

Russian threats to Lithuania – labour perspectives.

Friday 1 November 2024, by [PIRANI Simon](#), [VALIUKEVIČIUS Jurgis](#) (Date first published: 29 October 2024).

Trade union organiser and activist Jurgis Valiukevičius talks to Simon Pirani about the new workers' movements in Lithuania, emigration and immigration, and about how sympathy for Ukrainian resistance has opened up space for discussions about the meanings of nationalism and anti-imperialism

Simon: Please tell us about the labour movement in Lithuania. What are its strengths and weaknesses? What form does it take (trade unions? workplace organisations? and so on). Are there links between the labour movement and other social movements?

Jurgis: The labour movement in Lithuania has been weak, but we have seen some positive tendencies during the last 10 years: there have been more strikes and a bit more militancy.

Union membership has been low: around 8-10 % of the workforce are union members. Since the economic transformations that were implemented after Lithuania assumed independence from Soviet Union in 1990, union membership steadily decreased. Most of the factories closed down, and there were no more large industrial sites where traditional union activity could take place.

In the Soviet Union, unions tended to function as welfare providers, distributing social welfare such as housing and vacations. When there were problems with the workers' rights, they were used to writing complaints to the Communist party branch in their workplace, or solving matters directly with the factory directors through paperwork and official negotiations.

Once the state control of the production process disappeared, there was no official that the union reps could complain to, which left the unions defenceless. At the same time, most of the union leaders were not equipped with organising skills. And the new business class that was emerging at that time, came out of shady mafia-style groups with connections to the central government.

I have [previously published \(in English\)](#) stories of worker resistance that took place around these times. Workers would guard their factories from being dismantled by the new owners until they received compensation for unpaid wages. In the most radical cases, people would do hunger strikes.

Stopping production does not make much sense if your factory is going bankrupt. So the only way to force some kind of reconciliation was through using your own life as a defence of last resort of valuable property.

You could say that the workers managed to put some political pressure on the government officials to intervene. Around 2001, the government created a bankruptcy fund, out of which workers could expect to get back some of their salaries if their company became financially insolvent. However, most of these struggles were rather reactions to the privatisation process and did not produce

positive experiences of collective power. Most of the people who took part in these struggles felt disillusionment with political and social activity. The effect on people was further disengagement from mass organisation such as unions or political parties.

And what about more recent times?

During the last decade, union membership stabilised, and new union initiatives were started, that are trying to organise precarious workers, as well as look for connections with the broader left movement and the non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The most militant are the teachers. They have been on strike once every four years. Also they organise more publicly oriented protest actions that stimulate public discourse and popularise ideas about striking. In 2019 they occupied the education ministry for a month. Teachers slept in the ministry while waiting for collective negotiations.

In 2023 they organised a strike march: teachers made a “pilgrimage” from all corners of Lithuania, walking on foot and visiting every little town’s school. All these actions helped this particular union of teachers, the [Lithuanian Education Employees Trade Union](#), to grow. Many of its strongholds are in rural areas.

In 2019 a new union, [G1PS](#) or First of May Labour Union, was established. This is the union I represent and work for. The organisation was established after successful protests against liberalisation of the labor code in 2018. This union organised in the service, cultural and IT sectors as well as some workers for sales platforms (e.g. Uber or Bolt).

While this union is fairly young and small in numbers, it has a different model: every worker can become a member despite of their profession. It provides free consultation on labour issues. In five years, it has set up six branches – some are based in single workplaces and some are oriented towards sectors, such as the platform couriers.

In general, the main obstacles to building a more militant and active labour movement are not only economic and ideological, but also legal. The Lithuanian strike law is one of the most restrictive in Europe. It forces workers to go into negotiations before legally acquiring a right to strike. It can take up to two years to pass through the negotiations, and the union cannot change its demands in that time. As a result, most negotiations end without much results, and strikes are rare.

