

Preparing for Zero Hour: Values and Geopolitics in Latvia and Lithuania

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Are values a luxury to be cast aside when your country is under threat of invasion, or is values-based politics part of building resilience? Two Baltic Green politicians whose parties have recently joined national governments discuss the opportunities and challenges of pursuing transformative agendas in times of geopolitical tension.

Richard Wouters: Both your parties entered national government after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Baltic region might well be Putin's next target. Under these conditions, is it possible to put a progressive and Green mark on policies?

Justīne Panteļejeva: The main motivation for my party, the Progressives, to join the Latvian government in 2023 was to ensure the passing of a civil partnership law granting rights to same-sex couples and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. To me, it's obvious that these types of measures lead to a more inclusive society, which in turn strengthens social resilience in times of crisis. Yet we only managed to get the bills through a mostly conservative parliament because we had insisted on including them in the coalition agreement.

We have done a good job in supporting middle- and lower-middle-class households by making the tax system more progressive. Starting this year, 95 per cent of working people pay lower income tax. This wasn't easy in the context of war in Europe and increased defence spending, but reducing inequality makes Latvian society stronger.

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Strengthening our defence and supporting Ukraine are this government's top priorities. Not only do we Progressives support these aims, we also provide the defence minister responsible for the implementation of policies to achieve them. In the coming years, the government aims to ramp up defence spending from the current level of 3.7 per cent of GDP to 5 per cent. That will be a tough debate. My party will stress the need for a balance between spending on defence and funding for social security, education, and healthcare.

As well as holding the defence portfolio, the Progressives also head the transport and culture ministries. Culture in particular is highly relevant for societal resilience, as it deals with media independence and media literacy. In an age where disinformation is a tool of war, people need to be able to read with a critical eye. Our culture minister is also strengthening the protection of cultural heritage, using lessons learned from Ukraine. One of the first things an invader wants to do is to destroy the culture of the

country it has invaded. Without culture, you don't have a shared sense of who you are as a nation. Preserving your culture – from books to monuments – allows you to fight back.

Tomas Tomilinas: My party, Democrats for Lithuania (DSVL), has only been in government since December 2024, so I can't yet present a list of our achievements as a governing party. But around 80 per cent of our manifesto has been integrated into the government's four-year programme. One of our two ministers heads the ministry of energy; their work focuses on the development of renewables, for the sake of both climate protection and energy security.

For me, one of the major topics at present is tax reform. We are learning from our Latvian friends on this. Our aim is to play a leading role in the tax debate, and I think we can do so because we're not afraid to say "tax the rich". Now that we will have to spend so much more money on defence – our government is aiming for 5.5 per cent of GDP by 2030 – wealthy people will need to make a bigger contribution.

Even when DSVL was in opposition, we were able to have an impact. During the Covid-19 pandemic, which required rapid decision-making, we strengthened parliamentary oversight of the government's use of emergency powers. In times of crisis, democracy must not be switched off. We also campaigned for the EU's Nature Restoration Law; as a result, the Lithuanian position changed from "against" to "for". That was crucial for its final adoption by the EU Council of Ministers.

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Your countries have brought back compulsory military service in response to the Russian threat. Has that generated a lot of debate?

Justīne Panteļejeva: It did when the decision was taken in 2022. Many young people are unhappy with this move, but most feel that it's necessary. You now see young men who have completed their military service taking on permanent jobs in the armed forces. This is reassuring. Conscription is like the imaginary monster under the bed: in reality, it ends up being just fine. Moreover, those who don't want to take up arms can opt for alternative civilian service. Military service is only compulsory for men, but our minister of defence is now looking into conscription for women, too.

Trump coming back into power, the way he bullied Zelenskyy in the White House last February: these events were a cold shower for Latvians. They galvanised support for strong national defence, including conscription. At the same time, people are talking to their relatives about what to do when *X stunda* (zero hour) comes – when Russia invades. Should they try to escape, hide, or resist?

Tomas Tomilinas: Zero hour is definitely being talked about in Lithuania as well. Conscription is no longer controversial. We already reinstated it in 2015, after the first Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Governments in Western and Southern Europe have long been deaf to warnings from the Baltic region of Russia's imperialist ambitions. According to Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the former president of Estonia, this was because they saw the Baltic states as second-class EU and NATO members – countries that were only reluctantly admitted and then had to keep quiet. Do you agree?

Tomas Tomilinas: Let me first stress what a great achievement it was for us to join the EU and NATO in 2004. At the time, I thought it was just a matter of fulfilling the criteria for membership. Now I realise that it was a historic event, a once-in-a-century opportunity that we seized. Ukraine did not get that

chance, and you see what happened. Yes, we felt the frustration of not being listened to, but that is less so now. We are quite active within the European foreign policy debate.

Justīne Panteļējeva: Even though we might have been seen as second-class, we had politicians who commanded respect. At the time we joined the EU and NATO, we had a wonderful president in Latvia, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, who was a figurehead for all Baltic countries. There was a ceiling, but it was possible for a strong and courageous leader to break through it and voice our perspective. Kaja Kallas, as prime minister of Estonia, did so too, in a powerful and uncompromising way. It landed her the job of EU foreign policy chief. That's a big win for the Baltic states.

Tomas Tomilinas: Kallas is certainly important for us, but her post is not yet fully functional. Because of its weak institutional set-up, with veto rights for every member state, the EU doesn't have an effective common foreign policy. Without this, how can there be a European defence policy? The Baltic states have traditionally opposed EU federalisation for fear of it undermining the power of small countries. Now that we need a strong Europe more than ever, it is really time to rethink that position.

Are Western and Southern Europe starting to learn lessons from the Baltics?

