

# Belarus-Lithuania Relations: Common Interests and the Nuclear Dispute

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	4
Abstract	5
Introduction: Toxic Belarus, Hysterical Lithuania	6
The Two Truths of the Belarusian NPP	7
Flourishing Economic Relations	9
Border Cooperation and Contacts between Citizens	13
Playing with Security	15
How to Improve Relations	18
About the Author	19
About the Ostrogorski Centre	20

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## Abstract

- The construction of the Astraviec nuclear power plant (NPP) has become the most notorious issue in Belarus's bilateral relations with Lithuania and may dominate dealings between the two countries for a long time to come. Both countries rely on separate facts to support their position while ignoring arguments presented by the other side. Lithuania has a right to raise issues related to the security of the NPP, but nonetheless over-politicises the problem.
- Relations between the two countries appear black-and-white in the sense that relations are very negative in some spheres and as positive in others. Apart from the NPP, military cooperation and intelligence services' activities remain sore spots in bilateral relations. Intelligence communities of both states look at each other with nearly open hostility.
- However, in the sphere of economic cooperation and contacts between citizens, relations show notable successes. The two countries are key economic partners and cross-border movements of people between the two countries grows constantly. The EU Programme for Border Cooperation plays a significant role in this, providing financial resources to maintaining the countries' interests towards each other.
- The main problem in Belarusian-Lithuanian relations is the lack of trust between the parties. The states need to learn to put one another in the partner's place. More specific recommendations include creating a joint mechanism to monitor the Belarusian NPP, expanding bilateral expert-level dialogue, proportional re-distribution of finances from the EU Neighbourhood Program and broader information exchange between the two states' defence ministries.

## Introduction: Toxic Belarus, Hysterical Lithuania

One easily forgets that Belarus and Lithuania used to be a single state – the Grand Duchy. The two contemporary states evaluate the history differently, especially in respect of the twentieth-century. Belarus and Lithuania depend on opposing geopolitical centres and speak different languages not only in the linguistic sense, but in the political sense as well<sup>1</sup>.

These factors also lead to misunderstandings between the elite on both sides. For some Belarusians, Lithuania comes across as a hysterical country which hyperbolises and dramatises all problems, setting unrealistic demands such as calling for the termination of the construction of the nuclear power plant (to quote Belarus's foreign minister Uladzimir Makei, Lithuania busies itself with «political bacchanalia» and «anti-Belarusian hysteria»<sup>2</sup>). Some Lithuanians see Belarus as a toxic country, over-dependent on Russia, and fear it could be used by the Kremlin to put pressure on Vilnius. Lithuanian leaders harbour doubts about the sovereignty of Belarus<sup>3</sup>.



Photo: Belarus MFA Uladzimir Makei with Lithuanian MFA Linas Linkevičius (mfa.gov.by)

This research aims to improve mutual understanding between the two countries. Such understanding significantly deteriorated when Belarus officially started the construction of a nuclear power plant on the border with Lithuania in 2013. In 2017 the Lithuanian parliament adopted a law under which the Belarusian NPP was considered a threat to the national security of Lithuania<sup>4</sup>, while the Lithuanian authorities try to form an international coalition to restrict the activity of the Belarusian NPP and in fact kill the project on which Belarus will spend a total of about \$11 billion from a Russian loan<sup>5</sup>. However, as demonstrated by

<sup>1</sup> R. Astapenia, 2018. *Common history that divides Belarus and Lithuania*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/common-history-that-divides-belarus-and-lithuania>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>2</sup> TUT.by, 2016. «Мы не идиоты, чтобы строить небезопасную АЭС». *Макей резко ответил на угрозы Литвы*, <<https://news.tut.by/politics/498203.html>> (“We are not idiots that would build an unsafe NPP,” Makei abruptly answers Lithuanians’ criticism) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>3</sup> S. Bohdan, 2017. *Is Belarus just ‘Greater Russia’? Neighbouring states dismiss Belarusian sovereignty*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/is-belarus-just-greater-russia-neighbouring-states-dismiss-belarusian-sovereignty>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>4</sup> Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2017. *Astravyets Nuclear Power Plant was recognised as a threat to Lithuania’s national security by a law passed by the Seimas*, <[http://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p\\_r=119&p\\_k=2&p\\_t=174377](http://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p_r=119&p_k=2&p_t=174377)> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>5</sup> R. Astapenia, 2018. *Will the West join the Lithuania’s crusade against Belarus NPP?*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/will-the-west-join-the-lithuanias-crusade-against-belarus-npp>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

examples in the spheres of economic cooperation or people-to-people contacts, the elite do cooperate pragmatically, and rather successfully, when they feel the need. Such pragmatism should be expanded to other fields.

## The Two Truths of the Belarusian NPP

Belarus and Lithuania disagree even regarding the purpose of the nuclear power station's construction. The Lithuanian elite believes that the initiative to launch the Belarusian NPP belonged to the Kremlin. According to them, the purpose of the NPP lies in keeping the Baltic States dependent on Russia's power resources, while renouncing plans for the Visaginas NPP; a Lithuanian power station which was to be constructed on the border with Belarus. Although Belarus planned to build its own NPP as early as half a century ago<sup>6</sup>, it remains unlikely that construction would have been possible without Russian backing. That is why, even before 2013 when Aliaksandr Lukashenka gave the order to build the nuclear power plant, the issue marred Belarusian-Lithuanian relations. The Belarusian ruling elite saw the Belarusian NPP as an opportunity to decrease their own dependence on gas and, most likely, to stimulate the economy as a whole and the depressed Astraviec district in particular.