Currently, the unions have been calling for the strike law to be liberalised, and there are expectations that the next government will put this question on the agenda.

What about the Lithuanian economy? As far as I understand, in recent years it has largely been integrated into the EU, and trade with Russia has been reduced. How have these changes affected working class people?

The Lithuanian economy has been completely transformed over the last 30 years. From being dominated by light industry in Soviet times, now it mostly consists of small and middle sized companies in the services sector, IT, logistic and financial markets.

The two richest men in Lithuania are the owner of the Maxima shopping chain, and the owner of Girtėka, a logistics company. Both economic sectors profit from precarious work conditions – in the shops women comprise most of the workers, and in logistics, migrants dominate the workforce of drivers.

Apart from that, Lithuania has a large agricultural sector: the main export is grain. While there are

some industrial sites, these are mostly post-soviet relics that survived the transition of the 1990s. Every major city has its own “free economic zone”, which is typical for an eastern European country trying to attract foreign capital.

Our financial market is fully dominated by Scandinavian banks. We don't have a national bank. There is an institution named like this, but it only provides analysis and some policy proposals for the government.

The economy's trajectory has been towards integration into EU markets. The war in Ukraine and economic sanctions that followed after the Russian attack shifted business even more towards EU markets. The geopolitical situation on one hand slowed down foreign direct investment. On the other hand, the government is trying to attract military industry - there are deals made with German and Ukrainian industrial companies to open new factories in Lithuania.

With deindustrialisation, the working class has been feminised and deskilled. If you asked today's supermarket workers about their personal history, many of these women had previously worked in a factory with some higher qualification. They lost their jobs in 1990s and could not find anything that would fit their education. Then they found work in the shops and supermarkets that sprung up during the early 2000s.

Furthermore, there has been a large-scale emigration, to Ireland, the UK, Germany and the US. In the last three years, the level of migration has stabilised, and there are more people coming to Lithuania than leaving. However, most of the immigrants are not local people returning, but Ukrainians, Belarussians and Russians arriving for the first time.

The working class become more mixed, and stratified by nationalities and by legal status. The workforces of the construction and logistics sectors, and the sales platforms, are dominated by migrants at the moment, which creates tensions and stimulates nationalist political tendencies.

I have several questions about the war in Ukraine, and Lithuanian people's attitude to it. First, may I ask you about refugees. I believe that now there are a substantial number of refugees from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus in Lithuania. How are they treated by the government? How is their life in Lithuania? How have Lithuanians reacted to their arrival?

The official position of the government has been that migrants from these countries are not the same and we cannot apply the same rules to everyone. You could say that Ukrainians have the easiest access so far. Yet, as the Ukrainian government is trying to get back their men to serve in the army, the positions of Lithuanian government has been somewhat changing - there is more talk about the need to bring the Ukrainians back to defend the country. Yet, this would create a big problem for the business, as Ukrainian comprise an important segment in the workforce by now.

The Belarussian diaspora is very big, but less outspoken. There is a long common history between Belarussians and Lithuanians. We have a Belarussian university in Vilnius that moved here after [Belarussian president Alyaksandr] Lukashenka banned it in Minsk. And the main Belarussian opposition organisation led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has its office in Vilnius. But Belarussians are treated in ambivalent manner - because of the 2020 protests, they were at first supported and loved, but once the war started in Ukraine, they have been looked at with more suspicion.

It is true that in Lithuania there are many secret agents of the Kremlin and of Lukashenka. And yet for ordinary people, the suspicion mostly translates into problems of getting asylum or documents. There are horrific cases of politically active Belarussians being sent back to Belarus, straight into the hands of the KGB [security police], just because they worked in some state company years ago.

You commented in your [article for Posle.Media](#) on the way that establishment and liberal forces in Lithuania often find it convenient to use ordinary Russians as a target for prejudice, and/or claimed that ordinary Russians are responsible for the brutality of the Russian government. You also said that, since the all-out invasion of Ukraine by Russia, this has changed. Can you give us an update?