Justīne Panteļējeva: First of all, I think it's important to say that we in Central and Eastern Europe have learned a few things ourselves from Southern Europe since the Ukrainian refugee crisis and the weaponisation of migrants on the Belarusian border. We are facing the same tough political realities as our southern EU partners and may also need additional support with our border situations. We can all learn from each other; it's not a one-way street.

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That said, it does feel like we live in two different Europes when it comes to defence. Right now, while northern and eastern member states are arming themselves to defend Europe, those in the south still haven't understood the urgency of the situation, or so it seems. We need to have more conversations. I would like to tell our southern partners, including Greens and the Left, that we are preparing to defend not only ourselves but all of Europe. If we don't manage to understand each other's realities, we are playing into Putin's hands. He's definitely trying to divide Europe.

If you were given a few minutes to address the congress of a party like Sumar in Spain or Europa Verde in Italy, what would you say to them?

Tomas Tomilinas: I would tell the story of old grandmother Europe, who is close to death. To revive her, and ourselves, to keep our civilisation alive, we need new stories – romantic stories that can unite us. Right now, the historic challenge is to defend Ukraine. And we can only rise to this challenge if we no longer see ourselves as mere nation states. Most nation states are easy prey for aggressive autocrats, oligarchs, and multinational corporations. At the very least, we need to be a strong coalition of states. We need to stick together in the face of Putin, Trump, Musk, and the like. And we should allow more countries to join, so we become even stronger. That is what's unique about the EU: you can expand it without hurting anyone. Look at the accession of Central and Eastern European countries: it's a good story, and it underpins the solid support for the EU here in the Baltics. Let's create more of those success stories.

Justīne Pantelējeva: I'm less of a romanticist than Tomas. For a long time, at least in Latvia, talk of European solidarity and the common striving for democracy was dismissed as empty words from Brussels. Instead of daydreaming about Europe, we needed to pave our roads and tackle the glaring inequalities in our societies. But the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine dramatically changed that. Suddenly, we are mentally, emotionally, and financially committed to people we've never met, in a country we've probably never visited, and we are doing everything we can for them. Because they are fighting for what we stand for. I like to think that is something very European. Only now do we feel that we are not alone but part of something greater: the project of Europe.

Is this an expression of the “neo-idealism” that security analyst Benjamin Tallis sees emerging in Central and Eastern Europe? An approach to geopolitics grounded in the power of values such as democracy, human rights, and the right to self-determination, by his definition.

Tomas Tomilinas: I like the concept of neo-idealism, even though it's quite academic. We know it as values-based foreign policy. In many ways, Lithuania is representative of this approach, especially when it comes to Russia and Ukraine. Other foreign policy issues get more easily caught up in political disputes. We might disagree on the values we wish to defend or the sacrifices we are willing to make. For example, our previous government incurred the wrath of autocratic China because it sought rapprochement with democratic Taiwan. I was a fan of this policy, but it was fiercely contested.

Justīne Pantelējeva: I think the rise of populists and outright autocrats calls for a new idealism, as an antidote. Populists and autocrats diminish the role of truths and facts. They exploit and fuel cynicism, detachment from society, in order to create a system that first and foremost benefits themselves. People who refuse to fall for their lies and hatred will be attracted to leaders – not necessarily politicians – who demonstrate bravery, who break through apathy, who create and facilitate hope. Centrist politics will be less in demand.

In my day-to-day politics, there is little room for new ideals. But if I take a step back and think about where we are and what we're going to see over the next few years, about what we as Green and progressive parties should really prioritise, I also come to the conclusion that we need to offer idealistic leadership to citizens. We need leaders who are able to both take on the populists and autocrats and bring people together around bold ideas.

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Tomas, you call yourself the only “degrowth” in the Lithuanian parliament. Can degrowth be reconciled with neo-idealism?

Tomas Tomilinas: One of the possible reasons why Europe struggles to unite against autocrats and oligarchs might be our prioritisation of material wealth over the values that constitute our common historical legacy. We must also realise that most future conflicts and wars will be over natural resources. This should force us to rethink our production and consumption and work for a global system that distributes these resources in an equitable way. We could still have a thriving economy if we developed public and private services that are less resource-intensive.

Justīne Panteļējeva: The fact that Latvia's GDP has – like Lithuania's – roughly doubled since EU accession has brought prosperity to many people. It has allowed us to survive in the post-Soviet world and to invest in defence and other public goods. So although there is room for degrowth or post-growth ideas within my party, these ideas will not fly in Latvian politics more broadly. Furthermore, in a globalised economy, a small country like ours cannot effectively pursue degrowth policies. If you want to gradually change ideas, to mount a challenge to over-consumption, you should perhaps tap into the frugal practicality that can still be seen among our parents and grandparents. In Soviet times, they had to develop a talent for tinkering in order to survive with almost nothing.

Tomas Tomilinas: I would like to add an example from recent debates in the Lithuanian parliament. As Greens, we want to preserve our forests; we emphasise how important they are for biodiversity, health, and tourism. But our proposals to curb logging have long been met with opposition on financial grounds. Now, with the threat of war, that has changed. It has become clear that forests are a natural defence against invading forces. Our parliament has now voted in favour of laws protecting the huge, forested areas on our eastern border. This shows that it is not impossible to convince majorities that there are more important values than economic growth.



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Tomas Tomilinas is co-founder of Democrats for Lithuania (Demokratų sąjunga „Vardan Lietuvos“, DSVL), a governing coalition party in Lithuania and a member of the European Green Party. He has been a member of the Lithuanian parliament since 2016. Tomas has deep roots in the green movement. Among other things, he headed the successful campaign against nuclear power in Lithuania in 2012.

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