the EU, the €50 billion Ukraine Facility was long (and unsuccessfully) in the way of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Gitanas Nausėda regularly stressed that in the face of new conflicts erupting in the world, Lithuania's diplomatic efforts should focus on mobilizing international support for Ukraine. At the 2024 World Economic Forum in Davos, G. Nausėda publicly called on the leaders of the Alliance countries to increase aid to Ukraine: “The West cannot afford war fatigue until this war is won. Of course, all possible support – political, economic, military, humanitarian – should be concentrated for Ukraine, so that Ukraine can win this war” (Kaunodiena.lt 2024).

These episodes in Lithuania's foreign policy show that the Lithuanian president was quite flexible in his choice of communication methods, often relying on Lithuanian national interests and the need to adapt to prevailing conditions, both geopolitical and international. In general, G. Nausėda's policy toward Ukraine was primarily related to a growing pro-Ukrainian identity and seeking international assistance for this country. He viewed Russian aggression as a threat to the security of his Lithuanian state and the entire region. Therefore, he actively sought further assistance to Ukraine, as well as the international isolation of Russia, including the suspension by the EU and NATO of comprehensive practical cooperation with the regime in Moscow. The actions and strategies taken by the Lithuanian president toward Ukraine in 2022–2024 are summarized in Table.

Table. Strategy, main directions, and effects of the Lithuanian President's foreign policy in 2022–2024

Country/Visits	International factors/conditions	Domestic factors/target	Type of change/purpose	Effect
Ukraine/Kyiv: 7 visits	Expressing solidarity and support for Ukraine in the face of escalating tensions with Russia	Strong pro-EU and Euro-Atlantic orientation	Continuing the goal: bring Ukraine closer to NATO and the EU	Obtaining the status of an EU candidate country
NATO / EU: 5 visits / 16 visits	Russia's invasion of Ukraine	Increase security requirements/ Increase the potential for military-civilian and allied cooperation within NATO	Impose sanctions on Russia / Continuing the goal: to bring Ukraine closer to NATO and the EU / continued assistance to Ukraine	Issued proposals for EU sectoral sanctions against Russia / adoption of 13 sanctions packages / creation of NATO-Ukraine Council / creation of a financial instrument for Ukraine, the Ukraine Facility, amounting to €50 billion for the period 2024–2027 / strengthening defense and deterrence mechanisms within NATO
Germany/ Berlin: 4 visits	Russia's invasion of Ukraine	Increase security requirements	Increasing Alliance forces on Lithuanian territory as part of a battalion battle group commanded by Germany	Building a close strategic alliance / Formation of a German brigade in Lithuania
Poland/ Warsaw: 9 visits	Russia's invasion of Ukraine	Priority of security guarantees	Changing the target – a new quality partnership with Poland	Intensify and deepen cooperation in the fields of security, economic development, and aid to Ukraine
USA/ Washington: 3 visits	Russia's invasion of Ukraine	Maintain security guarantees	Further assistance to Ukraine	The US Senate has approved over a dozen military and financial aid packages for Ukraine. The US has increased the number of its troops stationed in Lithuania

Source: own elaboration.

Conclusions

Despite the limited resources and capabilities of the Lithuanian state, it remains actively engaged in political, military, and humanitarian support for Ukraine. This cooperation is assessed as a tool for enhancing Lithuania's security and strengthening its position in the international arena, including through a pragmatic approach to dialogue with Alliance countries. The strengthening of bilateral and multilateral relations is fostered by a common perception of the threat from the Russian Federation. At the same time, active engagement with Kyiv translates into stronger support for the Lithuanian president from Alliance partners. This is evidenced by the president's support for his 2022–2024 initiative to strengthen cooperation within the EU and NATO to support Ukraine and impose sanctions on Russia and Belarus.

The article closely examines the Lithuanian state's responses to Russian threats, focusing on three hypotheses. H1 suggests that an increased sense of threat from Russia strengthens political as well as military cooperation between Lithuania, Ukraine, and the Alliance. H2 highlights how the active policy of the Lithuanian president contributes to Lithuanian and regional security and assistance to Ukraine. H3 addresses the analysis of the Lithuanian president's strategic priorities, increasing his activity in the face of a changing security environment. The article's analyses provide evidence to support these hypotheses, demonstrating the president's flexibility and commitment to shaping the security of Lithuania and the region.

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