

*A Case of Confidence in the European Project***Highlights**

- ★ If Lithuania did not enter the EU with specific objectives in mind, it has clearly benefited from its membership. Membership has allowed the country to catch up economically, to join the Single Market and expand business opportunities. Its adoption of the euro in the midst of the Eurozone crisis is another evidence of Lithuanian keenness to participate actively to the EU.
- ★ Lithuanians do are little interested in the level of EU integration. What matters is a strong EU and Lithuania as a member of all circles. EU membership has also allowed the country to feel more confident about asserting its interests in its Eastern neighbourhood to become the “regional activist” within the Eastern Partnership.
- ★ The EU does not face a crisis of legitimacy in Lithuania and conjures a very positive image. However, the EU could do better to formulate what it stands for. Today, it appears too technical. But instead of new policies, it should develop the concept of “Europeanness” – or a feeling of being European.

Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



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About Building Bridges

Called “Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union”, the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others’ from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



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What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?

In order to understand Lithuania's attitude towards the European Union it is necessary to take into account the main characteristics of the country, its historical background, size, culture, etc. Since space is limited, I would like to make a short epigraphic notice concerning only the location of Lithuania.

The peculiarity of Lithuania's location was probably most picturesquely characterised by one of the outstanding Lithuanian geographers Kazys Pakštas who, on the eve of the second world war, in 1939, wrote, "as Switzerland is characterized by high mountains, Italy – by works of art, Finland – by lakes, so Lithuania should be called a country that is very dangerous for a small nation to live in".¹

However, the solution of the problem suggested by the famous geographer was extremely radical. He proposed – no more, no less, than to try to establish an alternate Lithuania in a more secure place, somewhere in America or Africa, where the whole nation could simply decamp to if ever necessary. Perhaps its EU membership could be considered as another way out, because Lithuania, after joining the EU, has started to live in a new place without having to move somewhere else...

It would be an exaggeration to say that Lithuania had rationally calculated what concrete benefits it could get from its EU membership. First of all, EU membership was basically considered by Lithuanians as a means of returning to the European family, from which they had been excluded for years as a result of the Soviet occupation. This idealistic motivation outweighed all other considerations, including sometimes very costly requests.

An example of this situation could be the Ignalina nuclear power plant case. One of the conditions of the European Commission for Lithuania's EU membership was the closure of this plant. It was the biggest Chernobyl-type atomic power plant in Europe, which could potentially threaten the whole Baltic Sea region. The plant was, however, a major source of cheap electric power in Lithuania, producing 80% of electric power nationwide. In addition, energy supplies were exported to both Russia and Belarus, and there were realistic projects for further exports via Poland to Western Europe. In order to raise the safety level of the plant huge resources had been invested since 1991 from both national and international sources of funding. Nevertheless, despite the importance of the plant for Lithuania's economy, and international experts' opinions that with the safety upgrades that had been achieved, the risks of an accident in the Ignalina plant were more or less comparable with those of Western plants, the European Commission insisted on its closure. It argued that because of the reactor type, the safety level of the plant's long-term exploitation could not attain Western standards of safety.

On the other hand, despite such relatively high costs, the general perception of the total balance between costs and benefits of EU membership remained positive. EU membership strengthened the Lithuanian state and fostered its modernisation. It also opened up new horizons for the business sector to participate in the single market, granting access to more than 500 million people without any borders. The link between economic and social progress in Lithuania and EU membership was thus more than obvious. In order to illustrate this, it is enough to mention two figures. Firstly, before its EU membership Lithuania's GDP per capita was

only 46% of the EU average. Today this gap has been substantially reduced. Lithuania's GDP per capita now comprises almost 75% of the EU average and is continually growing.

Secondly, it is estimated that, prior to its accession to the EU and over its first ten years of membership, Lithuania received approximately 13.5 billion euros in assistance from the European funds, while Lithuania's contribution to the EU budget was almost three billion euros. To add to this positive balance one could also include the increase in investment, the strengthening of energy independence, freedom of movement, social guarantees, support for agriculture, and consular assistance, and the list goes on.