The rival narratives only grew as both parties found new arguments to fuel the dispute. The Lithuanian side make the well-grounded claim that the Belarusian authorities have a problem with transparency. For example, when a 300 ton reactor vessel fell, the authorities initially refuted reports and concealed the incident from the public for several weeks<sup>7</sup>. This gives the impression that, in the event of an accident at the power station, Belarus would not inform Lithuania (and indeed its own citizens), or will do so only when it is too late. In addition, the construction of the NPP by Belarus does not fully meet the requirements of both the ESPOO Convention<sup>8</sup> and the Aarhus Convention<sup>9</sup>, though in practice many similar constructions go through difficulties in order to correspond with all the regulations of these international conventions. They are based on the good will of the signatories, and even many European Union member states argue about compliance with these Conventions<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> В. Монзурь, 2018. *Мирный атом в БССР*, <[http://beldumka.belta.by/isfiles/000167\\_171423.pdf](http://beldumka.belta.by/isfiles/000167_171423.pdf)> (V. Monzul', The peaceful atom in the BSSR) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>7</sup> TUT.by, 2016. *Какие опасения разбудил в белорусах «проскользнувший» корпус реактора*, <<https://news.tut.by/society/506742.html>> (What dangers did the "slipped" reactor vessel awaken in Belarusians) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>8</sup> The ESPOO Convention envisages that coordination procedures for the construction of objects which could cause ecological harm should be conducted not only inside the country, but also with the neighbouring states whose interests may appear threatened. However, Belarus failed to conduct this procedure the way it is envisaged by the Convention: United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2013. *Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context. Report of the Implementation Committee on its twenty-seventh session*, <[https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/documents/2013/eia/ic/ece.mp.eia.ic.2013.2\\_adv\\_copy.pdf](https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/documents/2013/eia/ic/ece.mp.eia.ic.2013.2_adv_copy.pdf)> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>9</sup> According to the Aarhus Convention, the public has a right of access to information, participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental issues. In practice, Belarus, although having made certain improvements, did not provide all the said rights to its citizens: United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2017. *Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. Report of the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties. Addendum*, <[https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/pp/mop6/Documents\\_aec/ECE.MP.PP.2017.2.Add.1\\_aec.pdf](https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/pp/mop6/Documents_aec/ECE.MP.PP.2017.2.Add.1_aec.pdf)> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>10</sup> See S. Marsden, T. Koivurova (eds.), 2011. *Transboundary Environmental Impact Assessment in the European Union: The Espoo Convention and its Kiev Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment*, Eatchscan, London and New York.

Moreover, the Lithuanian side tends to ignore several facts. First, Belarus is coping with the development of the nuclear power engineering excellently according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the regulator (and the lobbyist) of the field.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, Belarus voluntarily agreed to be subjected to the stress-tests of the European Commission<sup>12</sup>. Finally, even Lithuanian energy specialists note that the station complies with high safety standards<sup>13</sup>. It seems obvious that Lithuania's motives in the struggle against the Belarusian NPP are not solely ecological – the issue of the Belarusian NPP allows Lithuanian politicians to earn political capital. Many Lithuanian politicians, including Dalia Grybauskaitė, Valdas Adamkus and Vytautas Landsbergis, call the station a “non-conventional weapon” or “nuclear bomb”.

In the international arena, the actions of Lithuanian politicians bear little fruit. While Lithuanian politicians struggle for the termination of the Astraviec NPP's construction or for a ban of Belarusian energy in the EU market, no other EU country shares Lithuania's totally unrealistic position. “You will never satisfy the Lithuanians, they simply do not want the project,” a European official told the Wall Street Journal<sup>14</sup>. Although the European Commission makes gestures toward Lithuania<sup>15</sup>, in September even the European Commissioner from Lithuania, who is politically connected with the ruling government, stated that “Lithuanian official persons seem to confuse politics and economics” and “Belarusians are more than everybody else concerned about the security of the NPP”<sup>16</sup>.

Earlier, in summer 2017, upon the initiative of a Swedish MP, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly refused to consider a Lithuanian resolution which “a bit inaccurately” combined the topics of the NPP and human rights. This position was supported by 20 delegations, including such countries as the Czech Republic, Canada and the United Kingdom. Only seven countries supported Lithuania<sup>17</sup>.

Other countries in the region seem reluctant to criticise the Belarusian NPP and adapt their position to circumstances. Moreover, Latvia would even like to capitalise the Belarusian-Lithuanian conflict to its advantage. The Latvian government has long tried to convince the Belarusian authorities to transit through Latvian ports, so it selects its words of public criticism with great care<sup>18</sup>. As Latvia's foreign minister said in an interview to the portal TUT.by, “we share Lithuania's concern, but we are speaking directly with our Belarusian

