Follow Lithuania: Not only words, but also deeds

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Follow Lithuania: Not only in Words, but also in Deeds

Among countries that are in tension with, or themselves part of, authoritarian regimes, Lithuania stands out as a relatively small but principle-driven member of the European Union. Lithuania positions itself, like the EU more broadly, as a supporter of human rights, the rule of law, and democratic values (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2016). The country borders Russia and has historically adopted a highly critical stance towards Russian spheres of influence, even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Following the outbreak of the war in

Ukraine, this position has largely aligned with that of the European Union as a whole. Whereas several Western European countries previously placed strong emphasis on maintaining economic and diplomatic relations with Russia, the war has led to a fundamental shift in direction within the EU (European Council, n.d.). This is reflected, among other things, in sanctions packages, the reduction of energy dependence on Russia, and a broader reorientation of European security policy. However, this development has also had direct economic consequences, including rising energy prices and disruptions in gas and oil supply chains.

Against this background, it is interesting to examine Lithuania's foreign policy in more detail. The country is considered a pioneer of a more principled, value-driven approach to international politics, in which human rights and democratic norms are defended even when this entails economic or diplomatic costs (Milasius & Bankauskaitė, 2022). In addition, reflection on this policy is also relevant in light of broader geopolitical shifts. The increasing assertiveness of China on the global stage and the changing and unpredictable course of the United States within the international system create uncertainty about the future balance of power in the world order. Lithuania positions itself not only in opposition to Russia but also towards other authoritarian regimes that do not strictly adhere to human rights and democratic principles, such as China.

Since taking office in October 2020, the Lithuanian government, at the time led by the Homeland Union (Christian Democrats), introduced a so-called "values-based" foreign policy aimed at promoting democratic values worldwide (Janeliūnas, 2021). This policy has been continued in the following period under President Gitanas Nausėda and Minister of Foreign Affairs Kęstutis Budrys, even under a changed political composition of the government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025). It is a form of foreign policy that is not characteristic of a specific political ideology or party (Gilmore, 2020, p. 24). In the UK, for example, it has been developed by both Labour and the Conservatives. A values-driven foreign policy is, therefore, a concept that is characteristic of the traditional Western world. But what exactly does a values-based foreign policy entail?

A values-based foreign policy refers to an approach in which a state explicitly grounds its international relations in normative principles such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the international legal order, and actively seeks to promote these principles in its relations with other countries, even when this may come at the expense of economic or geopolitical interests (Heiduk, 2024). The aim is for values-driven foreign policy to be both morally legitimate and politically supported within society (Gilmore, 2020, pp. 24–27). In practice, however, there is often tension between values and interests (Escartin, 2023), for example in arms exports to countries with poor human rights records or in military interventions where strategic and security interests outweigh humanitarian considerations.

Reflection: According to Li Yuan (2023), there is no fully "neutral" theory of values. Even Western values are historically and culturally constructed. When Western states present their own norms as universal standards, this can, according to this perspective, be seen as a form of ideological exercise of power (Li, 2023; Escartin, 2023). Nevertheless, in this article, value-driven policy is linked to so-called "universal values" such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

Balancing on the edge of boundaries

Lithuania is of great strategic importance due to its geographical location. The country borders Russia via the Kaliningrad exclave and lies on the Baltic Sea, giving it access to key trade routes towards Scandinavia and Western Europe. This position may become even more significant in the future, partly due to the melting of polar ice caps and the potential development of shorter and more efficient maritime routes between Asia and Europe (National Geographic Nederland, 2025). As a result, Lithuania also remains geopolitically relevant from a Russian perspective. And Russia has always considered Lithuania important. From 1795 to 1918, it was part of the Russian Empire. It was then independent from 1918 to 1940, after which it again came under Soviet rule and ultimately remained part of the Soviet Union until 1990 (Lane, 2001, pp. 49–87). Historically, Lithuania has therefore not been a country able to maintain long-term neutrality, but has mostly been situated within the spheres of influence of larger powers (Lane, 2001, pp. 4–22). It is precisely this history that has likely shaped Lithuania's contemporary geopolitical orientation. After the restoration of independence in 1990, the country transitioned from a planned economy to a market economy (Lane, 2001, pp. 163–165). Following a difficult initial phase, the economy grew strongly (Lane, 2001, pp. 163–165), supported by membership in the European Union and NATO in 2004 (Janeliūnas, 2021). With this choice, Lithuania clearly positioned itself on the side of the West and its associated values of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Whereas many Western countries mainly promote these values in normative terms, Lithuania has actively put them into practice since the 1990s. For example, the country actively supports Ukraine and Taiwan. This stance regularly leads to tensions with Russia and China (Lane, 2001, pp. 199–201).