I think that, in terms of ideologies, divisions are made by our political elites between “civilisation vs brutality”. As we align ourselves with the “civilised” part of the world – in the broadest sense the “west” – we tend to draw the other side as hopelessly bestial and undemocratic. There is constant eagerness to paint the Russian society as brutal and bestial – it makes us feel more European and democratic.

Additionally, I believe that a large part of the support of our political elite for Ukraine comes not out of anti-imperialist positions, but is rather manifested as implicit hatred towards Russia as a country. There is a repetitive message in media that Ukrainians are fighting our war against Russia.

This is basically the dominant discourse in all of the media and political life. But opinions in the population are rather more mixed.

We just had parliamentary elections on Sunday (27 October). The unofficial winners of these elections is a party that came in third place – a fringe right-wing party which is led by a long-time parliamentarian, [Remigijus Žemaitaitis,] who got to be famous because he was accused of anti-semitism. He certainly made anti-semitic statements in parliament, before the 7 October [2023 attack on Israel by Hamas], that’s true. But later, the accusations of anti-semitism and an impeachment process against him made him into an “anti-establishment” figure. He perfectly exploited this sentiment, mobilising “protest” votes – a sort of Trump-style Lithuanian edition.

You can also hear more scepticism towards Ukrainians and support for Ukraine. However, the parties that tried to exploit this sentiment did not win any major vote in the Parliament election. Actually, the main politician who advocated pro-Kremlin positions just announced that he is ending his political career: he did not manage to get a parliament seat.

Earlier on, in the spring of this year, we had a presidential election in which one candidate, who expressed somewhat nostalgia for Soviet Union, got around 50,000 votes in all Lithuania. He won the largest percentage in the regions where Russian and Polish minorities are predominant. The media took this as a proof that we have “a Russian threat” in our own country – although this candidate was, I think, the only one that managed to translate his leaflets and visit these regions during his campaign.

What about the agreement recently made between Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine, that Ukrainian men eligible for conscription should be returned to Ukraine? The background to this, as you know, is the difficulties that Ukraine is having in fighting the war with Russia, without conscripting more people to the army. Has there been a reaction to this in Lithuania?

This agreement has not been forced into law – I think that economic interests have halted the implementation of this policy. As I mentioned before, the Ukrainian working class is well integrated into workforce and whole sectors would stop functioning if one day all the men would be sent back to Ukraine.

However, some of the political parties aim to deliver such policies. It takes shape in “unofficial” steps. For example, there are many Ukrainians whose passports expire – and once your passport

expires, your visa is also no longer valid. And if you go to the Lithuanian migration department, they will tell you that you have to go to Ukraine to get your passport. What it means is that you will never come back from Ukraine: if you are fit for the army, you will be conscripted.

I know more and more people who are asking themselves what to do. A large number of migrants might fall into this grey zone, and live without documents or decide to join the army.

To help people in western Europe understand, could you say something more generally about the attitude of Lithuanians to Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere, and to the political evolution of the Putin regime towards dictatorship in recent years? I will explain my question in this way. A few months ago I met up with an old comrade and friend of mine, a lifelong socialist activist. He criticised me for writing articles, in which I said that Ukrainians had a right to defend themselves, arms in hand, against Russian aggression. He said, "you are in danger of supporting NATO". I said that I believed that Russian imperialism, and not NATO, was the primary cause of the war in Ukraine.

And I added (roughly): "People in the Baltic states, and elsewhere in eastern Europe, see the world very differently from people who live in Mexico, and elsewhere in central America. The imperialist power they are worried about is not the same one. I bet you that, after Russia invaded Ukraine, workers in the Baltic states breathed a sigh of relief, that their governments had joined NATO."

After that, I read in your article in Posle that NATO membership indeed has a very high approval rating among Lithuanians. Please comment.