<sup>11</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency, 2016. *IAEA Director General Welcomes Belarus' Use of IAEA Review Services in Preparation for Nuclear Power*, <<https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/iaea-director-general-welcomes-belarus-use-of-iaea-review-services-in-preparation-for-nuclear-power>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>12</sup> The results will be published in the first half of 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Д. Параскевич, 2018. *Литовские энергетики считают, что Литва должна помочь Беларуси в строительстве БелАЭС*, <<https://bsblog.info/litovskie-energetiki-schitayut-cto-litva-dolzha-pomoch-belarusi-v-stroitelstve-belaes>> (D. Paraskевич, Lithuanian energy experts think that Lithuania should help Belarus construct the Belarusian NPP) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>14</sup> B. Julian, P. Emre, 2017. *Russian Nuclear Plant Stokes Europe's Fears of a Power Play*, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-nuclear-plant-stokes-europes-fears-of-a-power-play-1514116800>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>15</sup> M. Peel, 2017. *Lithuania given EU backing in nuclear plant dispute with Belarus*, <<https://www.ft.com/content/1cd6dc70-d137-11e7-b781-794ce08b24dc>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>16</sup> Delfi, 2017. *PM surprised at Lithuanian EU commissioner's position on Belarus' N-plant*, <<https://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/politics/pm-surprised-at-lithuanian-eu-commissioners-position-on-belarus-n-plant.d?id=75802509>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>17</sup> The Baltic Course, 2017. *Lithuanians' OSCE resolution on Belarus' NPP blocked in 'painful blow from Sweden'*, <<http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/energy/?doc=130997>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>18</sup> R. Astapenia, 2016. *Can Belarus punish Lithuania for its position on the Astraviec NPP?*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/can-belarus-punish-lithuania-for-its-position-on-the-astraviec-npp>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

colleagues”<sup>19</sup>. Lithuania tried to win support even from Ukraine with regard to the Belarusian NPP. However, as the Lithuanian energy minister said in December 2017, “no concrete position has been heard from Kyiv yet”<sup>20</sup>.

The only very significant achievement of Lithuania has probably been the position of Poland. Poland’s then foreign minister criticised the Belarusian NPP<sup>21</sup>, although later the Polish authorities softened their approach. Warsaw would probably like to disengage itself from Lithuania’s position, as confirmed by the interview of Poland’s ambassador to Belarus Konrad Pawlik to Naviny. by on 27 December 2017. Poland will not only refrain from buying electricity from Astraviec, but took the decision to disconnect the power transmission line Białystok-Ros due to internal reasons<sup>22</sup>.

All this, however, doesn’t mean that Belarus has a right to ignore the adequate demands of Lithuania. Moreover, the conflict will escalate in the near future, according to Lithuanian energy expert Rytas Staselis, when Lithuania may start allocating money for the plans and infrastructure necessary for the evacuation of the Vilnius residents in case of an accident. Even such small things as giving iodine pills to nearly half of the Lithuanian population (those living within 100km of the NPP) will prove very expensive and Belarus should realise this.

## Flourishing Economic Relations

Belarusian-Lithuanian economic relations may not be perfect, but against the background of the nuclear dispute they look paradoxically good. Lithuania remains one of the biggest Western investors in Belarus, having occupied first place among them, and was one of the biggest exporters from the West in some years<sup>23</sup>.

In 2013, the Lithuanian political analyst Laurynas Kasčiūnas (now an MP) said that “every second rich Lithuanian has a business in Belarus”<sup>24</sup>. Since then the number of Lithuanian investments has continued to grow. There are several basic reasons why Lithuanian businessmen come to Belarus: low competition in the market, geographical and mental closeness, a rather large market when compared to the Lithuanian one and low labour costs. In addition, according

<sup>19</sup> TUT.by, 2017. *Глава МИД Латвии – об учениях, адекватности планов Литвы по БелАЭС и как «не пересолить» Беларусь*, <<https://news.tut.by/economics/551944.html>> (Head of Latvian MFA – on exercises, Lithuania’s adequate plans on the NPP and how not to “over-salt” Belarus) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>20</sup> Delfi, 2017. *Lithuania expects Ukraine’s support on Belarus’ N-plant project*, <<https://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/foreign-affairs/lithuania-expects-ukraines-support-on-belarus-n-plant-project.d?id=76608415>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>21</sup> TVN24, 2017. *Słowa Waszczykowskiego zaniepokoiły Białoruś. Ambasador wezwany do MSZ*, <<https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-ze-swiata,2/bialorus-ambasador-polski-wezwany-do-msz-po-slowach-waszczykowskiego,763332.html>> (Waszczykowski’s words disturbed Belarus. Ambassador summoned to the MFA) [accessed 15 April 2018].

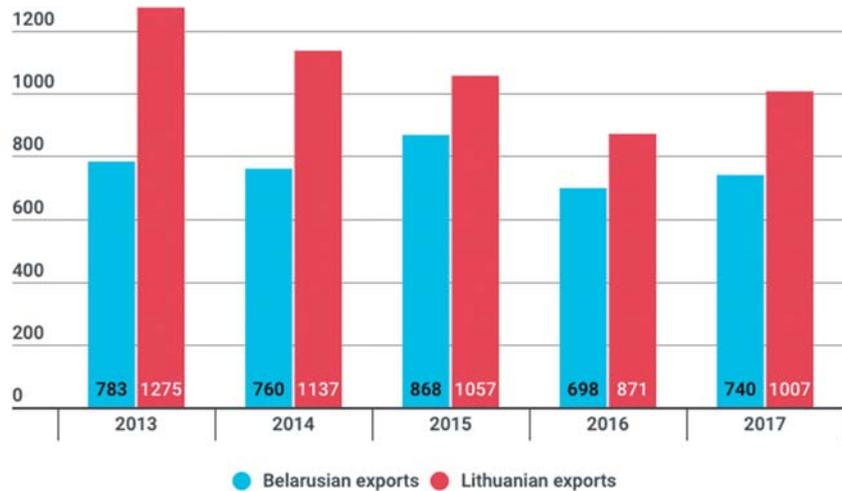
<sup>22</sup> Naviny.by, 2017. *Посол Польши Конрад Павлик: мы никому ничего не навязываем, мы лишь предлагаем*, <<http://naviny.by/article/20171227/1514352433-posol-polshi-konrad-pavlik-my-nikomu-nichego-ne-navyazyvaem-my-lish>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>23</sup> Delfi, 2016. *Lithuania now biggest EU exporter to Belarus*, <<https://en.delfi.lt/corporate/lithuania-now-biggest-eu-exporter-to-belarus.d?id=70274162>> [accessed 15 April 2018]. It is worth noting that the Belarusian statistics give a much lower quota for imports from Lithuania because they take into account only products made in Belarus. In practice, however, the Lithuanians deliver a far greater volume of goods. For example, if a Lithuanian company supplies German cars to Belarus, the Belarusian statistics would treat these as imports from Germany, not Lithuania.

