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KALININGRAD AND THE LITHUANIAN “GEOPOLITICAL CODE”

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Abstract. The paper analyses the evolving role of Kaliningrad in shaping Lithuania’s security perceptions vis-à-vis Russia. Applying the framework of the “geopolitical code” designed by Flint, the authors question whether the exclave-enclave nexus in the Kaliningrad region – after the European Union (EU) and the Atlantic Alliance (NATO) enlargements – has been a relevant change in context that has affected Vilnius’ security perception of Moscow in its “geopolitical code”. The cooperative posture of Vilnius initialled in 1991 – and later reinforced through the EU programmes – tended to be based on achieving the country and EU’s own stability and development, in a regional perspective, with no strategy to spill over on global relations with Moscow. Vilnius’ understanding of Russian policies in Georgia and, mainly Ukraine, represented a change in context from 2008 onwards that brought a focus on military dimensions concerning the *Oblast*. This change was convergent with the same tendency in NATO. Membership in the EU and NATO has reinforced Lithuanian perceptions of Kaliningrad as a potential ally or enemy. At the bottom line, Vilnius’ key decisions towards militarization in detriment of cooperation result from a continued negative security perception of Russia. Although cooperative engagement exists, it has not been able to become a feature of the relation due to the rationale of this cooperation. Kaliningrad influenced the “geopolitical code” of Lithuania concerning Russia but it did not play a decisive role in changing Vilnius’ calculations on how to engage with Moscow.

Keywords: Lithuania, Kaliningrad, Russia, Geopolitical Code, European Union, NATO, Cooperation, Militarization, Security and Defence policies.

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Introduction

The Kaliningrad region or *Oblast* occupies a peculiar geographical position and plays a significant role in European and Russian geopolitics. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the *Oblast* was separated from the territory of the Russian Federation and became an exclave or semi-exclave [Rozhkov-Yuryevsky, 2013; Gareev, 2013; Zieliński, 2020]. Although exclaves tend to be diminutive in territory and population, they often exercise disproportionate, and often divisive, roles in international relations [Vinokurov, 2007]. After the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) enlargements in 2004, with the Lithuanian and Polish accession, “Kaliningrad Oblast became a kind of an enclave” or a “semi-enclave” [Ivanauskas *et. al.*, 2017; Se-bentsov, Zotova, 2018]. As Berger [Berger, 2010: 313] underlines: “All enclaves are borderlands and as such they are characterised by their peripheral status. They act as barriers against potential ‘others’, and they filter influences both from the surrounding area and the mainland, but they are also contact zones and meeting points of different cultures, languages and political orders, which often facilitate exchange and cultural transfer”.

Taking into consideration that Russia has been considered an existential threat to Lithuania since its independence [Pavlovaite, 2003], this paper questions the role of Kaliningrad in shaping the evolution of Lithuanian security perspectives. We posit that – despite the fact that the *Oblast* is at the same geographical location since 1991 – changes have been operated in Vilnius’ security perceptions taking into consideration two main aspects. (a) The Oblast has become a semi-enclave after the 2004 enlargements and (b) the Lithuanian perception of the Russian threat since independence has endured despite signs of evolution.

In the aftermath of the reunification of Crimea with Russia, geostrategic significance of the *Oblast* has been reinforced in European security and in the Baltic region in particular [Veebel, Sliwa, 2019]. Should Moscow be successful in seizing a 104 km piece of land along the Polish-Lithuanian border – known as the Suwalki Gap – the three Baltic states would be completely cut off from their NATO allies¹.

The paper questions whether the evolution of Kaliningrad – as exclave and enclave – has been a relevant change in context that has affected Vilnius’ security perception of Moscow in its “geopolitical code”. In the first section, we expose the analytical framework that we apply in this research. The “geopolitical code” [Flint, 2017] of Lithuania is identified in the subsequent sections of the paper. Secondly, we unpack the contexts in which Kaliningrad is viewed cooperatively by Vilnius, and how these dynamics have contributed to frame the country’s geopolitical code. Thirdly, we identify negative security perceptions of the *Oblast* and how they contribute to redefine the Lithuanian code.

