

Status Seeking by Small States: The Case of Lithuania and the EU's Policy on Belarus

Beāte Livdanska, Karlis Bukovskis¹

Abstract: *Using the example of the Republic of Lithuania and of its engagement towards Belarus, this paper seeks to explain how small states may elevate their status in the European Union by influencing the common foreign policy. Thus, it addresses Lithuania's specific interests and the rationale behind its desire to consolidate its status among EU's partners in the context of the violent post-election crackdowns on the opposition in neighbouring Belarus. Moreover, this paper seeks to examine the theoretical conceptualisations of status seeking and, to this end, it uses empirical evidence from the specific Lithuanian-Belarusian case. The article concludes that by its strong diplomatic and political outcry against Belarus, accompanied by the hosting of the Belarusian opposition's leadership, Lithuania not only demonstrated that it is a pro-democratic country, but also flexed its foreign policy muscles on the international stage. The motivation behind its foreign policy was a positive change for Lithuania among the EU Member States and a revamp of the country's image to free it from the post-Soviet "stamp". The heartening feedback from its partners in the EU and NATO has cemented Lithuania's resolve to be a trustworthy and capable partner that does not shy away from taking the initiative and from assuming responsibilities in the European Union's foreign policy.*

Keywords: *Small states, status seeking, European Union, Lithuania, Belarus.*

Introduction

Small states constitute assuredly the largest number of countries in the modern world. While most of them are internationally recognised *de jure* and *de facto*, and therefore are members of the United Nations, their very existence is a phenomenon of international relations that continues to puzzle many scholars. The sovereignty principle protects the statehood of numerous small countries that otherwise would be absorbed by mightier countries. When making foreign or economic policy choices, or even societal choices, small countries often undergo pressure from larger countries. Hence, each decision related to foreign policy, economic and societal affairs becomes a security matter for them. 'Blunders' are often not forgiven and cause vulnerabilities that can be exploited by external enemies.

After having secured for themselves a relative autonomy in terms of policy-making and security, small states tend to engage in more pro-active and assertive

¹Beāte Livdanska is a visiting Lecturer and a PhD student in political science at Riga Stradiņš University, and researcher at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs.

E-mail: beate.livdanska@rsu.lv

Karlis Bukovskis, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Riga Stradiņš University, and the Director of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs.

E-mail: karlis.bukovskis@rsu.lv

foreign actions, if the international environment allows. They seek to increase their financial welfare, influence and prestige, just like the larger and more resourceful countries. Naturally, the tactics and toolkit used by small states can differ from those used by larger states. The tactics and toolkit can range from financial investments (e.g., those made by the Nordic countries or Switzerland to acquire influence and prestige) to malevolent actions: hybrid war tactics, the weaponisation of migration (e.g., the case of Belarus). The small states' leadership aspires to gain prestige and influence, no matter how relative the latter may be. Having limited financial resources, small states may use their membership in multilateral organisations to enhance their international visibility and foreign policy presence. Small EU Member States, among other things, may be inclined to develop their foreign policy specialisation² or to elevate their status in the EU.

In this specific context, it is worth mentioning that from the analysis of Lithuania's foreign policy and stance vis-à-vis the political instability in Belarus we can extrapolate patterns of behaviour of other small states that do not have EU member state status.

Moreover, it is equally important to emphasise that our choice to focus on the *Lithuanian-Belarusian case* has been determined by two factors. First, Belarus' geostrategic and political significance, not only in the narrow security context of the Lithuanian-Belarusian bilateral relations, but also in the broader security context of Europe. Second, the need to fill the research gap concerning the EU's interactions with Belarus, and especially the dynamics of relations between small EU member states and Minsk.

Status seeking by a small country is the central issue of this paper, which aims to analyse the case of Lithuania influencing the European Union policy on Belarus to establish a pattern of behaviour. This article employs qualitative research methods: document analysis and a specific case study. The first chapter of this article establishes what is a small country based on its definition. The second chapter addresses the concept of "status" mirrored in the small states' behaviour. Finally, the third chapter uses empirical evidence to evaluate the hypothesis that Lithuania's current foreign policy approach is determined primarily by its specific status as a proponent of EU's policy on Belarus.