Relations with China deteriorated significantly when an official "Taiwanese Representative Office" was opened in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius (Reuters, 2021). This move was highly sensitive. Countries that host Taiwanese diplomatic offices usually choose to name them after the city of Taipei in order to avoid provoking China (South China Morning Post, 2021). Such diplomatically neutral naming practices reflect the balance that many Western countries attempt to maintain in their relations with China: on the one hand, they are aware of their responsibility to promote democracy and human rights, while on the other hand they are cautious to avoid steps that could lead to a serious diplomatic break (Escartin, 2023). Beijing therefore decided to sharply reduce trade relations with Lithuania (Axios,

2021). For many countries, this would have been disastrous, but not for Lithuania. Unlike many other EU member states, its trade with China was relatively underdeveloped. Prior to the deterioration of relations in 2021, China accounted for only 2,5 percent of Lithuanian exports, compared to 16,8 percent in Germany (Bohman, 2021). For the Lithuanian economy, authoritarian regimes closer to home, namely in Minsk and Moscow, are significantly more important (Bohman, 2021).

But here too, Lithuania acts in a bold and principled manner (Dumčiuvienė, 2016, pp. 92–112). One could even say it is like the child in class who often seeks conflict, though in this case, with the bullies. Lithuania refuses to cooperate with Belarusian leader Aleksandr Lukashenka and provides shelter to the Belarusian opposition in exile, led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (LRT, 2026). When the migration crisis at the Polish and Lithuanian border further escalated tensions in 2021, Minister Landsbergis stated that free and fair elections in Belarus were a precondition for initiating dialogue (Sky News, 2020). On April 22 of this year, the Prime Minister reiterated that these conditions for dialogue remain in place (UA News, 2026).

Let the West look at Lithuania for once

Lithuania pursues a foreign policy that the West often likes to promote. However, the difference is that Lithuania also shows the courage to actually implement this policy, even when it may harm the country economically or politically (Dumčiuvienė, 2016, pp. 92–112). Moreover, Lithuania not only advocates these values but also appears to believe in them more strongly than many Western countries. For instance, Lithuania assumes that Belarus, due to increasing societal destabilisation (partly reinforced by international pressure and Lithuania's own stance) will ultimately choose a trajectory that aligns more closely with Lithuania's own (Slunkin & Valodskaitė, 2023). This confidence is not unfounded, considering that Lithuania scores very highly on the Freedom Index, particularly in areas such as individual freedom, governance and democracy, and other human rights-related indicators (91/100 freedom points) (Freedom House, 2020).

This appears to stem in part from a historical mindset shaped by a past in which the country was under Russian rule, had to continuously position itself strategically, and experienced periods of suddenly regained independence. It seems that Lithuania is determined, at all costs, to avoid falling back into a position of dependency, and therefore perceives the threat of a non-values-based policy more strongly than many Western European countries. This courageous stance can serve as an example for Europe. Lithuania has proven how valuable independence is. Only then can you truly stand for your values and protect and promote human rights around the world. It is time for the EU to move toward European autonomy.

And if the EU itself does not yet fully dare to pursue this course, it should at least support the countries that do. The long-term success of

Lithuania's values-based policy, therefore, depends to a significant extent on the support of allies, and such support is far from guaranteed.

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