Yes, your comment is quite right. For us, anti-imperialist critique means that not only the US or "the west", but also others, can be imperial powers. This simple idea seems to be very hard to understand for some of the left in western countries. And I get it - for many people in Lithuania it is quite hard to grasp the idea that not only Russia has imperial interests.

Yet, in a strange way, the western left maintains the same western-centric view, even when it comes to critique colonialism and imperialism. I think this should not be the way: we should learn to listen and respect each others' histories and positions, even if it contradicts our theories. It is one of the sad illnesses of dogmatism on the left - trying to fit the world into theory. I think it should be the other way around, or that there should be some kind of interaction between the two.

Our countries' histories have been shaped by the Russian empire more than by the western countries. It is only 30 years since we began to function as independent states. I have read a lot of critique of nation-states and nationalism, and I see many problems in our countries with nationalistic ideas. However, in my view, the difference between most of the western countries and the eastern European countries is that the west has never been occupied by other countries in modern times.

You had fascism, revolutions, and some dictatorships - but it always was your own history. For our societies, the fear of being occupied by some other country is more real. So when Putin claims that the current borders in eastern Europe are not rightful and they should be changed - this is a clear sign of danger for us.

I think that nationalism should also be criticised by putting it into this historical and geographic context. There is this idea that eastern European societies are more nationalist. In Italy I even heard negative opinions about Ukrainians that they are too nationalistic, because they bring their country's flags to protests. It seems that those who express such opinions cannot understand different contexts and histories: there might be a big difference between a person bringing an Italian flag to a

protest in Italy, and a person bringing a Ukrainian flag.

Eastern European societies have lived under occupations for most of the time, and, sadly, but nationalism is one of the easiest tools of mobilising against such powers. I am saying this not to propose that we should all embrace nationalism, but only to understand that you cannot measure everything according to one history. This just destroys any kind of possibility for dialogue and solidarity.

I would also like you to share, for readers in western Europe, your thoughts about Lithuanian history. Many people here forget that Lithuania spent the whole 19th century as a Russian colony, just as many countries spent long periods as British colonies. How do people in Lithuania see that now?

Yes, since 1795, the territories that we now call Lithuania was under Russian empire up until 1918. Also, the serfdom was formally stopped only in 1861, however, the peasants were not given the land (which caused several uprisings). And then again from 1945 to 1990 we were part of Soviet Union.

While speaking about this history, I need to say that sadly, this historical experience of occupations does not easily translate into a broader understanding of different colonisations. Our school curriculum and general ideas about history still see "our experience" as somewhat exceptional. Maybe this is unavoidable for such a small country - to always fixate on ones country's history. However, in terms of finding solidarity, there is some potential to look for connections with other experiences of colonisation.

There is of course a big difference among Lithuanians around racism. And probably racist beliefs are the ones that blocks any kind of more global understanding of colonisations and imperialism.

What about the Soviet Union? In our discussions in the labour movement in western countries, it seems to me that the "campist" position of those who oppose Ukraine's right to resist Russian aggression is basically a continuation of those who saw the Soviet Union as the epitome of anti-imperialism. The roots of this are political ideas that back in the 1970s and 80s we called Stalinist. I remember having arguments with members of the Communist Party in the UK, back then, who defended the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact as having been necessary, for the defence of the Soviet Union. How is all that viewed in Lithuania, by your generation?

My generation is the one that has been born after the end of the Soviet Union, and our opinion about this system has been shaped more by state propaganda than by any kind of real experience. In the most general terms, the Soviet Union is kept alive as a "horror story", which should push you to believe that today you live in a truly equal and free society - which is some propagandistic bullshit.

I would say that, according to age, you could divide the Lithuanian population roughly into three groups. I already mentioned my group: people for whom the Soviet experience is less important in their political backgrounds. These are people that tend to align themselves with "European values" - human rights, the LGBTQ movement, and so on.