Smallness as a Formative Power of Foreign Policy

The impact and significance of major powers on the world stage are undisputable. However, it is not accurate to suggest that only they have the ability to shape the international system. Following the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in 1919, and the subsequent decline of other European empires (the British, the French, etc.), the decolonisation process of the 1950s and 1960s, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991³, the international system witnessed the emergence of numerous

²Bukovskis, K., Palkova, A., and Bikovs, A., (2021). "Foreign Policy Specialization of Small States: Latvia's Engagement in Central Asia", *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 114-129.

³Neumann, I.B., and Gstöhl, S., (2006). "Introduction. Lilliputians in Gulliver's World?", in Ingebritsen, C., Beyer, J.L., Neumann, I.B., and Gstöhl, S. (eds.), *Small States in International Relations*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, pg. 5.

sovereign states, most of which are small. Unlike the established major powers or large states, the small states have consistently grappled with the challenge of a lack of consensus on their definition.⁴

Small states are mainly defined on the basis of quantitative indicators. According to the World Bank definition, all countries with a population of less than 1.5 million inhabitants fall into the category of small states, and their overall levels of development and economic capacity are significantly lower, compared to those of larger states. As indicated by Archer and Nugent, not only the economic capacity (specifically: GDP) is important for categorising states,⁵ but also their territorial size. However, it should be noted that quantitative indicators do not provide strict limits for delineating small states, as highlighted by B. Thorhallsson. In the international system, there are several countries with small territories, but high population levels and strong economic indicators, which allow them to be classified as major powers or defined as such.⁶ Therefore, it is necessary to refer to the three ideal-type definitions of small state proposed by Baldacchino and Wivel.

The first ideal-type definition is rooted in history and it indicates that small states are those states that are not great powers.⁷ Theoretically, such an explanation would be correct. However, nowadays, it is not that easy to define major powers as it was in the 19th century.⁸ The second ideal-type definition distinguishes small states from the other states based on their absolute or relative material capabilities, while placing a special emphasis on the military aspect. As noted by Baldacchino and Wivel, a small state lacks the military capability required to project power beyond its borders or to deter an enemy attack. Hence, states can be categorised by their ability or inability to respond to security challenges.⁹ From this perspective, the task of categorising states into small and large states seems straightforward. Nevertheless, this definition is not adequate for the case study conducted on Lithuania within the scope of this paper.

The third ideal-type definition presents the small state as a “political construct”. It stems from the assumption that a state is viewed as “small” due to the perceptions and preferences of its citizens, of its institutions, and of the other states. In other words, a state can be described as small in the specific reality in which it exists.¹⁰ Such a definition would enable us to explain Lithuania’s particular interest in the EU’s policy on Belarus, manifest in its activities carried out within the EU’s institutional framework (and especially within the Council of the European Union, which plays a crucial role as a forum that allows Member States to coordinate their policies across various areas). Lithuania’s proactive role in dealing with the Belarus issue at EU level

⁴Panke, D., (2010). *Small States in the European Union: Coping with Structural Disadvantages*, 1st ed., Surrey: Ashgate, pg. 15.

⁵Archer, C., and Nugent, N., (2002). “Introduction: Small States and the European Union”, *Current Politics and Economics of Europe*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 1-10.

⁶Thorhallsson, B. (2018). “Studying Small States: a Review”, *Small States & Territories*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pg. 18.

⁷Wivel, A., Bailes, A.J.K., and Archer, C., (2018). “Small states and international security”, in Wivel, A., Bailes, A.J.K., and Archer, C., *Small States and International Security: Europe and Beyond*, London: Routledge, pg. 3.

⁸*Ibid.*, pg. 3.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁰Radoman, J., (2018). “Small States in World Politics: State of the Art”, *Journal of Regional Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 182-183. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5937/JRS1802179R>.

would later stimulate its desire to acquire a specific status in the European Union and to influence other policies. Therefore, we can infer that it is possible to formulate a definition tailored to small EU Member States.

As indicated by Thorhallsson and Wivel, all states are sovereign and equal in the European Union's institutional framework. Hence, they have equal rights to influence the international affairs regardless of their size or power.¹¹ It follows that, within the EU's framework, there is no consensual definition meant to place Member States in specific categories. Thorhallsson and Wivel also point out that usually the small states' views do not carry much weight in the security-policy sector.¹² Consequently, these states are more active in policy sectors where they have a stronger political and economic interest. However, in Lithuania's case, we can notice a pronounced interest in Belarus' domestic and foreign policies, which is natural, considering their geographical proximity and their historical relations. Lithuania's political positioning toward Belarus is justified by the challenges arising from the latter's internal politics (human rights violations and authoritarian regime policies) and foreign policy, based on close ties with Russia. Thus, Lithuania's interest in Belarus' domestic and foreign policies is coupled with concerns over its national security and the European Union's security.