¹ Sytas (2017) ‘NATO war game defends Baltic weak spot for first time’, Reuters, 18 June. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-russia-suwalki-gap-idUSKBN1990L2> (accessed: 07.09.2021)

Geopolitical Codes: a framework of analysis

The concept of geopolitical codes was originally developed by Gaddis [Rae, 2007] in his analysis of U.S. post-war security policy. Rae observes that those codes are a relatively stable framework for understanding the world. However, they could change spatially depending on the assumption regarding the interests and threats of a given country. Flint and Taylor [Flint, Taylor, 2018] and Flint [Flint, 2017] have defined this concept as dynamic and in a framework which permits the identification of markers of change and the assessment of how changes in context might alter foreign policy calculations. Flint exemplifies with the Baltic countries’ NATO membership, a dramatic change in a geopolitical code as these countries were part of the Soviet Union. This geopolitical framework of analysis is suited to unpack political calculations and incorporates both classical and critical dimensions of the field¹.

Considering the geopolitical code as the way in which each country orientates itself towards the world, Flint considers five main calculations to define a code: “(a) Who are our current and potential allies? Who are our current and potential enemies? (b) How can we maintain our allies and nurture potential allies? (c) How can we counter our current enemies and emerging threats? (d) How do we justify the four abovementioned calculations to our public, and to the global community?” [Flint, 2017]. Thus, our paper aims at identifying Vilnius’ “geopolitical code” by addressing these questions.

A geopolitical code “is the product of state elites”² and is generally connected with national myths. “Visions of one’s country and its position in relation to other countries are formed within particular national myths. These myths form the basis for geopolitical codes and the means to represent and interpret these goals so that they obtain popular support.” [Flint, 2017: 311]. National myths include concepts of sovereignty, territory and state security, and threats are commonly originated by other nations. Thus, national myths require the construction of us/them and inside/outside identities. We explore below how Kaliningrad, as a Russian territory, has been incorporated in Vilnius’ geopolitical code that includes negative security perceptions of Russia.

This methodological choice needs to be understood in the agent-structure debate in geopolitics, as Flint himself underlines [Flint, 2017]. Firstly, agents cannot act freely, but they are able to make choices. Secondly, agents act within structures that limit, or constrain, the possible actions of the agent. Furthermore, structures provide opportunities for agents to attain their goals. Finally, an agent can also be a structure and vice versa [Flint, 2017; Peet, 1998]. Thus, we use this framework of analysis to explain the manner in

¹ Van Effrink, L. (2012) Colin Flint: structure agency, identity, peace networks, geopolitical codes/visions URL:

https://exploringgeopolitics.org/interview_flint_colin_structure_agency_identity_peace_networks_geopolitical_codes_visions_agents_actors_representations_practices_spaces_powers_environmental_geopolitics/ (accessed: 20.03.2021)

² Ibid.

which state elites have been taking decisions within the (geopolitical) context regarding Kaliningrad, which involves positioning towards Russia and the effects of EU and NATO integration. The framework of analysis suggests that the country's view about this question is tightly influenced by its "geopolitical code", which is by definition, a highly biased picture of the world [Flint, Taylor, 2018].

Finally, the "geopolitical code" framework can be put under the theoretical perspective of the "security dilemma" that offers a language to frame the empirical situation and ways of thinking about what is necessary to ameliorate tensions. In particular, the "security dilemma sensibility" [Booth, Wheeler, 2008] – referring broadly to the ability to understand the fear that one's own actions can generate in others – and the (in)capacity of States to exercise this "sensibility" pervades the security environment.

The "geopolitical code" framework allows us to grasp the complexity of agency in the sense that multiple identities and goals have an impact at the decision level on the course of external action [Flint, 2017]. Our paper focuses on the specific impact of the Kaliningrad region on Lithuanian positioning towards Russia in terms of security guarantee perceptions. We consider the effects of EU and NATO integration on this issue as a change in context since, parallelly, Kaliningrad became a semi-enclave and Vilnius reinforced its security perceptions towards Moscow. We apply below this framework to assess how changes in context might alter foreign policy calculations. In other words, we outline in what ways the Lithuanian "code" has been dynamic, considering the impact of the Kaliningrad exclave-enclave question in different contexts.