Then there are people who grew up in the Soviet Union, but took part in the protests and experienced the independence movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most of these people tend to be very sceptical of any kind of left politics, and are supporters of the conservative side. And while it is not a monolithic strata, I think this group is often mobilised mainly by stories about "if you elect such-and-such a person, the Soviet times might come back". This rhetoric is used by the conservative parties and usually it also has some class-ist overtones - the idea that democracy is

threatened by the poor, the so-called *homo sovieticus* (those, that were left behind).

And lastly, there is a generation that lived most of their lives in the Soviet Union. This generation is fading away. While they survived very horrific times of war and deportations under Stalin, they also saw the growth of cities, the industrialisation of agriculture, and also some kind of liberalisation of life under Khrushchev and Gorbachev. They experienced all the modernisation of the state that was done in Soviet times.

This is also the generation that has been most disillusioned by the reforms and the changes that took place after independence. Maybe their pensions got cut, maybe they lost their jobs and could not change their profession because they were already in their late 50s. Also, for most of them, the factories, companies and cultural centres that surrounded them, or were even built by their own hands, have been destroyed by the privatisation.

They are full of anger and disbelief in the current system, which easily translates into nostalgia for Soviet times. However, I believe that such nostalgia should be read not as direct support for the Soviet system, but as disillusion with the current system.

To what extent is there active support, and solidarity with, Ukraine's fight against Russia in Lithuania? How is it expressed (e.g. volunteers going to fight, aid to civil society organisations, other actions)?

There are a couple of strong volunteer organisation that were started after war began in 2014, and grew with the current escalation. At the moment, the support is at a lower level. And there is a process of disagreement about, how much support can we give? And yet, Lithuanian society is still very positive about supporting Ukraine, as this is seen a crucial element for our own national security.

There is an idea, that if Ukraine falls, we would be next. I am not sure whether there are real grounds for that fear, and I also believe that the right wing uses it to mobilise support for their political programme. However, I cannot say that such a threat is impossible. Specifically, if the US government changes its policy on Ukraine, than our situation might become serious quite soon.

The Israeli assault on Gaza over the last year has galvanised millions of people, including socialists, in western Europe. There have been big demonstrations against the supply of weapons to Israel by the western powers. In London, a group of us have gone on some of these demonstrations with banners and posters saying, "From Ukraine to Palestine, Occupation is a Crime", and trying to underline the fact that Ukrainians, like Palestinians, have the right to resist aggression. We have met with a great deal of sympathy from other marchers. How do these issues look, from your point of view?

As I mentioned before, the support towards Palestine has been very limited, but with some positive changes recently.

The main obstacle to support is not that the population does not understand the situation in Palestine, or in Lebanon. The problem is that Israel has very strong ties with Lithuanian institutions, and that can affect the position of the political elite. And so Lithuania has voted against any kind of support for Palestine in the UN. Also, the media portrays the genocide as a conflict between the "civilised" Israel and "terrorist" Hamas. In this way they are trying to align Israel genocide with Ukrainian resistance against Russia: this is a very wrong and stupid alignment.

After all, so much depends on the US. Among the political elite, the main fear about expressing

support for Palestine is that it might trigger the US to weaken its support for Lithuania. You can see that the same logic works with Ukraine, which also votes against Palestine at the UN.

Despite all this, there have been protests against Israeli aggression, organised by local activists together with migrant communities. They have been far smaller than the ones that were organised to support Ukraine. However, I see that there is a bit more space to discuss the Palestinian question and there are more people who are willing to listen.

I hope that in the future there will be more politicians who will be brave enough to denounce the genocide that has been carried out by the Israel government and the right wing movements in Israel.

Thank you for taking time to answer my questions in such detail.

Jurgis Valiukevičius

Simon Pirani

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P.S.

People and Nature

<https://peopleandnature.wordpress.com/2024/10/29/lithuania-for-us-the-fear-of-being-occupied-is-more-real/>