It is crucial to emphasise that small EU Member States consider that their integration into the EU's institutional framework is meant to effectively represent their interests and achieve the implementation of desired policies. However, significant challenges stand in their way and small states need to mobilise greater resources to navigate the complexities of the institutional framework.¹³ Here, by resources we mean diplomatic resources, assuming that many agreements are reached 'behind closed doors'. The small states' lack of a large administrative apparatus leads to the need of setting priorities, but at the same time enables a more effective decision-making process. The formal, institutional communication in a small state is not as restrictive as that in larger states, and the resource constraints facilitate manoeuvring through various informal channels of policy influence. In light of these considerations, it is clear that if a state belongs to the category of small states this does not necessarily imply that its ability to act effectively in an international institutional framework is limited; rather, the opposite. The small states' activities are noteworthy. Therefore, the next section of this study is dedicated to analysing the country status as an element that can serve as a driving force for the small states acting within the EU framework in specific policy contexts.

Understanding the interplay between status and small states

The discussion in the previous section suggests that small states are noteworthy players in the international system. Their definition has no negative bearing on their role, especially within institutional frameworks (e.g., within the European Union, in the context of this research). Hence, it is crucial to address the question of why small states

¹¹Thorhallsson, B., and Wivel, A., (2006). "Small States in the European Union: What Do We Know and What Would We Like to Know", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pg. 652.

¹²*Ibid.*, pg. 659.

¹³Thorhallsson, B., (2002). "Small States in the European Union: A Theoretical Approach", in Beltrán, L., Maestro, J., and Salo-Lee, L. (eds.), *European Peripheries in Interaction: The Nordic Countries and the Iberian Peninsula*, Universidad de Alcalá, Servicio de Publicaciones, pg. 53.

are so active in specific policy sectors. The small countries' determination to seek status in the international system should be seen as an additional instrument to their toolkit of foreign policy strategies. Choosing a foreign policy strategy tailored to a country's capabilities and interests can become a key to success not only in strengthening security, but also in increasing influence at regional and international levels. However, the small countries' foreign policy strategies often focus on their ability to respond to different security challenges. In the international relations theory and practice, these strategies imply relations with powerful countries, and balancing against potential threats, by bandwagoning or developing hedging strategies or by remaining neutral.¹⁴ In this section, for the purpose of this article, we assume that the driving force of the small states' actions – visible in this case study on Lithuania – is their status, or in a broader context, the efforts to obtain it.

The interactions between states, irrespective of their size or classification as small or large states, occur based on the understanding that there is a certain hierarchy within the international system and that states aim to achieve greater political and economic influence and prestige. In this context, prestige is an important element because it has a hierarchy of its own, born of the acceptance of the status quo by lesser powers who aspire to form alliances with one or several major powers. Thus, small states acknowledge the hegemon as a provider or guarantor of public goods, and they contribute to the establishment of an ideology that rationalises the hegemon's dominance. Ultimately, prestige stems from a state's economic and military capabilities. It can be viewed as the credibility of a state's power and it serves to clarify how nations can accomplish their objectives without necessarily resorting to direct exertion of power. The third aspect – the power credibility – encompasses a set of rights and rules related to three distinct domains: diplomacy, warfare, and various other forms of state interaction.¹⁵ One can assume that the dominant or great powers shape the international rules and institutions, but does this assumption fully correspond to the realities of the contemporary international system? Although the international system is commonly viewed as an environment with a distinct hierarchical structure, the small states' efforts put into specific EU policy sectors can lead to optimal benefits, as small EU members may thus acquire the status they crave for or maximise their prestige.

According to Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, status, by definition, refers to a certain hierarchy and order. In a hierarchy, the issue of status is not taken for granted. On the contrary, it implies a generally acknowledged pre-eminence. Each state recognises that it is positioned higher or lower than the others within a specific hierarchical structure¹⁶. Thus, the definition of status inherently implies that a state cannot unilaterally assign to itself a status. There must be an interstate interaction, including within an institutional framework, to recognise the existence of a country status. If such an interaction is necessary, it is logical to wonder how to determine the status of a small state, like Lithuania, in the context of EU's policy on Belarus. Is status determined by the pursuit of certain goals or by the outcome and consequences of specific activities? This issue

¹⁴Vaicekauskaitė, Ž.M., (2017). "Security Strategies of Small States in a Changing World", *Journal on Baltic Security*, Vol. 3, No. 2. DOI 10.1515/jobs-2017-0006.