Kaliningrad as "another" Russia for Vilnius: dynamics of cooperation

After declaration of sovereignty, Lithuanian political elites had the ambition to maintain a certain neutrality regarding the tensions between East and West. The *Outline of the Concept of National Security* of 1990, drafted even before Lithuanian independency, highlights intentions on maintaining neutrality by becoming a zone of greater confidence between the East and the West. Despite the fact that the document doesn't contain clear reference to particular threats, Miniotaite [Miniotaite, 1999] identifies the Soviet Union as the implicit threat to the country's security. In June 2000, this perception of Russia as a threat was made explicit, for instance, in the editorial of the leading Lithuanian daily newspaper, as follows: "the spirit of militaristic and ideological communist revenge is alive in Russia...destabilizing Russian-Lithuanian relations and the whole world" [Pavlovaite, 2003: 199].

Although the USSR and later the Russian Federation were considered by Lithuanian public opinion¹ and elites² as a threat to the country's security, Vilnius' relations with Moscow seemed closer when compared to the other Baltic states. While Lithuania suc-

¹ Centre for Insights in Survey Research (2020) *Public Opinion Poll: Lithuania, 7-26 June 2020*. URL: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/lithuania_slide_deck_ltu-to_be_published.pdf (accessed: 07.09. 2021)

² Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania and State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania (2020) *National Threat Assessment 2020* URL: <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-Gresmes-En.pdf> (accessed: 05.05.2021)

cessfully signed a border treaty prior to the former’s accession to the EU and NATO, Riga and Tallinn’s attempts to sign a similar treaty were fruitless. The absence of territorial disputes between Moscow and Vilnius played a key role in paving the way for the signature of the treaty [Fernandes, Correia, 2018]. Relations seemed closer when it came to cooperation through Kaliningrad. In fact, both countries successfully signed an Agreement on Illegal Migrant Readmission in the framework of Kaliningrad negotiations [Karabeshkin, 2015]. Cultural cooperation has also been developed, namely educational cooperation (Baltic University Programme and ERAMUS+ programme) and a cultural attaché in the Consulate General in Kaliningrad until a recent downsizing to one position for the entire Russian Federation¹.

Despite Russia being perceived as a threat in Lithuania’s political elite imaginary, from 1991 until 2008 relations between Vilnius and the Kaliningrad region were mainly grounded on cooperation. The key element was the natural, functional and political features of “cross border regions” [Kolosov, Sebentsov 2019: 76]. We develop below examples of cross-border cooperation that, according to Khudoley [Khudoley, 2019], are “functional” and practical relations with positive effects in the presence of a deteriorating international situation.

The cross-border agenda between the Baltic country and the *Oblast* is primarily grounded in two fields: regional economic cooperation and the transit of Russian citizens and military units through the Baltic country. Engagement in the New Hansa² organization (Kaunas and Kaliningrad are members) serves as a tool for cross-border cooperation through city diplomacy [Vasilyeva, Kosov, 2017]. The New Hansa is seen as the “incarnation” of the Hanseatic League referring to successful trade cooperation between the XIII and XIV centuries in the region. History, an essential aspect in the establishment of national myths, contributes positively to the perception of the Russian “other” through Kaliningrad.

From the very beginning of 1991, Moscow took action to alleviate the problem originating from Kaliningrad’s geographical position as “Lithuania and Russia soon reached a provisional arrangement allowing visa-free travel for Russian citizens across Lithuanian territory” [Diener, Hagen, 2011: 580]. Moreover, during Boris Yeltsin’s administration a regionalization of Russia could be noted while, at the time, Lithuania was able to develop direct relations with the *Oblast*. In 1994, a consulate of the Baltic country was opened in Kaliningrad, and in 1995, another agreement on visa-free travel for visits shorter than 30 days was signed to facilitate mobility of the residents of Kaliningrad and of the Lithuanian citizens entering the region [Ivanauskas *et al.*, 2017]. The 2002 National Security Strategy refers to Vilnius’ intention to maintain good economic, commercial, and cultural

