



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

At 25,212 square miles (65,300 square kilometers), Lithuania is larger than its Baltic neighbors Latvia and Estonia and is slightly bigger than West Virginia. It lies on the western fringe of the east European plain and has a short coastline on the Baltic Sea. It is a green country with rolling hills and more than 750 rivers and 4,000 lakes. The two longest rivers are the Nemunas and the Neris.

Summers are short, and winters are cold and snowy. The general climate is comparable to that of southeastern Canada. Forests cover about 30 percent of the country and are rich in wild animals, mushrooms, and berries. Forests, the Baltic seaside, and the Curonian Lagoon, a large freshwater lagoon on the Baltic, are favorite destinations for recreation. Rain falls throughout the year. A westerly breeze is common. Temperatures average 23°F (-5°C) in January and 63°F (17°C) in July.

History

The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus first used the term *Lithuania* in the first century AD when referring to one of many peoples who inhabited the Baltic region between the first and fourth centuries. Lithuanians began to form a distinct society in the early second century, but it was not until 1236 that a tribal leader, Duke Mindaugas, united several groups to form the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The new state grew in prominence, especially during the 14th century, when it annexed neighboring lands and was ruled by strong

monarchs. Vilnius became the capital in 1323.

In 1386, reacting to a serious threat from Germanic invaders, the Grand Duke Jogaila married the Polish crown princess and became king. This alliance brought Lithuania into a union with Poland, which strengthened the nations enough to defeat the German (Teutonic) invaders in 1410. Because of the union, Lithuania adopted Roman Catholicism in 1387 and became increasingly open to Western culture. Poland and Lithuania tightened their association in 1569 when they united under the Lublin Union.

After the Polish-Lithuanian state was partitioned by its neighbors (in 1772, 1793, and 1795), the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was left largely a part of the Russian Empire. Many attempts were made to regain independence, but all were unsuccessful. During World War I, Germany occupied Lithuania. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Germans allowed Lithuania to elect its own officials, who in turn declared the country an independent state in February 1918. In December, however, Russian Bolsheviks invaded and occupied part of the country; the Lithuanian government was forced to move to Kaunas.

Determined to gain sovereignty, people drove the Soviet army from most of Lithuania in 1919. During the same period, Poland sought to restore the Polish-Lithuanian state as it had been before 1795 and began fighting the Soviets. Poland soon gained control of Vilnius. In the interwar period (1920–40), Lithuania was independent and had a free-market economy, trading agricultural products with European and Scandinavian countries.

After a number of border disputes, Vilnius was eventually returned to Lithuania at the outset of World War II as

compensation for the presence of Soviet military bases. However, the Soviets soon dismissed the government and officially occupied the entire nation in 1940. In 1941, Germany broke the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty it had made with Russia by invading and occupying Lithuania. Gestapo forces killed thousands of Jews and other Lithuanian citizens and brought suffering to the entire country. The Soviets returned in 1944, and they incorporated the country into the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR).

Thousands of armed guerrilla fighters, known as Forest Brothers, fought unsuccessfully for independence between 1940 and 1954. As a result of the resistance and Soviet policies toward the Baltics, Lithuania suffered mass deportations and other difficulties. Relations were less confrontational after the 1950s, but Lithuanians never gave up their goal for independence. Their desires were realized in 1990 when the freely elected legislature of Lithuania restored independence (first declared in 1918). Weakened by various international and domestic factors, the Soviet government could not force Lithuania to cancel the declaration.

After the entire USSR collapsed in 1991, Russia recognized Lithuania's independence, already recognized by many countries. The government, led by independence hero Vytautas Landsbergis and members of the political movement Sajūdis, embarked on an aggressive campaign to reform the economy and other social structures. Hampered by a poor global economy, soaring energy prices, and other problems, progress was slow. In 1992, voters rejected the Sajūdis leadership in favor of former Communists who had formed a new political party. The new government slowed privatization and other reform measures to soften the impact of political and social change. Governmental efforts, however, were not enough to prevent a banking crisis at the end of 1995 that led to the dismissal of the prime minister.

