



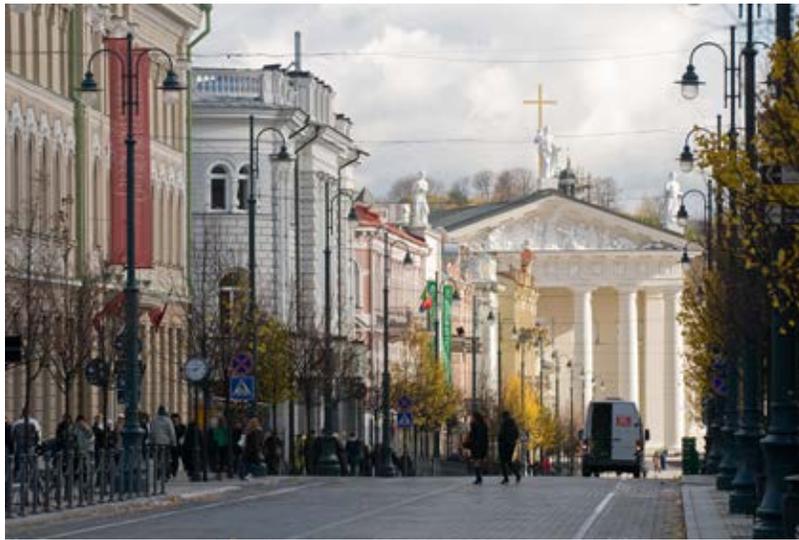
LITHUANIA

EU MEMBER SINCE	2004
OTHER MEMBERSHIPS	NATO, Schengen Area, Bologna Process
CURRENCY	Litas
CAPITAL	Vilnius
AREA	65,300 sq km
POPULATION	3,515,858 (July 2013 est.)
LANGUAGE	Lithuanian
RELIGION	Roman Catholic 79%, Russian Orthodox 4.1%, Protestant (including Lutheran and Evangelical Christian Baptist) 1.9%, other or unspecified 5.5%, none 9.5% (2001 census)
GDP	\$ 14,099 (2011)
GNI	\$ 20,760 (2011)
SGI	N/A
CPI	54 out of 100 (2012)
ARCHITECTURE	Baroque, Neo-Byzantine, Neoclassical, Neo-Gothic, Art deco, Stalinist, Functionalist
LITERATURE	Kristijonas Donelaitis, Maironis, Simonas Daukantas, Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas, Bernardas Brazdžionis, Vytautas Mačernis, Justinas Marcinkevičius
MUSIC	Sutartinės; Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Vytautas Miškinis, Osvaldas Balakauskas, Foje, Antis, Bix, SKAMP, Happyendless, Jurga
PAINTING	Isaac Levitan, Jacques Lipchitz, Cheslov Znamierovsky, Cheslov Grigonis
CUISINE	Beet soup, Cepelinai (potato dumplings with meat, cheese or mushrooms), Šakotis cake, Kibinai (meat stuffed pies), Vilniaus duona rye bread, Balandėliai (stuffed cabbage), Dešra (sausages). Delicacies: Skilandis (smoked meat), Kūčiukai pastries, Surelis (chocolate covered curd), Naminis suris ("home-made" cheese curd)
DRINKS	Midas (honey mead), Alus (beer), Gira (rye brewed non-alcoholic drink), Degtine (Lithuanian vodka), Trauktine (herbal vodka)
CONSUMPTION	15.03 equivalent liters of pure ethyl alcohol per capita per year (WHO, 2005)
SPORTS	Basketball, swimming

Robert A. Saunders *On Lithuania*

4 June 2014

Once part of medieval Europe's largest country, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or *Rzeczpospolita*, contemporary Lithuania (*Lietuva*) is a small but proud nation with a strong historical consciousness and a love of singing and the outdoors.