¹⁵Gilpin, R., (1981). *War and Change in International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-49.

¹⁶Dafoe, A., Renshon, J., and Huth, P., (2014). "Reputation and Status as Motives for War", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 17, pg. 375.

is of utmost importance in the case of the states considered small in the international system.

As Neumann and de Carvalho have pointed out, the smaller states' real problem is not so much about being recognised as equals by the great powers, it is rather about being recognised alongside the great powers. However, for the purposes of this analysis, it would be appropriate to employ the concept of 'good power', proposed by de Carvalho and Neumann in their analysis of the Norwegian case.¹⁷ Hence, the concept of 'good power' can be applied to the small states who are recognised alongside the great powers thanks to a consistent strategic approach that enables them to achieve their interests and increase their influence, by engaging in various multilateral forums and actions, and by fostering good norms and values (e.g., human rights, democracy) internationally. The reinforcement of a small country's status requires interaction with the other states to validate that specific status.¹⁸ Thus, the status sought and acquired opens up new opportunities for international interactions, which can further solidify it. Based on this assumption, we can first discuss multilateral formats (e.g., the meetings held by the EU institutions) as a crucial setting for states not only to attain status but also to affirm it. Secondly, if a small state acts as if it already possesses a strong status, it is crucial to see it successfully engaged in specific policy sectors in which typically small states do not engage. It is noteworthy that de Carvalho and Sande Lie have highlighted the importance of the peace and security sectors for assessing the status of a small state like Norway.¹⁹ However, such an assessment can target other policy sectors as well. For example, in Lithuania's case, it can be applied to the economic sector and to the normative efforts in the security sector.

First and foremost, to better understand whether "status seeking" can truly be regarded as a driving force of the small states' demarches in a specific policy sector within the EU framework, it is essential to bear in mind the point we made about the engagement of small states in policy sectors where such engagement would usually not be expected. This kind of engagement in policies that seem to be "out of their league" suggests that small states have realised they can elevate their status through relevant hierarchical interactions with influential states (which are often major powers) in particular policy sectors. Status is a relational concept; it is meaningless outside the nexus of relations at the societal or international levels. The country status can be gained and improved based on recognition from other countries (typically, from major powers or larger states with established status in a specific sector), or lost.²⁰ Finally, this allows us to conclude that the status is dynamic in nature and cannot be taken for granted as an inherent and inalienable element.

These assumptions about a hierarchy of status generate debates regarding the relevance of the comparison between small states and major powers. As previously mentioned, a small state can acquire a higher status recognised by major powers. Yet,

¹⁷Neumann, I.B., and de Carvalho, B. (eds.), (2015). *Small States and Status Seeking: Norway's Quest for International Standing*, Routledge, pg. 16.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pg. 16.

¹⁹ de Carvalho, B., and Lie, J.H.S., (2015). "A great power performance. Norway, status and the policy of involvement", in Neumann, I.B., and de Carvalho, B., *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 59.

which is the significance of this new status and how is it perceived by other small countries or 'among peers'? In this regard, the multilateral frameworks that facilitate interactions play a crucial role. Schia and Sending underscore that there the small states' search for status is different, especially due to the specific conditions of multilateral frameworks, which operate mainly in a normative perspective.²¹ Hence, state interactions are governed therein by the norms and rules that countries adhere to. Therefore, a country's status is defined more by its concrete actions or role (in a certain multilateral framework) than by its resources or economic capacity. The roles within such formats may vary. For example, in the next section of this article, we are talking about the way Lithuania grappled with the Belarusian politics and influenced the EU's stance towards Minsk to safeguard its national and European interests. Thus, this small Baltic state assumed the status of an 'advocate' for the EU's policy on Belarus.²² This allows us to conclude that different multilateral frameworks enable small states, regardless of their economic capacity and size, to become a driving force in certain policy sectors, thereby improving their status among other countries, whether great or small. As noted earlier, research on the small states in the international system is a relatively narrow niche, partly because there is no unified definition of small states. Given these circumstances, the aim of this paper is to examine the significance that small states assign to the country status. The country status and 'status seeking' by small states are relatively under-researched topics, as evidenced by the research conducted on Norway and edited by Neumann and de Carvalho – "Small States Status Seeking: Norway's quest for international standing". Based on this study, one can conclude that the analysis of country status is significantly enriched by specific case studies, such as our in-depth study on Lithuania. We consider that our paper represents a notable contribution to the theoretical debate and literature on the interplay between status and small states.