¹ Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania (2021) *Office of Cultural Attaché has been established in Japan*. URL: <https://lrkm.lrv.lt/en/news/office-of-cultural-attache-has-been-established-in-japan> (accessed: 14.12.2021)

² Die Hanse (no date) *Die Hanse*. URL: <https://www.hanse.org/en/> (accessed: 13.12.2021)

relations with Kaliningrad¹ and highlights intentions to involve the region in European and regional cooperation. Concurrently, Lithuanian elites expressed a willingness to help solve the problems that Kaliningrad posed to the whole region [Pavlovaite, 2003]. Although Lithuania's relations with the *Oblast* are mooted to be the trial, test, and model for socializing the Russian 'other', they are also seen as a way of helping to develop a genuine strategic partnership between Europe and Russia [Vitunic, 2003; Ivanauskas *et al.*, 2017].

Before Lithuania's accession to the EU, mobility questions transformed as Kaliningrad would become a Russian enclave within the Union, raising concerns about citizens transit into the Schengen area and the visa regime that would be applied. "The priority objectives of the exclave region were to ensure transport accessibility and to reduce political tension brought about by the exclave being sandwiched between EU and NATO member-states" [Mikhaylova, 2019: 97]. The main issue regarding Lithuania's accession to the EU was the enlargement of the Schengen Area.

In the 2002 *Joint Statement on Transit between the Kaliningrad Region and the Rest of the Russian Federation*, the EU and Russia acknowledged the unique geographical situation of the Kaliningrad region². Both agreed to take comprehensive measures to facilitate border passage. Russia-Lithuania-EU tripartite negotiations resulted in the signing of the Facilitated Transit Document (FTD) and the Facilitated Railway Transit Document (FRTD), for transit by train, bus and car [Vinokurov, 2020: 67]. The search for a more open dialogue shows how the existing "geopolitical code" can be justified to the population, which at the same time, in practical terms, implied important changes in daily life.

An initial agreement on Local Border Traffic (LBT), also known as Small Border Traffic, was also reached in 2009 for transit issues but abandoned by Lithuania in 2012. The withdrawal resulted namely from a growing concern about Lithuania's territory openness [Anisiewicz, Palmowski, 2014: 80–81]. At the same time, probably as an attitude to preserve good relations regarding cross-border cooperation, Vilnius decided to build new border crossing points³.

After 2004, economic cooperation between Lithuania and Kaliningrad evolved. An enthusiastic vision towards enlargement and its consequential benefits in regard to EU-Russian relations and with the *Oblast* existed. The idea that Kaliningrad could be a testing ground, a bridge or pilot region for enhancing cooperation between Russia and the EU

¹ Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania (2002) *National Security Strategy*. URL: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/156892/Lithuania-2002.pdf> (accessed: 05.05.2021)

² Kremlin (2002) *Joint Statement of the European Union and the Russian Federation on Transit between the Kaliningrad Region and the Rest of the Russian Federation*. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/3537> (accessed: 18.12. 2021)

³ 15 Min (2012) *Lithuania to build new border crossing point at Kaliningrad*. URL: <https://www.15min.lt/en/article/society/lithuania-to-build-new-border-crossing-point-at-kaliningrad-528-281232> (accessed: 13.12. 2021)

LRT (2019) *Lithuania moves ahead with new checkpoint on Russian border*. URL: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1124584/lithuania-moves-ahead-with-new-checkpoint-on-russian-border> (accessed: 13.12. 2021)

existed at the time, namely becoming a thriving area of liberalized free trade between the EU and Russia. Thus, becoming an enclave presented the opportunity for Kaliningrad to become a “region of cooperation” and the future Hong Kong of the Baltic Region [Sebentsov, Zotova, 2018; Jokubaitis, Lopata, 2010].

The status of Kaliningrad as a pilot project could have resulted in a “reciprocal and open strategic partnership” [Maass, 2020: 518] between Russia and the EU, namely under the Neighbourhood Programme «Lithuania, Poland, Kaliningrad region», 2004–2006. For the period, more than 44,5 million euros from the European funding were allocated to the Programme, resulting in 162 cross-border projects [Richard, Sebentsov, Zotova, 2015: 9]. Since 2007, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) finances cross-border cooperation, mainly involving cities located in the coastal region [Richard, Sebentsov, Zotova, 2015].