Gediminas Ave in Vilnius © EU 2013

The country's mostly-flat geography is dominated by forests, grassy plains, and small lakes, as well as short seashore on the eastern rim of the Baltic Sea. The climate is characterized by extreme changes from winter to summer, with the former being wet and cold and the latter hot and sunny. The largest and southernmost of the three Baltic republics, Lithuania possesses a robust central European character. Nestled between Latvia, Poland, Belarus, and Russia's Kaliningrad exclave, Lithuania's geopolitical setting is a key part of its identity. Like their Latvian cousins, ethnic Lithuanians have a strong connection to nature, often keeping tending to personal gardens and spending their leisure time in the forests or at the lakeshore. While staunchly Catholic, Lithuanians continue to adhere to traditions rooted in their pagan past, particularly those which mark seasonal transitions and the solar calendar. Local community is extremely important to Lithuanians. The familial unit is central to the Lithuanians' social structure, with small, close-knit families being the norm. Lithuanians tend to be sentimental, convivial, and often a bit bombastic in speech and action when compared to their more reserved Nordic neighbors, the Latvians and the Estonians. Sport, singing, and dancing are key pastimes.

Recent History

One of only two surviving Baltic peoples, the Lithuanians were among the last Europeans to be Christianized. Following the establishment of a Grand Duchy (1251), the Lithuanian state merged with Poland in 1569, only to be partitioned in the late eighteenth century, with modern-day Lithuania coming under Russian rule by 1795.

After World War I, Lithuania gained its independence alongside a reconstituted Poland; however, territorial disputes with its larger neighbor resulted in a short war that deprived Lithuania of its historic capital Vilnius. Following the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Lithuania once again came under Russian (Soviet) domination before being invaded by Axis forces in 1941. During the occupation, the vast majority of the country's 250,000-strong Jewish population perished. When Soviet troops returned to Lithuania in 1944, the USSR's 1940 annexation of the republic was reaffirmed (though never recognized by the US, UK, and many other nations).

In the post-war period, Vilnius was transferred to the Lithuanian SSR, and the country underwent a substantial Sovietization process, albeit one which allowed for comparative economic prosperity and a meaningful "Lithuanianization" of the state apparatus. Under the influence of the reformer Vytautas Landsbergis' Sajūdis movement, Lithuania emerged as leading critic of the Soviet repression of democracy and the nationalist aspirations of the non-Russian population of the USSR during the late 1980s. Having previously annulled the wartime annexation of the country, Lithuania's Supreme Soviet voted for independence in March 1990, an act which triggered a crisis in the Soviet Baltics. Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev's use of lethal force against demonstrators attempting to protect an independent television station provoked intense international criticism and prompted more nations to recognize the independence of the beleaguered republic. In the wake of the USSR's failed August Coup of 1991, Lithuania banned the local Communist Party and seized its assets. Within a month, Lithuania gained admission to the United Nations, thus ending more than four decades of Soviet domination.

With its independence secured, the country moved towards economic integration with central and northern Europe; however, the transition from a planned central economy to a free market proved difficult with standards of living declining sharply in the early 1990s. Control of the government shifted between the conservative Sajūdis party and the (formerly Communist) Democratic Labor Party of Lithuania several times until 2000 when a new centrist coalition came to power.

The country's most pressing foreign policy issue during the post-independence period was the continued presence of Russian troops on its soil (which lasted until 1993). Unlike in Latvia and Estonia, the comparatively small ethnic Russian minority has not proved a major sticking point in post-1991 relations with Moscow. Lithuania's 1994 application to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization did however put a chill on bilateral ties; a decade later, Lithuania, along with Estonia and Latvia, joined the US-backed alliance. In the new millennium, Lithuania has emerged

as an avid promoter of democratic values and political pluralism across post-socialist Europe and Eurasia. The country's political elite has been supportive of reform movements and anti-authoritarian opposition movements in neighboring Belarus, as well as Ukraine and Georgia, often to the chagrin of Moscow. Despite periodic difficulties, Russia's Kaliningrad region's reliance on Lithuania for electricity and foodstuffs demands that both countries maintain cordial relations; however, in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Lithuania has moved quickly to develop alternative sources of energy to preclude any economic fallout resulting from the Kremlin's retaliation for Western sanctions.

The EU Connection

In the aftermath of independence, Lithuania entered into a number of cooperation and free trade agreements with the European Union. The country submitted an official application for EU admission in late 1995. Following a referendum in which more than 90 percent of the population voted in favor of accession, Lithuania joined the [European Union](#) on 1 May 2004. All major political parties supported admission, with only far-right and ethnic Russian groups opposing. The largest of the Baltic republics, Lithuania acceded in tandem with Latvia and Estonia, as well as a number of other post-socialist states and the island nations of Malta and Cyprus. Lithuania has the distinction of being the first member to ratify the EU Constitution (11 November 2004).