The case of Lithuania

This section lays out the reasoning behind Lithuania's actions within the scope of the EU's policy on Belarus. It provides examples that validate the hypothesis that Lithuania's actions, as a proponent of the aforementioned policy, have been driven primarily by status seeking. Lithuania and Belarus have somewhat complex bilateral relations shaped by close historical ties, geographical proximity, and the current political situation in Vilnius and Minsk. The outcome of the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections and the subsequent events not only led to a deterioration of these bilateral relations, but also entailed changes in the EU's policy on Belarus to address this new geopolitical reality in which Belarus represents a potential security threat not only to Lithuania, but also to the other EU Member States.

Shortly after the rigged elections in Belarus (held on August 9, 2020), Lithuania was among the first EU Member States whose top officials, including the president

²¹Schia, N.N., and Sending, O.J., (2015). "Status and sovereign equality: Small states in multilateral settings" in Iver B. Neumann and Benjamin de Carvalho, *op. cit.*, pg. 73.

²²Kłysiński, K., (2013). "No other choice but co-operation. The background of Lithuania's and Latvia's relations with Belarus", OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, July 1. Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-01-07/no-other-choice-co-operation-background-lithuanias-and-latvias>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

and the foreign minister, declared that Aliaksandr Lukashenko is not the legitimate president of Belarus, and that the massive suppression of the peaceful opposition protests is unacceptable.^{23,24} Lithuania's reaction was appropriate and foreseeable, given the results of the electoral process and the ensuing human rights violations. It was foreseeable not only due to the neighbouring relations, but also due to Lithuania's status as an EU Member State, which requires a unitary view on the adherence to democratic norms. It is noteworthy that, on August 12, 2020, a few days after the brutal suppression of the Belarusian protests, the Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda set forth a three-step plan designed to restore peace in Belarus, that is, to stop the violence, to initiate a dialogue with the civil society by establishing a National Council, and to immediately release detained civilians. Thus, Lithuania was the first among all EU Member States to come up with practical recommendations on how to stabilise the situation in the neighbouring country.²⁵

However, two factors play a major role in Lithuania's positioning vis-à-vis Belarus that calls for increased attention. First, Lithuania's sharp rhetoric that theoretically could affect the security of this small EU Member State, given its geographic proximity to Belarus and their former close economic relations. Such blunt statements would normally be expected from a larger Member State like Germany. Second, the fact that Lithuania was among the first EU members to question the legitimacy of Lukashenko's re-election is highly significant. It demonstrates Lithuania's efforts to take the lead in the development of the EU's policy on Belarus. These efforts are also illustrated by Lithuania's subsequent statements and proactive stance. Lithuania became the first EU Member State and, all the more important, the first Baltic state (which makes it a leader among "kin" or other small Member States, like Latvia and Estonia) to call for concrete action. On August 12, 2020, Lithuania opened its borders to Belarusian citizens, allowing them to seek asylum on its territory.²⁶ Moreover, it hosted Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, becoming for the latter a refuge.²⁷ Thus, Lithuania took decisive steps to consolidate its stance on the political situation in Minsk, and prove its readiness to support the Belarusian democratisation efforts. Consequently, it became a centre for the development of those democratic processes, and a safe haven for the leaders of the Belarusian opposition. At the same time, Lithuania's position and actions set an example for its neighbouring countries,

²³Lithuanian National Radio and Television, (2020). "Lithuanian president: Lukashenko not legitimate leader of Belarus", August 14. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1210314/lithuanian-president-lukashenko-not-legitimate-leader-of-belarus>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

²⁴ Beniušis, V., BNS. "Former president' Lukashenko should 'face reality', says Lithuanian foreign minister", Lithuanian National Radio and Television, August 16. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1211198/former-president-lukashenko-should-face-reality-says-lithuanian-foreign-minister>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

²⁵Lithuanian Republic Presidency, (2020). "The President's plan for Belarus: stop the violence, release detainees and start a dialogue with civil society", August 12. Available at: <https://lrp.lt/en/news/the-presidents-plan-for-belarus-stop-the-violence-release-detainees-and-start-a-dialogue-with-civil-society/34510>. Accessed on: October 22, 2024.