Even the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2010 did not change the positive perception of the EU in Lithuania. In contrast to other Member States the crisis in Lithuania was never linked to its EU membership. According to the assessment of the Central Bank of Lithuania, the impact of the crisis would have been much less tangible if Lithuania had been a member of the Eurozone: "If Lithuania would have adopted the euro in 2007, the country's general government and the private non-financial sectors for the period of 2007-2012 together could have saved LTL 3.7 to 4.9 billion, or 0.59-0.79% of GDP. Having added the economies on the interest on the debt securities issued in this period by the Republic of Lithuania, throughout their duration the financial benefits could reach LTL 6.2 to 7.8 billion."² Unfortunately the first Lithuanian bid to join the Eurozone in 2006 failed. Problems in controlling the inflation rate, coupled with the impact of the economic and financial crisis of 2008, deferred the prospect of accession. Only in 2014 was

Lithuania able again to fulfil the convergence criteria, joining the Eurozone in 2015.

In summary, in order to understand what Lithuania hoped to gain from its membership of the European Union it is important to take into account its point of departure. At the beginning of 1990s, Lithuania was a post-Soviet, post-communist, poor, and badly governed state. During the pre-accession period and the first decade of membership Lithuania, alongside the other two Baltic states, gained a much more positive image as dynamic developing countries, which already in 2003, right before membership, earned them the label of "Baltic Tigers".³ After ten years of EU membership it is safe to say that Lithuania's main objective of modernising its economy was basically achieved. That does not mean that all the problems are settled. Vice versa, it is only after its first decade within the EU, and especially after its first Council Presidency term (in the second half of 2013) that Lithuania gained a much deeper understanding of how complex and complicated a system the EU is.

Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?

It would be strange if the EU project would be a clear project for Lithuania. The EU itself does not have a clear vision. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that the EU in Lithuania is perceived more as an already established entity rather than a developing project. More urgent concerns related with preparations for accession and transposition of the *acquis communautaire* overshadowed a broader reflection on the EU as a project. Public debate is much more centred on subsidies for farmers, structural funds, the development of infrastructure, growing emigration, and the refugee crisis than the nature of the EU and its

pending reforms. Lithuania was thus busy with her own modernisation for more than a decade, and did not seriously consider how to modernise the EU.

On the other hand, while Lithuanians do not much care for further integration, what does matter to them is the EU's continued existence. The Lithuanian political elite sees the preservation and strengthening of the Union itself as a vital national interest. Lithuanians believe that the very existence of the EU completely changed the geopolitical environment and made it friendlier for smaller states. Therefore the weakening or eventual disappearance of the Union may mean returning to the nightmare of the interwar situation, when small Baltic states became interchangeable coins in the big powers' games.

During the last decade Lithuania always supported all EU reforms that were aimed at the deepening of integration and consolidation of the EU institutions. Lithuania became the very first EU country to ratify the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in November 2004. According to Lithuanian researcher Mindaugas Jurkynas, "The Seimas [Lithuanian parliament] wanted so eagerly to show 'political Europeanness' that some parliamentarians voted for the now defunct document without having read it. Political debates about the Constitution were virtually non-existent."⁴ Indeed, there was not so much to discuss, because stronger and more effective Union was a vital and perennial interest of Lithuania.

During the negotiations on the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 the Lithuanian President, Valdas Adamkus, successfully mediated between a reluctant Poland and the presiding Germany in order to reach a compromise and agreement. In 2012 the Lithuanian President, Dalia Grybauskaitė, while being sceptical of new

treaty changes, expressed strong support for the Fiscal Compact. The President underlined that Lithuania would accede to this treaty because it is in the interest of the country's economy. According to the President, "Lithuania is already implementing stringent fiscal discipline measures. Our accession to the treaty will serve to consolidate our position and will curb the way to irresponsible decisions and financial populism. Regardless of which political party is in power, it will be obliged to deal with the country's finances in responsible manner."⁵

Many more times Lithuania and Lithuanians proved themselves to be the most confident in the European project and in their role in this project. It is, however, necessary to underline that the positive attitude towards Europe, expressed by the politicians or wider public on European issues, does not necessarily mean there is any real public preoccupation with European matters.

Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?

In order to answer this question we need to have some kind of theory of degrees of integration. This way it should be clear what kind of unity we have in mind. If we have in mind a clear distinction between confederation and federation answering this question should be rather easy. While Lithuanians mostly assess the EU positively, they are not very keen supporters of a European federation. On the other hand a loose confederation is acceptable to a majority of Lithuanians. Basically Lithuanians are satisfied with the existing degree of European unity. Instead of being interested in further integration during the last decade, their primary ambition was to participate in all the inner circles of the

European Union, the Schengen area and Eurozone as well as to achieve full integration with European transport and energy networks, an external border control system, and other similar ideals.