<sup>24</sup> Хартия-97, 2013. *Лауринас Кашчюнас: Каждый второй богатый литовец имеет бизнес в Беларуси*, <<https://charter97.org/ru/news/2013/8/10/73715>> (Laurinas Kashchyunas: Every second wealthy Lithuanian has a business in Belarus) [accessed 15 April 2018].

to Lithuanian political analyst Vytis Jurkonis, “due to the technical regulations of the EU, it is much more convenient to open a plant in Belarus than in Lithuania”<sup>25</sup>.

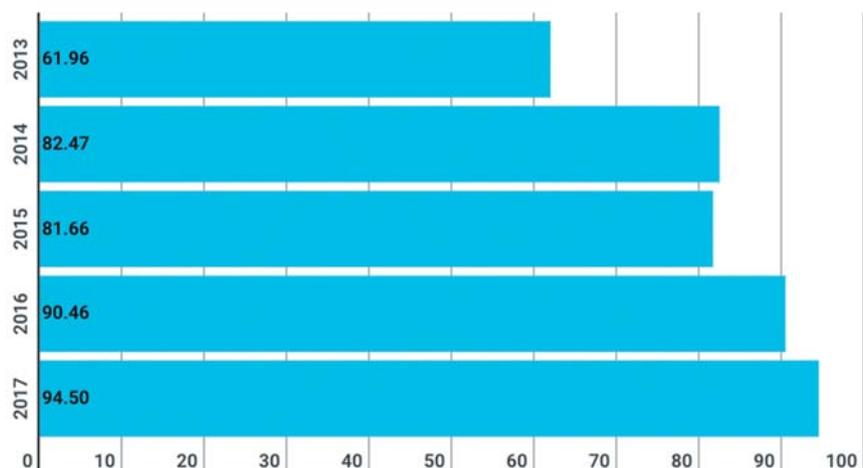
*The trade of goods between the two countries (€ millions)*



Source: statistical committees of Belarus and Lithuania. The Belarusian statistical data are published in US dollars, and have been converted into euros according to the average annual rate for the purposes of this research

No other country has such institutionalised business cooperation with Belarus. Every year, the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists organises forums, hosted in turn by Belarus and Lithuania, which enjoy political blessing. Thirteen forums have been held until now, and in 2018 the forum will take place in Vitsebsk, the centre of the most depressed Belarusian region. The forums gather several hundred participants and have the support of both countries’ governments. Another institutionalised form is the Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation between Lithuania and Belarus, although this has not convened since 2015.

*Lithuanian direct investments in Belarus (€ millions)*



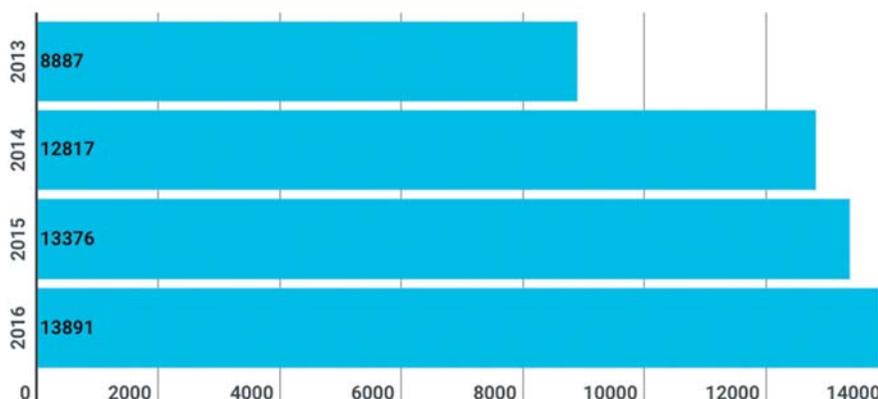
Data source: Lithuanian Statistical Committee

<sup>25</sup> R. Astapenia, 2017. *Investing in Belarus: a story of Lithuanian businessmen*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/investing-in-belarus-a-story-of-lithuanian-businessmen>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

Not all the projects discussed by the parties are implemented since the Belarusian economy remains in stagnation. Some companies anticipate not only the economic crisis, but pressure from the authorities as well. In 2016, the Head of the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists, Danas Arlauskas, characterised Belarus as a “peculiar market, where one can lose a lot without the support and approval of the authorities”<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, Lithuanian businessmen can anticipate being used as political pawns. According to information published by the Polish Centre for Eastern Studies, in 2012 the Presidential Administration of Belarus summoned foreign investors for a conversation to explain that they should stand against imposing sanctions on Belarus, otherwise the Belarusian authorities promised to complicate their activities in the country<sup>27</sup>.

The most important economic project involves transit of Belarusian freight via the Lithuanian railways through the Klaipeda port, which has flourished in recent years. Belaruskali, the Belarusian manufacturer of potash fertilisers, possesses a third of the shares in one of the Klaipeda terminals – Birių krovinių terminalas (BKT). The share of Belarusian freight in the general cargo flow of the Klaipeda port and the cargo flow of the Lithuanian railways is approximately the same, which amounts to about 2% of Lithuania’s aggregate GDP<sup>28</sup>.