The Northern Dimension (ND) is another ongoing programme that was also seen as an opportunity for Kaliningrad to act as a “bridge to Moscow-Brussels relations”, namely in the successful areas of public health, social well-being, and culture. The programme embodied the principle of depoliticized cooperation and Europe’s ‘new regionalism, thus a model for cooperation and a platform for informal dialogue maintaining a positive interaction potential [Kolosov, Sebentsov, 2019].

These programmes directed towards diminishing the disparities between the countries of the EU and the *Oblast* reinforced the view that the EU has of the region as an external security problem with the view of guaranteeing the Union’s own security and to support the development of its own frontier regions [Browning, 2003; Richard, Sebentsov, Zotova, 2015]. Therefore, we can incur that Lithuania shared the same EU biased image of Kaliningrad. After accession, Vilnius’ actions were also delimited by its political and legal commitments towards the EU and the country’s cooperation with Kaliningrad has been happening mainly through European institutions. For instance, Vilnius had an active role in setting guidelines for transit programs between Kaliningrad and Russia, as well as in preparing its implementation measures [Ivanauskas *et al.*, 2017].

The choice of Lithuanian elites to join the EU and NATO was based on an Atlanticist and Brussels-focused geopolitical vision of the European continent [Sawka, 2015]. Thus, Russia would be outside Europe in Lithuania’s imaginary. Consequently, Lithuania has made a clear choice favouring cooperation with the EU over Russia, making the EU as its main partner in its “geopolitical code”. Kaliningrad occupied a more benign place in the code, as “another Russia”, allowing the *Oblast* to be considered as potential ally for Vilnius’ security interests. However, as we will demonstrate in the next section, recent context has provoked major changes in the role of Kaliningrad in the Lithuanian “geopolitical code” vis-à-vis Russia.

Kaliningrad’s role in “othering” Russia: the prevalence of security concerns

If cooperation was part of Vilnius-Moscow relations since 1991, 2008 and 2014 can be considered as turning points. The biased image of Kaliningrad evolved in the opinion of Lithuanian population and elites, as more of a threat instead of an opportunity to coop-

erate [Piotrowski, 2018]. Maass [Maass, 2020] indicates 2015 as another significant date for this recalibration after the deployment of Russian missiles in the *Oblast*. During the 1990's the apprehension regarding Kaliningrad's militarization was closely related to soft-security issues and the demilitarization of the territory [Lopata, 2004].

According to Lithuanian analysts, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine increased Lithuanian concerns about Russia's intentions and "calls for reconsideration (from the West) of the threats in the region, and, with Russia exerting pressure on the neighbouring states and even raising a military challenge to the security of the entire Baltic Sea Region, it is now critical to see Kaliningrad as Moscow's tool to deter NATO from greater visibility in the region" [Ivanauskas *et al.*, 2017: 148].

NATO became, thus, central in Vilnius's perception of Kaliningrad as – together with the adjacent corridor at Suwalki – it is well positioned to disable the Alliance's air and sea abilities [Frühling, Lasconjarias, 2016]. The *Oblast* is the only place where NATO needs to be able to neutralize Russia's A2/D2 (anti-access and area denial) capabilities if its collective defence guarantee is to remain credible. Therefore, "we (NATO) have to practice, we have to demonstrate that we can support allies in keeping (the Gap) open"¹.

The positions of Lithuanian elites are similar with NATO's stances on Kaliningrad, seeing the region as a threat, and thus as a common enemy, which bolsters in the Lithuanian imaginary the need to hold tight to its Alliance since militarization re-started in the last decade in the region. The 2020 *National Threat Assessment* articulates this understanding and underlines that the Russian increase of military potential and activity in the Western Military District calls for cautiousness regarding these hostile intentions². As compared to the 2002 *National Security Strategy*, above-mentioned, where the *Oblast* was seen as an opportunity for cooperation, the new document portrays Kaliningrad as a latent threat. This shift demonstrates how dynamic the "geopolitical code" of a country is, as Kaliningrad has evolved from a potential ally to a potential enemy.