²⁶The Baltic Times, (2020). "Lithuania allows unrestricted entry to Belarusians 'for humanitarian purposes'", August 12. Available at: <https://www.baltictimes.com/lithuania-allows-unrestricted-entry-to-belarusians-for-humanitarian-purposes/>. Accessed on: 24 July 24, 2024.

²⁷Beniušis, V., (2020). "S. Cichanouskaja – Lietuvoje: Baltarusijos opozicijos lyderė ilsisi, su ja ryšį palaiko Prezidentūra" [S. Tsikhanouskaya – In Lithuania: The Belarusian opposition leader is resting, the Presidency maintains contact with her], August 11. Available at: <https://www.lrytas.lt/pasaulis/ivykiai/2020/08/11/news/1-linkevicius-s-tichanovskaja-yra-lietuvoje-15927062>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

Latvia and Estonia, because they demonstrate a kind of political know-how. Hence, Lithuania could become a leader among the Baltic states in the implementation of common policies, which might later be successfully enacted at the EU level.

Lithuania's role in applying the EU's sanction mechanism against Belarus is another important step meant to strengthen its status. The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs initially proposed the sanctioning of 118 Belarusian officials, including Aliaksandr Lukashenko²⁸, following the fraudulent elections and the mass repression of the peaceful protesters and of the opposition. The first sanctions against Lukashenko and other 29 Belarusian officials were adopted by Vilnius as early as August 2020,²⁹ while the EU was just beginning discussions on the technical implementation of the sanctions, and was weighing the possibility of addressing the situation through political dialogue.³⁰ Following Lithuania's decision, Latvia also decided to impose a ban on 31 Belarusian officials, declaring them *personae non gratae*.³¹ From the perspective of the traditional theoretical assumptions about the small states' behaviour in the international system, Lithuania's decision to impose sanctions can be seen as an unconventional and bold step.

Though it is an EU Member State, it has opted for independent action, which automatically called for a swift and unified EU position on the application of the sanction mechanism. This was further emphasised by President Gitanas Nausėda's statement that the political regime in Belarus is not ready for dialogue. Thus, Lithuania urged all EU Member States to follow its example³² and implement a sanction regime against Belarus. However, Lithuania did not limit itself to simply setting an example; it actively engaged in discussions with the other EU Member States to achieve consensus on the application of sanctions and to keep the Belarus issue on the EU's political agenda. For example, Lithuanian President Nausėda had a telephone conversation with the President of the European Council to stress the need to address the situation in Belarus at the EU level. He highlighted the importance of organising an extraordinary Council meeting to evaluate possible sanctions and stabilisation measures, including their potential impact.³³ Alongside its interactions with other EU Member States and with the EU institutions, Lithuania took the lead in the political discussions conducted

²⁸Lithuanian National Radio and Television, (2020). "Lithuanian sanctions 30 Belarusian officials including Lukashenko", August 31. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1222568/lithuania-sanctions-30-belarusian-officials-including-lukashenko>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

²⁹Beniušis, V. (2020). "URM siūlo nacionalines sankcijas įvesti daugiau kaip šimtui Baltarusijos pareigūnų" ["MFA proposes to impose national sanctions against more than a hundred Belarusian officials"], *Delfi.lt*, August 26. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/urm-siulo-nacionalines-sankcijas-ivesti-daugiau-kaip-simtui-baltarusijos-pareigunu-85083327>. Accessed on: July 24, 2020.

³⁰European Union External Action, (2020). "Video conference of Foreign Affairs Ministers: Main outcomes", August 14. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/video-conference-foreign-affairs-ministers-main-outcomes_en. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³¹Public broadcasting of Latvia, (2020). "Foreign Minister bans 30 Belarusian officials from entry to Latvia", August 31. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/foreign-minister-bans-30-belarusian-officials-from-entry-to-latvia.a372513/>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³²Sytas, A., (2020). "Baltic states impose sanctions on Lukashenko and other Belarus officials", Reuters, August 31. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/baltic-states-impose-sanctions-on-lukashenko-and-other-belarus-officials-idUSKBN25R0ZC/>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³³President of the Republic of Lithuania, (2020). "The President called the Head of the European Council to discuss the situation in Belarus at the EU level", August 11. Available at: <https://www.lrp.lt/en/news/the-president-called-the-head-of-the-european-council-to-discuss-the-situation-in-belarus-at-the-eu-level/34501>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

with the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, urging these countries to agree on applying a sanction mechanism against Belarus.³⁴ Thus, Lithuania's demarches extended beyond the EU's borders.