***Shipments of Belarusian freight through the Klaipeda port  
(thousand tons)***



The data has been provided by the Belarusian Embassy in Lithuania

Today many media, especially Russian media, speculate about Belarus’s opportunities for redirecting its freight movements from Lithuania to Russia, or even argue that Russia insists on this<sup>29</sup>. Even in the event that Russia continues its pressure for the rerouting of Belarusian freight through Russian ports, it remains unlikely that this will affect the Klaipeda port and the use of the Lithuanian railways by Belarusian companies.

First, Russian ports are inferior in quality and price compared with the Klaipeda port, and the Lithuanian ambassador to Belarus even metaphorically called it

<sup>26</sup> Delfi, 2016. *Will Lithuanian business come to Belarus after abolishment of the EU sanctions?*, <<https://ru.delfi.lt/news/economy/pridet-li-litovskij-biznes-v-belarus-posle-otmeny-sankcij-es.d?id=70911894>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>27</sup> K. Kłysiński, 2013. *No other choice but co-operation. The background of Lithuania’s and Latvia’s relations with Belarus*, <<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-01-07/no-other-choice-co-operation-background-lithuanias-and-latvias>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>28</sup> R. Astapenia, 2016. *Can Belarus punish Lithuania for its position on the Astraviec NPP?*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/can-belarus-punish-lithuania-for-its-position-on-the-astraviec-npp>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>29</sup> S. Bohdan, 2017. *Putin expects Belarus to boycott ports of Baltic States*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/putin-wants-belarus-to-boycott-baltic-states-ports>> [accessed 15 April 2018].



Photo: Shutterstock

a “Mercedes”<sup>30</sup>. Secondly, most Belarusian freight transported through the Klaipeda port consists of potash fertilisers (about 9 million tons of a total 15 million tons in 2017) which, unlike oil products, does not involve Russian production. Third, as the Ambassador of Belarus explained in Lithuania, the Belarusian state reinvests those financial dividends received from the terminal operation, which indicated that Belarus plans to continue using the Klaipeda port. Moreover, Belarusian transit through Klaipeda may even grow after “Grodno Azot”, the fertiliser producer, signed a three-year contract with the Lithuanian Railways (Lietuvos gelezinkeliai) in February 2018<sup>31</sup>.

This does not mean, though, that economic relations will only improve. As one Lithuanian expert said, deepening economic relations with Belarus may be taken negatively since it creates additional leverage on Lithuanian policies for Belarus. In 2017 Belarus’s ambassador to Lithuania noted in an interview that several Lithuanian businessmen and officials advocate “the undesirability of cooperation with Belarus” and recommend “a more careful choice of business partners and suppliers”<sup>32</sup>.

The current head of the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists (LCI), previously considered the main lobbyist favouring economic cooperation with Belarus, seems much less interested in developing relations<sup>33</sup>. So, many in Lithuania see the goal as preserving existing economic ties than further developing them. If earlier the circles connected with the LCI-held lobbying campaigns through the

<sup>30</sup> Naviny.by, 2017. *Посол Литвы: порт Клайпеды – это как «Мерседес». Все хотят на «Мерседесе»*, <<http://naviny.by/article/20170827/1503865719-posol-litvy-port-klaypedy-eto-kak-mercedes-vse-hotyat-na-mercedese>> (Lithuanian ambassador: Klaipeda port – it’s like a Mercedes. Everyone wants to drive a Mercedes) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>31</sup> Previously, the Lithuanian Railways had a reputation as one of the greatest lobbyists for cooperation with Belarus. While it still keeps good contacts with the Belarusian authorities, Lithuania is now conducting the de-monopolization of the company, leading to a reduction of its influence on the policy.

<sup>32</sup> Посольство Республики Беларусь в Литовской Республике, 2017. *Интервью Посла А. Короля «Литовскому курьеру»*, <<http://lithuania.mfa.gov.by/ru/embassy/interview/a3e4f04d779a2836.html>> (Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the Republic of Lithuania, Interview of the ambassador, A. Korol, with the newspaper *Lithuanian Courier*) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>33</sup> Another organisation, the Vilnius Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts has recently intensified cooperation with Belarus. *Vilniaus prekybos, pramonės ir amatų rūmai, 2018. Verslo misija į Baltarusiją*, <<http://www.cci.lt/naujienos/verslo-misija-i-baltarusija>> (Business mission to Belarus) [accessed 15 April 2018].

Lithuanian media aiming to make the attitude of Vilnius to Belarus warmer<sup>34</sup>, then today this seems unrealistic. The severe political climate cooled the lobbyists before it could melt the politicians.

## Border Cooperation and Contacts between Citizens

Borders, complete with infrastructure and complicated procedures for crossing them, first appeared between Belarus and Lithuania 15 years ago when the latter was about to join the European Union. For many residents of the border region this day was tragic because the border separated them from villages where relatives lived. In many cases the members of a single family suddenly had to obtain expensive and complicated visas and take detours of dozens of kilometres to the closest border-crossing points where they would queue to enter a different country.