The economy's sharp downturn in the wake of the Russian financial crisis in 1998 and subsequent economic challenges have hampered political and economic reforms. However, the country had advanced enough by 2004 that it was allowed to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) that year. Further market reforms are aimed at readying Lithuania to adopt the euro in the near future, though the country's 2007 application to join the eurozone was rejected due to overly high inflation rates. Strengthening the country's economy remains a high priority for a new administration, which is led by Dalia Grybauskaitė, elected in 2009 as the country's first female president, taking nearly 70 percent of the vote.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Lithuania's population of just over 3.5 million is shrinking by about 0.3 percent annually. Most people (83 percent) are ethnic Lithuanian, but the country is also home to Poles (6.1 percent), Russians (4.9 percent), and Belarusians (1.1 percent). About 67 percent of Lithuanians live in urban areas. All the nation's minorities have full citizenship rights and are treated equally. Except for Russians, minorities generally

maintain their own customs and have not adopted Lithuanian culture. Most Russians have integrated with mainstream society, combining their own customs with those of ethnic Lithuanians.

Language

Lithuanian is the country's official language. It is made up of gentle and melodic sounds. As one of the oldest Indo-European languages still in everyday use, Lithuanian belongs to the Baltic language group, along with Latvian and the extinct languages of Yatvagian and Old Prussian. It is grammatically similar to Sanskrit and ancient Greek. The formation of standard Lithuanian was not completed until the 19th century because Polish (and sometimes other languages) had been used as the state language after the 13th century. By the 17th century, Lithuanian survived only among rural peasants. After 1795, when Lithuania and Poland ceased to exist as independent countries, Russian was introduced and encouraged among Lithuanians. Printing and teaching in Lithuanian was forbidden between 1864 and 1904. Europe's 19th-century nationalist movement, however, prompted a revival of Lithuanian, and it became the state language during the country's years of independence (1918–40). When the Soviets took over in 1940, Russian was reintroduced; therefore, most Lithuanians today can speak Russian. English and German are other popular languages.

Religion

Most Lithuanians (79 percent) belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Under Soviet occupation, churches were closed, clergymen repressed, and teachers forbidden to teach religion. People practiced their faiths mainly at home, and many silently protested the repression by setting up crosses on the Hill of Crosses. Once a pagan worship site, the Hill of Crosses became a place for erecting Christian crosses of thanksgiving and petition. Though the Soviets bulldozed and burned the crosses in 1961, 1973, and 1975, the people kept returning with more crosses, ultimately wearying the Soviets. In 1990, the Act of Restitution of the Catholic Church restored the church to its prominence and allowed religious freedom. Pope John Paul II visited in 1993, held Mass on the Hill of Crosses, and brought the clergy up to date on the liturgy of the church. Many other Christian churches operate in the country, and Muslims and Jews also have active congregations.

General Attitudes

Lithuanians are a hard-working, hospitable people. Though they generally appear reserved, even somber, in actuality they may be sincere and full of emotion. They often mask their feelings to maintain privacy. They appreciate skill and intelligence. Many Lithuanians are critical of their personal faults and are openly critical and distrustful of public institutions. They commonly describe their nation as melancholy (because of its history). Individually, people are nostalgic for such things as old friends, youth, and fond memories. Lithuanians are patient and industrious. They value moderate thrift but view "excessive" thrift as stinginess. They also appreciate education, family, music, and patriotism.

Lithuanians are proud of their heritage but not of the Soviet period. For the future, they wish to be politically neutral and peaceful; however, they are willing to defend themselves to maintain national independence. During the first decade of independence, people were frustrated and uncertain about the future, but recent economic and social developments have encouraged optimism.

Personal Appearance

Lithuanians deem it important to be cleanly dressed. Styles are mainly from Europe and increasingly from the United States. Lithuania's national dress is worn only on special occasions. Because clothing is expensive and the market does not always meet demand, Lithuanians—especially people in rural areas and those who prefer a unique style—often wear handmade clothing. As Lithuania's economy continues to integrate with the world's, the use of handmade clothing is expected to decline. Wealthy people purchase clothing from Western Europe. Older rural women wear scarves on their heads. Wool and fur are commonly used for clothing when the weather is cold. Most women wear cosmetics sparingly.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Among men—less often among women—a handshake is a customary greeting. A handshake is nearly always used in professional contacts. Men sometimes kiss the extended hand of women in greeting, and good friends may kiss cheeks and embrace. To introduce a man, one uses *ponas* (Mr.) before the last name; the female term is *ponia* (Mrs.) or *panelė* (Miss). A person's professional title is also used before the last name when applicable. Doctors and teachers are respectfully addressed by title alone. Adults do not address each other by first name until invited to do so, but young people are called by their first names. The most common terms for greeting are *Laba diena* (Good day), *Labas rytas* (Good morning), *Labas vakaras* (Good evening), and *Viso gero* (Good-bye). Friends use the more informal *Labas* (Hello), *Viso* (Bye), and *Iki* (Later). *Sveikas* (for a man), *Sveika* (for a woman), and *Sveiki* (for a group)—all roughly meaning “How are you?”—are friendly ways to say hello. Urban Lithuanians do not greet strangers passing on the street.