Based on the conceptualisations of 'status seeking' and its benefits, we can infer that Lithuania's aforementioned activities (that brought to the forefront of international affairs the 2020 political crisis in Belarus) were aimed at improving this country's status. However, one cannot take for granted that Lithuania can gain a specific status within the EU without a wider international recognition. To validate this, several statements and events have been of utmost importance. From among the events, two stand out. First, the telephone conversation of President Gitanas Nausėda with Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel in August 2020. On that occasion, the two high officials discussed the upcoming meeting of the European Council, as well as the situation in Belarus, stressing the need to immediately impose sanctions against the Belarusian regime. Merkel emphasised the importance of Lithuania's support for the leader of the Belarusian democratic opposition and commended its efforts to stabilise the Belarusian crisis.³⁵ In December 2020, after attending the EU's Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius declared in a press release that the EU should facilitate an international investigation of the crimes of the Belarusian regime by setting up an international panel of law experts to bring those responsible to court.³⁶ Second, the meeting between the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius in September 2020. During this visit, they discussed topics such as 5G security, national security vulnerabilities in communication networks, and the Belarus issue.³⁷ In this context, Pompeo emphasised Lithuania's role in addressing the ongoing political crisis in Belarus.³⁸ This statement is significant – considering the United States' position in the international system as a global superpower, a model of democracy and an ally – because it does not highlight the collective efforts of the Baltic states, but those of Lithuania specifically.

Hence, it can be concluded that Lithuania is gaining status as a country that plays a major role in resolving democratic crises within its region. The declaration of the U.S. Secretary of State provides the first confirmation of Lithuania's status at the international level, and can also be interpreted as an assessment of its efforts. For this case study, not only the international recognition is important, but also Lithuania's activity within EU's institutional framework. The status conferred on Lithuania by the US is to some extent accepted in the EU as well. In this sense, it is worth mentioning

³⁴ President of the Republic of Lithuania, (2020). "The President calls on the EU, US, Canada, and UK to impose sanctions on the Belarusian regime", September 10. Available at: <https://www.lrp.lt/en/media-center/news/34668>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³⁵ President of the Republic of Lithuania, (2020). "Prezidentas su Vokietijos federaline kanclere aptarė būdus išspręsti Baltarusijos krizę" ["The President and the Federal Chancellor of Germany discussed ways to resolve the Belarus crisis"], August 17. Available at: <https://lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/34549>. Accessed on: October 22, 2024.

³⁶ Lithuanian National Radio and Television, "EU Must Help Investigate Regime Crimes in Belarus, Says Lithuanian Minister", December 8. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1293876/eu-must-help-investigate-regime-crimes-in-belarus-says-lithuanian-minister>. Accessed on: October 22, 2024.

³⁷ U.S. Department of State, (2020). "Secretary Pompeo's Meeting with Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linkevičius", September 16. Available at: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-lithuanian-foreign-minister-linkевичius/>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

that the European Parliament has acknowledged Lithuania's overall activity in support of the Belarusian opposition and of asylum seekers, but also Poland's contribution in assisting the Belarusians.³⁹ Therefore, Lithuania is not perceived in the EU as the only country entitled to receive gratitude.

Should we jump to the conclusion that, from the EU's perspective, Lithuania's status is not an exceptional one? No, that would be wrong. First, it is important to emphasise that other countries, including Poland and Latvia, have followed Lithuania's example. Second, Lithuania has also sought to strengthen its status as a supporter of Belarus at the domestic level. One striking example was the creation of a human chain from Lithuania, across Latvia and Estonia, all the way to the border with Belarus, on August 23, 2020, the anniversary of the Baltic Way.⁴⁰ Primarily, this was a grand gesture, showing support for the Belarusian civil society's path to democracy. Moreover, it proved the Lithuanians' shared understanding of the necessity to provide support to the Belarusians. This meant that the civil society had embraced the policymakers' objectives, creating a somewhat logical synergy in the domestic political atmosphere.