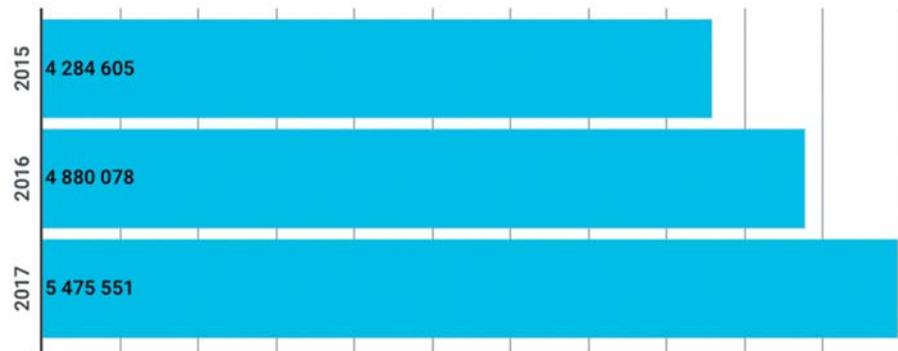


Photo: Shutterstock

Lithuania's joining the Schengen area therefore proved very painful for contacts between ordinary Belarusian and Lithuanian citizens, although the situation has significantly improved thanks to Belarus's visa-liberalisation policy and Lithuania's wide-spread practice of issuing Schengen multi-entry visas for Belarusians. Belarusians and Lithuanians visit each other more and more often in search of goods or services which are cheaper or of higher quality<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> K. Klysiński, 2013. *No other choice but co-operation. The background of Lithuania's and Latvia's relations with Belarus*, <<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-01-07/no-other-choice-co-operation-background-lithuanias-and-latvias>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>35</sup> Another example of the use of lower prices in Belarus concerns transportation of diesel fuel to Lithuania, which leads to traffic jams at the border. Truckers who travel across Poland have the right to import 200 litres of diesel fuel at a time, while there are no such restrictions in Lithuania. Consequently many truckers choose the route via Lithuania and the solution to this problem requires a joint decision.

*Number of citizens crossing the Belarusian-Lithuanian border*

The data has been provided by the Belarusian Embassy in Lithuania

*Structure of citizens crossing the Belarusian-Lithuanian border in 2017*

	Entrance from Belarus into Lithuania	Entrance from Lithuania into Belarus
Citizens of Lithuania	609 467	616 817
Citizens of Belarus	1 357 954	1 253 380
Citizens of other countries	868 408	769 525
Total	2 835 829	2 639 722

The data has been provided by the Belarusian Embassy in Lithuania.

However, the main driver of the Belarusian-Lithuanian human contacts is not the state authorities but the European Union, which finances border cooperation. The budget of the European Neighbourhood Instrument programme for the cross-border cooperation between Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus for the years 2014-2020 totals €81 million, of which the share contributed directly by the EU amounts to €74 million<sup>36</sup>. Although the Lithuanian and Belarusian regions have 70 agreements, it seems almost the only recent meeting between the heads of the cities of the two countries was a conversation between the Vitsebsk and Panevėžys leaders at the beginning of 2018, which was primarily devoted to a joint project funded by the EU<sup>37</sup>.

*Financing of priorities of the programme «Belarus-Lithuania-Latvia» for 2014-2020 (€millions)*

Priority	Quota
Promotion of social inclusion and fight against poverty	18.15
Support to local and regional good governance	15.84
Promotion of local culture and preservation of historical heritage	17.6
Promotion of border management and border security	21.67
Technical assistance	8.14

Source: the website of the programme "Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus", <<http://www.eni-cbc.eu/llb/en/programme/budget/68>> [access April 15, 2018].

<sup>36</sup> The website of the programme: <http://www.eni-cbc.eu>.

<sup>37</sup> Lithuanian Embassy in Belarus, 2018. *У амбасадзе Літвы ў Мінску абмеркавання перспектывы супрацоўніцтва рэгіёнаў абедзвюх краін* (Prospects for cooperation between the two countries in the region were discussed at the Embassy of Lithuania in Minsk) <<https://by.mfa.lt/by/news/u-amvasadze-ltbjymnsku-avmerkabanjyaa-perspektjybjy-supratsontsba-regjena-avedz-jbyuh-kran>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

In 2007-2013, during the previous programme for cross-border cooperation, more than two hundred Belarusian, Latvian and Lithuanian companies built or repaired 150 facilities and conducted more than 300 events. Thanks to the financial support of the EU joint tourist routes appeared, the duration of the train traveling between Vilnius and Minsk was reduced to two-and-a-half hours, and joint youth football camps or field exercises for firefighters were organised. In total, 57 projects received €37 million<sup>38</sup>. According to an insider, when representatives of the Belarusian organisations cooperate with Western Europeans, they often feel patronised, while “in cases of working with Lithuanians and Latvians, they feel equal and engage in cooperation fully”.

However, the programme has a significant drawback for the Belarusian partners - the funds within it are allocated disproportionately among the countries. In 2017 the Steering Committee of the programme “Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus” selected 30 projects for funding. Among them, only two projects on the Belarusian side were among the main beneficiaries. In all the others, Belarusian organisations play a secondary or even marginal role. For example, Belarusians might feature as guests at a seminar in Lithuania or Latvia. The Technical Secretariat refused to provide data on the distribution of funds allocated by the European Union between the two countries, although such data exists in another programme of the cross-border cooperation which involves Belarus – “Poland-Belarus-Ukraine.” According to the Belarusian Ambassador to Lithuania, a big fault indeed lies in the fact that “the Belarusian organisations are not adapted to work with the European funds, but this will change with the acquisition of experience and improvement of regulations.” Other insiders say that connections inside the Supervisory Committee play an important role. The current selection system prioritises state institutions or GONGOs (government-organised non-government organisations) but should be more open also for the representatives of the independent civil organisations.