While the Lithuanian currency (litas) is pegged to the Euro, continuing problems with inflation have prevented the country from joining the Eurozone, although a tentative date of 1 January 2015 is set for conversion. In 2007, the country joined the Schengen Union allowing free movement of its citizens across the borders of other member states. However, given that Lithuania borders Belarus and separates the Russian Federation from the Kaliningrad exclave, the admission of the country resulted in a substantial investment in its border control capacities as well as necessitating special transit arrangements for Russians passing between Kaliningrad and the Russian "mainland."

In 2013, Lithuania assumed the rotating presidency of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the first Baltic state to do so. Lithuania spearheaded new laws on counterfeiting and cross-border debt recovery as well as agreements promoting greater levels of innovation and improved cooperation on international criminal investigations.

Cultural Traits

Folk singing is an elemental part of Lithuanian culture. In fact, the traditional polyphonic singing manner of *Sutartinės* is recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage. From the root word for 'accord,' *Sutartinės* are sung in pairs (*dvejinės*), threesomes (*trejinės*), and double pairs or "foursomes" (*keturinės*). Samogitia, the northwestern region of the country, is the original home the style, whereas monophony dominates in the south and east of the country. These songs were traditionally only sung by women; however, men performed instrumental variants on *kanklės* (psaltery) or *skudučiai* (pan flute). A wide variety of other folksongs also shape Lithuanian culture, from work ditties to marital ballads to ritual songs. The *Dainų šventė* or song festival has been a key part of national identity for more than a century and often served as a focal point for resistance to Soviet control of society.

Language is of great importance in the country. Lithuanian is one of the most archaic of all [Indo-European languages](#) and shares many traits with Sanskrit, the liturgical language of Hinduism. The Lithuanian language is held in high regard by its speakers, not least of all because of its historic role in uncovering the ancient connections between the tongues of southern Asia and the European continent. Despite the effects of the Holocaust, the Yiddish language is also preserved in Lithuania, once home to one of the most vibrant centers of eastern European Jewish culture. The [Yiddish Language Institute](#) in Vilnius is one of the few remaining places in Europe where the language is studied. Contemporary Lithuanians pride themselves on their bilingualism, with nearly every citizen speaking at least two languages. It is not uncommon to find young people who can converse in up to three or four languages (Russian, Polish, German, and English being most popular), as well as Lithuanian.

Lithuanians are well-known for their skills on the basketball court, and gained international fame at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games through a sponsorship from the American rock band [The Grateful Dead](#), who supplied them with tie-dyed jerseys featuring the band's iconic Skull Man. Cycling, football, and a variety of extreme sports are also popular. Notably, the athlete [Žydrūnas Savickas](#) has won the Arnold Strongman Classic title six times in a row.

Lithuanians are great fans of media and art. There is a robust broadcasting industry and it is joked that, in this small country, every citizen will appear on television at least once in their lives. Modern and conceptual art can be found all around the capital, especially in the self-declared [Republic of Užupis](#) (in fact, a quaint, hippie-friendly suburb of Vilnius), which has long been home to painters, composers, and other *bons vivants*.

Food and Wine

Lithuania's simple, yet satisfying [cuisine](#) appropriately reflects the cold, continental climate of the country and features mushrooms, potatoes, and meats (often doused in heavy cream or cottage cheese), as well as host of savory pastries, dumplings, and pancakes. Cold beet soup (*šaltibarščiai*) is perhaps the most famous contribution of Lithuania to world gastronomy; however, there are a host of more exotic dishes including *skilandis* (cold-smoked pig's stomach stuffed with minced meat and garlic) which has protected status under European law.

Mead (*midus*) is a favorite of Lithuanians, and ties them to their proud medieval heritage when mead was the drink of

choice in the region and available at the vast network of inns (*karčema*) that covered the country. Beer (*alus*) is also popular with the breweries Utenos and Švyturys producing a wide variety of specialized styles, including Baltic porter and unfiltered wheat beer, alongside their popular pilsners and lagers. When looking for something a bit stronger, Lithuanians tinkle a bit of the grain alcohol *krupnikas*, typically flavored with honey to provide a bit of sweetness. Lithuanian also drink *gira* (known in Russian *kvass*), a low alcohol drink made from fermented rye bread.

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