Conversely, EU membership opened new avenues for Lithuania's *Ostpolitik*. Prior to EU membership, Lithuania tried to rid itself of its 'post-Soviet' or 'Eastern European' image while increasing its contacts with Western Europe and trying to reorient its trade exchange from the other post-Soviet countries' markets towards the EU. However, once Lithuania, as well as other Baltic states, became EU Member States, they immediately decided to redefine their foreign policy priorities and started to participate very actively in European external policies towards the Eastern neighbourhood. According to the Lithuanian researcher Dovilė Jakniūnaitė, "the new EU external policy instrument, ENP (which not incidentally was also promoted by the Baltic states themselves), proved to be exceptionally well suited for defining the new foreign policy mission of the Baltic states".⁶

Lithuania's accession to the EU made it a part of the Western international community. However, because Lithuania was a part of the Soviet Union for fifty years, and because it has common borders with Russia and Belarus, it continued, in a way, to feel that it had obtained a unique opportunity and coveted the ambition to play the role of "bridge" between Western and Eastern Europe, and contribute to the "export" of the values of western democracy and market economy to Eastern Europe. At the same time active participation in the neighbourhood policy was supposed to make Lithuania, as well as other Baltic states, better heard and to find their niche within the context of the EU external policies. However,

differing from the other two Baltic states, Lithuania was perhaps the most ambitious. In 2004, Lithuania's Acting President, Artūras Paulauskas, already declared the country's willingness to become "the regional leader" in this regard.⁷

That idea of becoming "the regional leader" was perhaps too ambitious. In any case Lithuania became the real "regional activist", especially concerning Ukraine. The best example of this activism is Lithuania's efforts to push forward the conclusion of the Association agreements with interested Eastern Partnership countries. Lithuanian diplomats worked hard even before the Lithuanian EU Council Presidency term (July-December 2013) with the European institutions and the Member States in order to facilitate preparations of these agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The signature of the agreements was scheduled for November 2013 during the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius. As is well-known, the last minute decision of the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich not to sign the Agreement provoked the revolution in Kiyv and finally led to the change of government. The majority of Ukrainians wanted to follow the example of the Baltic states by maintaining their country's European trajectory and future. According to the Finnish researcher Kristi Raik, "[W]hat Lithuania has proved is that a small and peripheral Member State can shape the EU agenda. It has also proved that the country holding the Council presidency can still make a difference to the EU's external relations, although its direct role in running the show has been largely taken over by the High Representative and the European External Action Service."⁸

According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?

European affairs are widely reflected in Lithuania's media. Being a small country Lithuania is very open to inflows of media and entertainment products from outside, especially from Europe. During the last two years a lot of attention was devoted to issues of European importance such as the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, EU sanctions against Russia, the Greek financial collapse, the refugee crisis

The fact that Lithuanian citizens identify themselves more and more with not only their own country, but with the whole of Europe shows that Lithuanian society is gradually abandoning such divisions as "we, Lithuanians" and "those, Europeans". Unfortunately, there is not much literature available on the causes and implications of this process. It is rather clear, however, that so far being a European is completely compatible with being a Lithuanian. Despite this, the precise meaning of "Europeanness" and how it could be strengthened and who could be responsible for that remains unclear.