A main concern for Vilnius is the installation of *Iskander* ballistic missiles in the *Oblast*, a high precision weapons system with a range of over 500 km, capable of carrying nuclear warheads [Oldberg, 2015]. As, in Vilnius views, Moscow had already acted aggressively in the post-Soviet space in Georgia and Ukraine, Russian military exercises of considerable dimensions during the same period near the Suwalki Gap were interpreted as a warning of Moscow's intentions. The missiles and Russia's most extensive military exercises carried out since the end of the Cold War (in Kaliningrad and Belarus) ultimately posed a direct threat to NATO and the EU [Maass, 2020].

¹ Sytas (2017) 'NATO war game defends Baltic weak spot for first time', Reuters, 18 June. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-russia-suwalki-gap-idUSKBN1990L2> (accessed: 07.09.2021)

² Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania and State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania (2020) *National Threat Assessment 2020*, p.4. URL: <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-Gresmes-En.pdf> (accessed: 05.05.2021)

From 2015 onwards, additional Russian combat capabilities in the region (and Crimea and the Arctic) such as modern Su-30SM / FLANKER-H multi-role fighter jets¹ have increased the capability of the *Oblast*'s forces to conduct military operations without reinforcements from mainland Russia². Further militarization of Kaliningrad transformed Vilnius's understanding of the *Oblast* from a vulnerable and exposed territory (a semi-enclave sandwiched between NATO and the EU) to a potential threat to the Baltic countries, resulting in a change of “geopolitical code” tailored to the need of containing this (new) potential enemy.

In practice, the change is observable in Vilnius' growing defence spending since 2014. The defence budget has grown from approximately 0,8% to over 2,1% of the country's GDP, above the NATO 2% goal. Moreover, there is a political commitment to increase this figure to 2,5% by 2030³, in contrast with the previous era of disinvestment.⁴ Additionally, after 2014 all the Baltic countries started to erect fences at their borders with Russia. Lithuania justified this decision by alluding to a potential (military) threat posed by Russia⁵. The expansion of training areas in Western Lithuania in Rukla, Kazlų Rūda and Pabradė is also meant to accommodate exercises of Lithuanian and NATO soldiers⁶. NATO and Lithuania's positions have, thus, converged on Russia's continued military build-up in Kaliningrad and the Alliance acknowledges Lithuania's active political and military role in NATO⁷.

The convergence of official positions on Russia's security challenge (militarization of the *Oblast* and the regional instability after the Georgian and Ukrainian crises) is shared by the Lithuanian public opinion. In a 2020 poll, only 14% of the respondents strongly agreed with the following: “Lithuania's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with Russia”. Among those who strongly agreed that Lithuania should maintain

¹ Heritage, T. (2015) ‘Russia to step up combat capabilities in Crimea’, Reuters, 13 January. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN0KM10320150113> (accessed: 07.03. 2021)

² Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania and State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania (2020) *National Threat Assessment 2020*, p.24. URL: <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-Gresmes-En.pdf> (accessed: 05.05. 2021)

³ Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania (2020) *Lithuanian Defence System: Facts and Figures 2020*. URL: https://kam.lt/en/defence_policy_1053/important_documents/lithuanian_defence_system_facts_and_trends.html (accessed: 05.05.2021)

⁴ Trading Economics (no date) *Lithuania Military Expenditure*. URL: <https://tradingeconomics.com/lithuania/military-expenditure> (accessed: 05.05.2021)

⁵ Day, M. (2017) ‘Lithuania to build fence along its border with Russia to protect itself from 'provocations'', The Telegraph, 17 January. URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/17/lithuania-build-fence-along-border-russia-protect-provocations/.2017> (accessed: 07.09.2021)

⁶ Jankauskas, K. (2020) ‘Lithuania to Endorse Building Foreign Military Base – OpEd’, EurasiaReview, 16 September. URL: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16092020-lithuania-to-endorse-building-foreign-military-base-oped/> (accessed: 10.03.2021)

⁷ NATO News (2021) *NATO Secretary General and the Lithuanian Foreign Minister shared views on NATO's future*. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180848.htm (accessed: 08.03.2021)

strong relations with Moscow, 34% thought that “Russia is close and dangerous – we must keep on good terms to protect ourselves”; and only 2% believed that “Russia is our true ally and guarantor of national borders and sovereignty”. On the other hand, 64% of the respondents strongly agreed that the national interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with the EU, and 51% strongly agreed that their country’s interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with NATO¹.