## Playing with Security

The construction of the Belarusian NPP is not the only problem between Belarus and Lithuania. Since the countries belong to different military-political and economic unions, it seems quite natural that tensions characterise relations between the two states’ intelligence services and militaries<sup>39</sup>. However, Belarus’s relations with Lithuania in this sphere look far tenser than with Poland or Latvia. According to Chief of the Lithuanian Department of the State Security, the department does not even have contacts with the Belarusian special services as Belarus remains an unfriendly state<sup>40</sup>.

Lithuania sees Belarus as a country heavily dependent on Russia in the security sphere. Annually, the Department of the State Security and the Ministry of Defence of Lithuania jointly publish their “Assessment of Threats to National Security”<sup>41</sup> in which the threats posed by Belarus are hyberbolised and included

<sup>38</sup> R. Astapenia, 2018. *How EU money stimulates Lithuania-Belarus border cooperation*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/how-eu-money-stimulates-lithuania-belarus-border-cooperation>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>39</sup> Even relations between non-politised institutions, such as the respective Ministries of Justice, became tense in 2011 when Belarusian law-enforcement agencies used their Lithuanian counterparts for political persecution of Ales Bialiatski. See: Palitviazni.info, 2014. *Ales Bialiatski*, <<https://palitviazni.info/viazen/ales-bialiatski?lang=en>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>40</sup> Delfi, 2017. *Lithuanian security chief: We must avoid hysteria when discussing threats*, <<https://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/defence/lithuanian-security-chief-we-must-avoid-hysteria-when-discussing-threats.d?id=76177399>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>41</sup> All reports are available on the website of the Department of the State Security of Lithuania: <<https://www.vsd.lt/en/threats/threats-national-security-lithuania>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

in the same chapter as threats coming from Russia (they dedicate less space to Belarus than Russia, though). The Belarusian and Russian special services are perceived as tightly connected, although in practice the states have goals which are totally different both in terms of direction and ambitions<sup>42</sup>.

The 2016 report states that “half of the Diplomatic Corps of the Belarusian Embassy in Lithuania are members of, or at least related to, the State Security Committee and the Main Intelligence Department of the Ministry of Defence”. This, of course, raises questions. First, why did Lithuania accredit these diplomats if Vilnius knows that they are special services agents? Secondly, what is the point of having such a number of special services agents when they remain under the observation of the Lithuanian authorities all the time. Thirdly, what is the point of having so many spies for Belarus?

This does not mean that spies do not work in both countries, but their influence should not be overestimated. The cases revealed to the public rather demonstrate the weak representation of the Belarusian secret services. In 2016 an electrician of the state enterprise Oro navigacija Romuald Lipskij<sup>43</sup> was sentenced to five years in jail for espionage in favour of Belarus; a paramedic in the Lithuanian army got three years under the same article<sup>44</sup>. Even the terms which the informants were sentenced to show that they posed little threat if any at all.



Photo: Romuald Lipskij (Delfi)

Herein, the Belarusian special services may be more interested in Western donors and NGOs<sup>45</sup>, which work from Vilnius for the benefit of democratisation of Belarus. Lithuania has become the venue for constant meetings and seminars of the Belarusian opposition and civil society organisations, so, correspondingly, any funding from American and Swedish donors reaches Belarus through Vilnius. By force of habit, the Belarusian special services remain interested in the European

<sup>42</sup> V. Smok, 2014. *Belarusian Espionage: Abroad and at Home*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarusian-espionage-abroad-and-at-home>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>43</sup> Delfi, 2016. *Belarusian spy's sentence extended from 3 to 5 years*, <<https://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/society/belarusian-spys-sentence-extended-from-3-to-5-years.d?id=71357158>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>44</sup> Delfi, 2016. *Lithuanian army paramedic convicted for spying for Belarus*, <<https://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/defence/lithuanian-army-paramedic-convicted-for-spying-for-belarus.d?id=70601134>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>45</sup> In particular, Freedom House, National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute (all - the US), the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Germany), Forum Syd (Sweden) are conducting their activities in Belarus from Lithuania.

Humanities University (EHU) which, however, seems to be abandoning its Belarusian-centrist mission<sup>46</sup>, thus diminishing their interest. The Belarusian university in Vilnius, aimed at growing new elite for Belarus, has become more known for corruption scandals and the inability of its management to conduct reforms. Recently the Lithuanian authorities have considered depriving the EHU of its accreditation after 1 January 2019, although this remains unlikely given the political significance of the university<sup>47</sup>.

In turn, in 2017 Belarus sentenced one of its citizens to 15 years in prison for spying for Lithuania, and previous examples remain widely known where people received 8 or 10 years in prison<sup>48</sup>. However, it remains difficult to assess the adequateness of these punishments given the non-transparency of the Belarusian judicial system. In general, the attitude of the Belarusian KGB head to the Lithuanian special services indicates the latter's attitude to their Belarusian colleagues. According to Valer Vakulchyk, "the methods of work of the Lithuanian special services are aggressive, they conduct deliberate provocations, which the civilised world has left in the past"<sup>49</sup>.

In terms of military cooperation, the tension remains similar to that in the work of the intelligence services. Lithuania was probably the biggest critic of the Zapad-2017 military drills held in Belarus and Russia last autumn. Before the drills, Lithuania's president Dalia Grybauskaitė stated that Russia "uses the territory of Belarus for various experiments and aggressive games, targeted against the West"<sup>50</sup>.