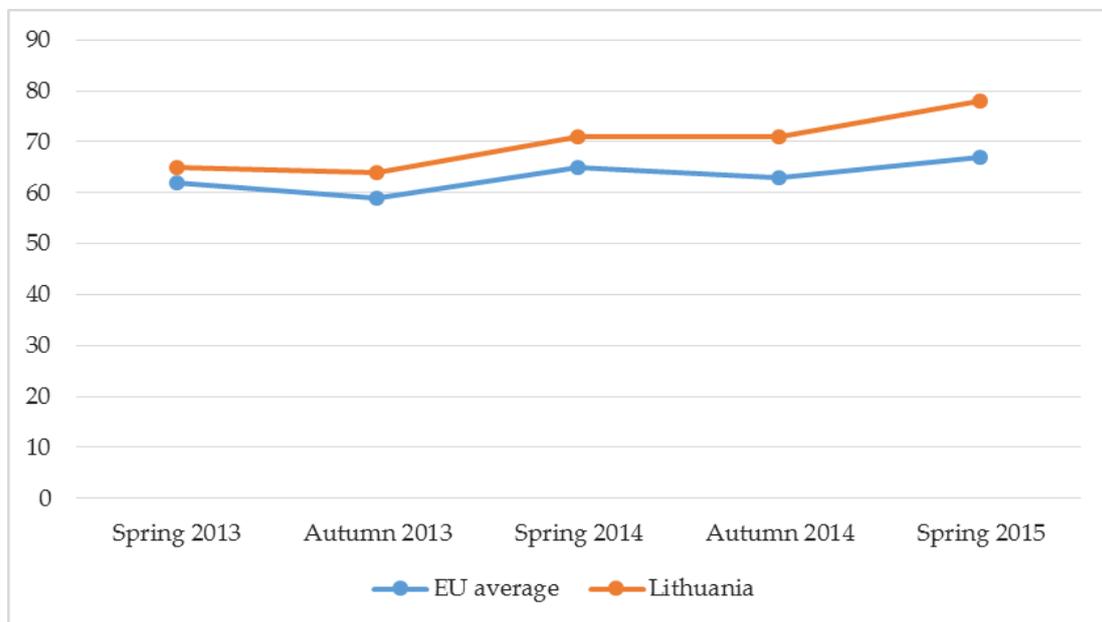


Figure 1 You feel you are a citizen of the EU, in % (source: Eurobarometer)

and the debate over how to deal with it, and the terror acts in Paris. This shapes the existence of a European public sphere, where European people are sharing their problems and challenges.

According to Eurobarometer, the number of Lithuanians who feel themselves to be not only Lithuanian, but also EU citizens has continually increased during the last several years and is above the EU average (see Figure 1).

A rare example of research done in this context was provided by Lithuanian researchers Aukšė Balčytienė and Aušra Vinciūnienė who looked into the reporting practices of journalists on European affairs during the period 2006-2009 in Lithuania and Estonia. In a qualitative study, over thirty journalists from the two Baltic countries were interviewed. The authors obtained their results in light of constraints and conditions for the Europeanisation of day-to-day political reporting practices in the Baltic media.

According to them, “there are some certain drawbacks which have direct impact on the professionalisation of European reporting in the Baltic states. The Baltic journalists talk about a number of challenges in EU news reporting: the European political discourse is quite complex because of both the issues debated as well as the language used. Moreover, journalists, very often, lack specific understanding of issues involved. In addition, they face many pressures such as information overflow as well as time constraints.”⁹

Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?

The most up-to-date source of the official position of Lithuania on the EU affairs is the Strategic Guidelines for Lithuania’s EU Policy for 2015–2020 “Growing and Safe Lithuania in an Efficient European Union”.¹⁰ The document was drafted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in spring of 2015 and adopted by the Lithuanian Government on 22 June, 2015.

On 15 and 20 May 2015 it was debated at the Committee on European Affairs of the Seimas (Lithuanian Parliament). After reviewing the rather long document (running to 27 pages), the European Committee identified six priorities of Lithuania's EU policy: the creation of the European Energy Union; the Eastern Partnership; implementation of strategically important energy and transport infrastructure projects; protection of the EU’s information space; enhanced competitiveness of national research and innovation systems; and implementation of the social dimension objectives under the Europe 2020 Strategy.

The Committee also recommended complementing the document by adding

wording concerning the promotion of a common historical memory.¹¹ There is no doubt that these “official priorities” reflect the expectations of the wider public. Therefore, the progress and new initiatives in policy areas mentioned above could contribute to the better legitimisation of the European project in the eyes of the Lithuanian public.

It does not, however, appear that Europe's project suffers from any lack of legitimacy in Lithuania. According to the latest (Spring 2015) Eurobarometer survey, only 5% of Lithuanian respondents found that the EU conjures up a negative image.¹² There is no basis to talk about serious negative attitudes. There is no eurosceptic party in Lithuania. Eurosceptic views are expressed only by marginal politicians.

On the other hand, it seems that, in order to strengthen the legitimacy of the EU idea, it will firstly be necessary to have a clearer formulation of what it stands for. Unfortunately, today the European idea is unclear, wishy-washy and hidden behind the technical details related to the EU institutions and policies. It is doubtful whether European citizens would become more interested in European affairs if they know the obligations and calendar of MEPs, or how the President of the Commission is elected. In order to better legitimise the European project it is not necessary for the EU to develop new policies. It is necessary, rather, to develop a new ideology. It is necessary to develop the concept of “Europeanness”, to make it less complex, more easily understandable and based on an emotional endeavour.

Endnotes

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