In another poll, 71% of Lithuanians trusted the Lithuanian Armed Forces, confirming the public support that the Minister of Defence, Raimundas Karoblis, wanted to gather². Moreover, 65% of respondents thought that the Russian Federation was using information to influence the people of Lithuania deliberately in order to sway their attitudes. Perceptions of Russian soft power also fed mistrust as it is seen as a threat to national security and has been criticised by local organizations and elites [Vorotnikov, Ivanova, 2019]. Russia reoccupies, thus, a central place in Lithuanian “national myths” and the Atlantic Alliance consequently, as 71% of the country’s population is satisfied that foreign NATO troops are stationed in Lithuania ensuring their security and 51% consider that military exercises in the region are needed to maintain NATO’s readiness to defend their country³. The convergence of thinking among the political elite and the population attests the progressive change of Lithuania “geopolitical code” over the past years that, according to the theoretical model, cannot be enacted unless the majority of the population is acquiescent.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the Lithuanian “geopolitical code” in order to unpack its perceptive role of the Russian semi-enclave of Kaliningrad in shaping Lithuanian security perceptions and key policy changes. Positing that Russia has been continuously perceived as a threat since the independence of the country in 1991, we have argued that this perception has evolved in nature and intensity in different contexts and that Vilnius’ changing actions towards the *Oblast* are illustrative of this evolution. Cooperation dynamics are a straightforward path to identify a country’s “geopolitical code”. In this case they demonstrated how Lithuania used to consider Kaliningrad differently when compared to Russia, in other words, as a potential ally with whom relationships could be nurtured. Cross-border

¹ Centre for Insights in Survey Research (2020) Public Opinion Poll: Lithuania. URL: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/lithuania_slide_deck_ltu-to_be_published.pdf (accessed: 07.09.2021)

² Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania (2019) *Numbers of citizens who have confidence in the Lithuanian Armed Forces and are prepared to defend the Motherland are increasing*. URL: https://kam.lt/en/news_1098/current_issues/numbers_of_citizens_who_have_confidence_in_the_lithuanian_armed_forces_and_are_prepared_to_defend_the_motherland_are_increasing.html (accessed: 01.05.2021)

³ Centre for Insights in Survey Research (2020) *Public Opinion Poll: Lithuania*. URL: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/lithuania_slide_deck_ltu-to_be_published.pdf (accessed: 07.09.2021)

and cultural cooperation between Lithuania and Kaliningrad has evolved and perdured over the past decades (whether bilateral, multilateral or based on European initiatives).

However, the opportunities to build closer relations with Moscow, generated by a cooperative engagement until the mid-2000's, have faded away for two main reasons. Firstly, the cooperative posture stemming from Vilnius – and later its reinforcement through EU programmes – tended to be based on achieving the country and EU's own stability and development, in a regional perspective, with no strategy to spill over on global relations with Russia. As a consequence, the fact that the *Oblast* was perceived by Lithuania as “another Russia”, in an initial phase, was not prone to trigger a real change in the Lithuanian “geopolitical code”.

Secondly, change in the context that influences Vilnius' understanding of Russian policies in Georgia and, mainly Ukraine, from 2008 onwards brought a focus on military dimensions concerning the *Oblast*. This recontextualization was in line with the same tendency that the Atlantic Alliance displayed. Ultimately, in either the cooperative and defensive phase, membership in the EU and NATO has reinforced Lithuanian perceptions and key decisions (towards militarization in detriment of cooperation) as both organisations shared a common understanding with Vilnius on each dimension, respectively. However, as underlined by Okunev [Okunev, 2013: 74], “geopolitical codes” are dynamic and coalition strategies are “forged to meet a specific objective, hence their ad hoc nature. In these circumstances, a country feels free to choose its allies and rivals of its own accord.” The positive cooperative elements concerning the Kaliningrad case have, thus, still the potential to impact on the Lithuanian “code”.

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