

Controversy over deployment of German brigade in Lithuania

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On 26–27 April, the Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda paid a working visit to Germany. Its highlights were his meeting with Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the speech he gave at the Körber Foundation under the title *Zeitenwende*. The turning point: Lithuania's approach'. In it, Nausėda portrayed Russia as a country which poses a long-term threat to security and stability in Europe, and promoted the tightening of sanctions against it. He also called for the international community not to give in to nuclear blackmail, and demanded the punishment of those in Russia who were responsible for the war crimes in Ukraine. He stressed the importance of the German government's decisions to move toward energy independence from Russia and continue supplying arms to Ukraine.

In his talks with Scholz, Nausėda touched on the preparations for the NATO summit in Vilnius on 11–12 July, as well as issues of support for Kyiv and bilateral military cooperation. Thanking Germany for its contribution to the security of the Baltic region, Nausėda referred to the joint communiqué issued on 7 June 2022 during the German chancellor's visit to Lithuania. At that time, the two leaders agreed that in addition to commanding the NATO battle group already located in Lithuania, Germany would also take command of a brigade consisting of a German forward command post, deployed on permanent rotation, and of Bundeswehr forces which would be ready for rapid deployment to the country. Referring to the June announcement, President Nausėda declared in Berlin that Vilnius was ready to increase its defence funding and investments in military infrastructure to enable the deployment of a German brigade in Lithuania by 2026.

Toward the end of the visit, in a video commentary on 27 April, Nausėda told Lithuanian media that he and Chancellor Scholz had agreed on the gradual deployment of the German brigade, depending on what progress was made in developing the necessary military infrastructure in Lithuania. The German side did not comment directly on the statement. In response to an inquiry by the Politico website, a German government spokesman pointed to the contents of a press statement published on the Chancellery's website after the meeting with Nausėda. It stressed that the June 2022 agreements were still valid, and that Berlin and Vilnius were still focused on implementing them.

The German-Lithuanian communiqué last year was issued ahead of the NATO summit in Madrid (July 2022). At that summit, the Alliance adopted a compromise formula to assign forces with heightened readiness to individual Baltic states; these could be rapidly redeployed if needed, and could form an entire brigade, together with a permanent rotating presence in each country (see '[Expectations vs. reality: NATO brigades in the Baltic states?](#)').

Commentary

- Nausėda's video commentary from Berlin, which only discussed the German brigade issue while omitting the other topics of the visit, proves that from the Lithuanian side's point of view the former issue is currently the most important in Vilnius's relations with Berlin. There has been a debate in Lithuania since last year over how to treat last June's communiqué by the two countries' leaders. According to politicians from Lithuania's ruling Conservative party, the statement represents a commitment to the actual deployment of a German brigade in the country, which Berlin has so far failed to fulfil. Most critical of Germany is the Conservative leader and current foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis. He criticised Berlin's announcement that one part of the German brigade's troops would be stationed in Lithuania and another in Germany, with the latter being on standby for redeployment within 10 days. There has also been controversy in Lithuania over the statements made by Germany's defence minister Boris Pistorius, who said on 7 March that any decision on the need to deploy the German brigade should be taken by NATO. At the same time, Landsbergis has admitted that Lithuania does not currently have the military infrastructure to accommodate any more troops, but he announced that it would be in place by 2026. Accordingly, he has asked the German government to adopt a roadmap with targets and deadlines for achieving them.
- The issue of Vilnius's efforts to have a German brigade deployed in Lithuania is part of the political rivalry in that country. The ruling Conservative party's accusations that Germany is not fulfilling its commitments do not reflect the opinion of all the country's political elite. Not only have some columnists and military officers criticised Landsbergis' actions, but so too have the opposition, including the Social Democratic Party (LSDP) and its vice-chair Dovilė Šakalienė, who sits on the parliamentary security and defence committee. The LSDP maintains close relations with Germany's co-ruling SPD, including officials at the Federal Ministry of Defence. According to the LSDP, the Lithuanian government (most notably Landsbergis) is sabotaging Germany's military support for Lithuania. The Social Democrats are calling for continued dialogue with Berlin and for preparations to be made to receive the German brigade. The Left's position is important in the context of the future of relations between the two countries, as the party won the recent local elections and now has a chance to repeat its success in the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for next year. The escalation of tensions in relations with Germany is also of no interest to the conservative-leaning President Nausėda, who may seek re-election next year. His communiqué from Berlin stating that a consensus had been reached can on the one hand be seen as an attempt to temper political emotions in bilateral relations, and on the other as an effort to add to his foreign policy successes. This could also have been an attempt to gloss over the scandal that recently erupted after it was revealed that he had concealed the fact that he had joined the Communist Party in 1988, when the Sąjūdis independence movement already existed in Lithuania.
- Germany is still sticking to its interpretation of the disputed June 2022 communiqué, which corresponds with the agreements reached at NATO's Madrid summit. It was stated then that most of the German forces within the brigade assigned to defend Lithuania would be stationed in Germany, while being ready for possible rapid redeployment. Berlin currently sees no need to increase the Bundeswehr's permanently rotating contingent in Lithuania, nor does it currently have the capacity to maintain a permanently rotating

mechanised brigade (of around 3000 to 5000 troops) outside the country. In addition, the German government has emphasised the lack of the adequate military infrastructure which would be needed to deploy such a force in Lithuania, and has argued that the current model makes more sense in military terms. At the same time, Berlin has not yet openly countered Nausėda's statements, as it probably does not want to aggravate the already strained relationship with Vilnius, particularly in the context of the comments suggesting that Germany is shirking its commitments to its allies on NATO's eastern flank. If the NATO summit in Vilnius does not yield any decisions (which Germany can also influence) to expand the model of the Alliance's involvement in the Baltic states which was agreed on last year, then Berlin is unlikely to change its position. It could, however, be ready to increase the frequency of Bundeswehr exercises or rotate additional, smaller components within the NATO battle group in Lithuania in order to smooth over the disagreements with Vilnius.