We can conclude that Lithuania has strengthened its status as a result of its actions. More precisely, it has gained recognition from the EU and significant international partners, and has set an example for the Baltic states. However, we should stress that the validation of Lithuania's new status comes also from the reaction of Belarus to its activities. Shortly after Lithuania's refusal to recognise Lukashenko as the legitimate president of Belarus (followed by the adoption of a sanction list against Belarusian officials), this Baltic state's activities came to the attention of Minsk. The Belarusian leader, Aliaksandr Lukashenko, escalated his rhetoric on various occasions, claiming that Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland sought to destabilise Belarus by demanding new presidential elections.⁴¹

Considering Lukashenko's rhetoric, we can infer that Lithuania's activities have not gone unnoticed by Belarus. In contrast, they have somehow managed to shake Lukashenko's confidence in the stability of his political regime. This is also suggested by the Belarusian leader's statements about military activities near his country's borders with Lithuania and Poland. In his view, both these countries have interfered in the internal affairs of Belarus by influencing the election results and by supporting the opposition.^{42,43} Though Lukashenko's rhetoric is targeted at both Poland and Lithuania,

³⁹European Parliament, (2021). "Resolution of 7 October 2021 on the situation in Belarus after one year of protests and their violent repression" (2021/2881(RSP)). Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0420_EN.html. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

⁴⁰Lithuanian National Radio and Television, (2020). "People in Lithuania form human chain from Vilnius to Belarusian border", August 23. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1217587/people-in-lithuania-form-human-chain-from-vilnius-to-belarusian-border>. Accessed on: July 25, 2024.

⁴¹Belarusian Telegraph Agency, (2020). "Lukashenko: If we give in to their demands, we will go into spin", August 17. Available at: <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-if-we-give-in-to-their-demands-we-will-go-into-a-spin-132605-2020/>. Accessed on: July 25, 2024.

⁴²Belarusian Telegraph Agency, (2020). "Lukashenko comments on most dramatic decision in his career", August 24. Available at: <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-comments-on-most-dramatic-decision-in-his-career-132811-2020/>. Accessed on: July 25, 2024.

⁴³Belarusian Telegraph Agency, (2020). "Lukashenko: Several centers of power at play against Belarus", August 21. Available at: <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-several-centers-of-power-at-play-against-belarus-132784-2020/>. Accessed on: July 25, 2024.

this does not necessarily mean that Lithuania lacks status and, thus, influence on the Belarusian politics. Rather, the opposite is true: Lithuania, by its example, has managed to promote a certain course of action by addressing the Belarusian issue both internally and externally.

The theoretical assumptions about status, examined in the previous chapter, do not suggest that a country's status is recognised exclusively by the states that positively evaluate its activities. As the case study of Lithuania indicates, Belarus reaction to Lithuania's demarches involves a recognition of status. Though Belarus is a larger country than Lithuania, the activities of the latter have provoked a response from the Belarusian regime. This is a significant aspect, as it highlights the need to further explore the status of small states and their possible beneficial interactions with other countries in the international system.

Conclusions

Small states seeking to establish their status among partners and in the international system do not form a recent trend. Such status-seeking behaviour is a long-standing phenomenon. What is different in Lithuania's case is that this Baltic country has established and increased its foreign policy capacities since it regained its independence and national sovereignty. Its foreign policy and its relations with its neighbouring countries, Belarus included, underwent changes when Lithuania joined various international organisations, military alliances and thus increased its diplomatic and financial outreach.

Status seeking by Lithuania, as a small state in the European Union, has been an ongoing trend for more than a decade. Its relations with Belarus, the plea for EU sanctions against Aliaksandr Lukashenko's regime and rule, the strong opposition to the state repressions against the Belarusian opposition have been clear options to re-emphasise Lithuania's status as a democracy supporter, valuing human rights, as it is expected from a EU Member State. The positive feedback Lithuania received from its EU and NATO partners for its strong reactions and messages to the Belarusian regime has encouraged the Lithuanian diplomats and the political leadership to pursue this foreign policy vector that guarantees prestige and influence to the small country.

Lithuania's actions against the Belarusian regime were not isolated, as many other countries, including its fellow Baltic states, followed suit by denouncing the Belarusian President. Yet, Lithuania considered that it was its obligation and a good opportunity to demonstrate leadership on the Belarusian issue. For Lithuania, as well as for Latvia and Estonia, it was an opportunity to stand out against undemocratic and violent states of the former Soviet Union. Additionally, it was an opportunity to change the small countries' status from post-Soviet to fully Western.

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