Gestures

It is impolite to talk with one's hands in one's pockets. Eye contact is vital during conversation. People sometimes extend the thumb upward to express approval, but verbal communication is preferred. Using the hands during or instead of conversation is not uncommon although it is less formal. One avoids shaking hands through a doorway. Chewing gum in formal situations is not appropriate.

Visiting

People enjoy meeting friends in restaurants and cafes, but visiting in the home is also popular. Spontaneous visits, even between friends and neighbors, are not very common, though unannounced guests are welcomed. Invited guests usually

arrive a few minutes late.

It is customary to bring something sweet (like a cake or chocolates) and an odd number of fresh flowers for almost any visit (even numbers of flowers are reserved for funerals). Guests should unwrap flowers before giving them to the hostess. Dinner guests may also bring wine.

In formal situations, guests don't sit down until invited or until the host sits. They may be more casual during informal gatherings. Hosts always offer guests refreshments, which may include coffee or tea and cake or cookies. They offer an abundance of food to indicate their home's prosperity. Among both men and women, drinking alcohol is typically part of most social visits. The length of an evening visit depends on the occasion and it is considered impolite for a host to ask a guest to leave. If the hour is late, a host may accompany departing guests outside.

Eating

Lithuanians usually eat three meals each day. Breakfast is eaten sometime between 7 and 9 a.m., lunch between 12 and 2 p.m., and supper between 6 and 8 p.m. People in rural areas eat meals as much as two hours earlier. The midday meal is the main meal, and some businesses close for it. People either go home, eat at work-site canteens, or go to nearby cafes and restaurants. Meals are taken leisurely and socially. Toasting is common for lunch and supper, whether guests are present or not. Lithuanians eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Leaving food on the plate is impolite, as it suggests that the meal was not good. In a restaurant, one must request the bill from the server and pay at the table. Though uncustomary in the past, tipping is now largely expected.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The average Lithuanian family has one or two children. The father is generally the head of the family, but both parents usually work outside the home and share in raising children. Women do household chores; men handle repairs. When young people marry, they often rely for a time on financial support and housing from their parents, though they work to gain financial independence and their own housing as soon as possible. The elderly prefer to live alone, but many live with their adult children.

Housing

Lithuanians highly value home ownership. Increasingly, people are taking out mortgages to purchase apartments or private houses. Newer houses are made of brick, while cement blocks characterize older, Soviet-era houses. In urban areas, poorer people live in small, Soviet-era apartments containing one to four compact bedrooms. The living room often serves as a master bedroom. Wealthier people live in private houses in the outskirts of a city or in larger, newly built apartments in the city center. In these dwellings, living rooms, kitchens, and dining rooms are often combined into one large space.

Private houses dominate rural areas. These homes are usually made of brick and sometimes wood. They typically contain a single floor and an attic. Roofs are ridged and tiled. Rural inhabitants like to keep small gardens around their houses, in which they grow fruit and vegetables.

Dating and Marriage

Young people enjoy dancing, going to clubs, and traveling together. They usually marry in their early twenties, but some wait until they are financially secure. It is becoming more popular to live together before or instead of marrying. Legal marriages are performed at the city hall, and many couples now have a church ceremony as well.

Rural weddings can be lavish, and it is becoming popular to practice older traditions. Although young people choose their own mates, symbolic matchmakers have an important role in wedding traditions. After the wedding ceremony, the wedding party's way home is blocked by "ropes" of branches and flowers. The groom's friends and the matchmaker have to "buy" their way out with candy and alcohol. The last rope is usually stretched across the gate of the couple's home. Parents meet the newlyweds at the door with bread (representing the staff of life), salt (representing future tears), *krupnik* (a homemade honey liquor representing wealth), and an evergreen wreath (representing long life). Many other customs surround the two-day wedding celebration, including the mock punishment—and eventual rescue—of the matchmaker for convincing the bride to marry the groom.

Life Cycle

Pregnant women receive paid time off work for 70 days before the birth of their child and up to 70 days after the birth. After a newly born baby is taken home from the hospital, relatives and friends visit the parents and bring presents for the new child. The name given to the baby must be registered with the state. Religious families baptize their children, sometimes soon after birth and sometimes much later. Baptism is often followed with a celebration.