However, the irony lies in the fact that, despite a poor reputation, the defence ministries of the two countries cooperate rather successfully. Lithuania was the first NATO country to sign a plan for military cooperation with Belarus<sup>51</sup>. According to the plan, the countries exchange a significant volume of information and hold annual inspections of military objects<sup>52</sup>. The latest such inspection was conducted in October 2017, three weeks after the Zapad-2017 military drills<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> Y. Kryvoi, A. Rabagliati, 2013. *Analytical Paper: Optimising EHU's Impact on Belarus*, <<https://belarusdigest.com/story/analytical-paper-optimising-ehus-impact-on-belarus>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>47</sup> Delfi, 2018. *Lithuanian officials to draw up rescue plan for European Humanities University*, <<https://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/society/lithuanian-officials-to-draw-up-rescue-plan-for-european-humanities-university.d?id=76811269>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>48</sup> Naviny.by, 2013. *В Беларуси посадили «литовских шпионов»*, <[http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2013/12/31/ic\\_articles\\_116\\_184110](http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2013/12/31/ic_articles_116_184110)> ("Lithuanian spies" imprisoned in Belarus) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>49</sup> СБ. Беларусь сегодня, 2017. *О людях высокого долга*, <<https://www.sb.by/articles/o-lyudyakh-vysokogo-dolga.html>> (About people of high duty) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>50</sup> Lietuvos nacionalinis radijas ir televizija, 2017. *D. Grybauskaitė: padėsime Estijai*, <<http://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/kalba-vilnius/32/175229/d-grybauskaite-padesime-estijai>> (D. Grybauskaitė: we will help Estonia) [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>51</sup> TUT.by, 2017. *«The drills cause certain alert, but we are not afraid». Interview with Lithuania's ex-Minister of Defense Rasa Yunkeviciene*, <<https://news.tut.by/society/543826.html>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>52</sup> Belarus also remains part of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, so it hosts regular inspections from the Western countries. See: Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 2018. *In Accordance with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe*, <<http://www.mil.by/en/news/72041>>, [accessed 15 April 2018].

<sup>53</sup> Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, 2017. *Lithuanian Armed Forces arms control inspectors to carry out a visit to a Belarusian military unit*, <[https://kam.lt/en/news\\_1098/news\\_archives/news\\_archive\\_2017/news\\_archive\\_2017\\_-\\_10/lithuanian\\_armed\\_forces\\_arms\\_control\\_inspectors\\_to\\_carry\\_out\\_a\\_visit\\_to\\_a\\_belarusian\\_military\\_unit.html](https://kam.lt/en/news_1098/news_archives/news_archive_2017/news_archive_2017_-_10/lithuanian_armed_forces_arms_control_inspectors_to_carry_out_a_visit_to_a_belarusian_military_unit.html)> [accessed 15 April 2018].

## How to Improve Relations

Belarusian-Lithuanian relations have a much greater potential than many think. With the deepening of the Belarusian-Lithuanian ties, Lithuania could play an increasing role in the transformation of Belarus. For instance, in the end of 2017 Belarus signed up to its first “twinning” project, aimed at the support of the Belarusian National Bank and financed by the European Union. The Central Bank of Lithuania serves as the “twin” in this project<sup>54</sup>. This is just one example how the countries can pursue their interests helping each other.

The main problem in the Belarusian-Lithuanian relations lies in politics. The politicians of both countries distrust each other and seem unlikely to understand the motivations guiding the other party. When the political elite has difficulties in sincere communication, they can use proxies such as representatives from the analytical community, civil society, or the academic sphere – there are enough people in both parties in these spheres who feel good about their state bodies or at least are ready to serve them.

The Belarusian NPP will be completed and its safety more assured if Lithuanian experts cooperate with their Belarusian colleagues, rather than allowing the Lithuanian authorities to use the tactic of ostracism. In turn, Belarus should agree to the establishment of a common mechanism for constant monitoring of the NPP’s security. In so far as Belarus and Lithuania have failed to solve the conflict around the construction of the nuclear power plant in Astraviec on their own, they should engage the one party which enjoys respect from both sides at present: the European Commission’s Energy Directorate. Many Lithuanians fear a potential accident in Astraviec and that, in it’s event, the Belarusian authorities will attempt to cover it up. Belarus should relieve not only Lithuanians but also Belarusians of this fear by making the construction process more transparent and following the recommendations of the European Commission, which will be published in the near future.

The European Commission, just like representatives of state bodies, should do its best to make the distribution of finances in the neighbourhood programme “Belarus-Lithuania-Latvia” more proportional between the countries. It would also be reasonable to expand this programme so that it covered larger cities, which are more mobile and effective, than rural areas.

It seems unlikely that the Belarusian and Lithuanian special services will ever change their attitude towards each other, but they could at least stop demonising one another in the public space. More improvements are possible in the sphere of military cooperation. Both parties are interested in easing the tension between them and this can be achieved by broader exchange of information.

So far, Belarus and Lithuania successfully avoided arguments in the spheres where cooperation remains mutually beneficial. Now it is time to ease conflicts on the sore issues.

<sup>54</sup> EU Neighbours, 2017. *EU launches first ever Twinning project in Belarus with support for the Central Bank*, <<http://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/news/eu-launches-first-ever-twinning-project-belarus-support-central-bank>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

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## Ostrogorski Centre

The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to a market economy and the rule of law. Its work is non-partisan and dedicated to achieving practical results.

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The mission of the Ostrogorski Centre is to enhance understanding of the transition process in Belarus and learn from the experience of other countries. The centre aims to promote reforms and thinking which helps the economy become more competitive, governance more efficient, and integrate Belarusian scholars and analysts into pan-European and global networks.

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