Upon the death of a person, he or she is laid in an open coffin for two to three days, during which time close relatives stand watch over the body while friends and acquaintances visit, bringing sympathies and (an even number of) flowers. The body is never left alone during this time, even at night. After this period, a Mass is held at a church and the body is buried in a cemetery. Lithuania does not have facilities for cremation.

Diet

Lithuanian cuisine has adopted many dishes from neighboring cultures, including *blynai* (pancakes), *barščiai* (beet soup), and *balandėliai* (stuffed cabbage leaves). Traditional specialties include smoked sausage, various cheeses, *cepeliniai* (meat cooked inside a ball of potato dough, served with a special sauce), *vedarai* (cooked potatoes and sausage stuffed into pig intestines), and *kugelis* (potato pudding with a sour cream sauce). Potatoes are prepared in numerous ways. Soup commonly is served with lunch. Local fruits (apples, pears, plums, and strawberries) and vegetables (carrots, peas, beets, and cabbage) are also popular. Lithuanians regularly

eat rye bread and dairy products. Tea, milk, and coffee are the most common drinks.

Recreation

Basketball is the favorite sport in Lithuania, followed by soccer, boating (rowing), volleyball, cycling, tennis, and cross-country skiing. Camping is popular for family outings, as is picking mushrooms or berries in the forest and going to the beach. Men also enjoy fishing. Watching television, knitting and sewing (for women), and visiting are common leisure activities. People also relax by gardening or by playing chess or cards. Many enjoy caring for pets (mostly dogs), reading, and going to cultural events, especially those involving national dance and song. People vacation in rented villas located in the countryside or along the coast of southern Europe.

The Arts

Folklore, riddles, and local myths are very popular, and their themes are incorporated into other forms of Lithuanian folk art. Traditional ballads deal with nature, love, and mythical creatures. Music is frequently accompanied by the accordion and a harp-like instrument.

Folk arts include linen goods, straw baskets, woodcarvings, leather goods, clay or straw sculptures, and amber jewelry. A recent revival of folk arts has encouraged artistic production.

Holidays

Official public holidays include New Year's Day, Independence Day (16 Feb.), Restoration of Lithuania's Statehood (11 Mar.), Mother's Day (first Sunday in May), Anniversary of the Coronation of Grand Duke Mindaugas of Lithuania (6 July), National Day of Hope and Mourning (1 Nov.), and Christmas (25–26 Dec.). Families traditionally have a 12-course, meatless meal on Christmas Eve (*Kūčios*). The Day of Hope and Mourning, also known as All Souls' Day, is a day to remember and honor the dead. For the pre-Lent *Užgavėnės*, people dress in costumes and children go from house to house asking for treats. Easter is celebrated with family. St. John's Day (24 June) marks the advent of summer. Various local festivals are held throughout the year. Birthdays are hosted by the birthday person, and jubilee years (every 10th year) are very special. Name days honoring the saint after which a person is named may also be important celebrations.

SOCIETY

Government

Lithuania's 1992 constitution provides for a popularly elected president (currently Dalia Grybauskaitė) to serve a five-year term as head of state. The prime minister (currently Andrius Kubilius) is head of government. The prime minister is chosen by the president and must be approved by the 141-seat parliament (*Seimas*), which is the highest body of state power. Members of the *Seimas* are elected to four-year terms. The voting age is 18.

Although the country is technically divided into 60 municipalities and 10 counties, Lithuanians tend to identify with one of four main regions, which include Dzūkija (southeast), Suvalkija (southwest), Žemaitija (northwest), and Aukštaitija (center/northeastern lakes).

Economy

Lithuania is an industrial state, producing precision machinery, manufactured fertilizers, textiles, processed foods, and light industrial products. The country has few natural resources, so it depends on imported raw materials. Main exports include machinery and parts, meat and dairy products, and consumer goods. Imports include oil, gas, chemicals, metals, and equipment. Production declined with independence as traditional supply arrangements were interrupted. Ties are now being established with western Europe and neighboring countries to increase revenue, investment, and productivity in Lithuania. Privatization of key sectors, which is needed to increase foreign investment, nearly complete. The standard of living in Lithuania has risen in the last few years thanks to a strong economic growth rate and integration into the EU. Women earn a significant share of the nation's income. The national currency is the *litas* (LTL).

Transportation and Communications

Many families own a car, though most are purchased used. Public transportation is convenient. Local buses and trolleys operate in cities; bus and train services operate in the country. Airlines, trains, and sea ferries connect Lithuania with various European destinations. Several daily and weekly private newspapers are available. A state-run television station and multiple private ones serve the country. The telephone system is not extensive but is fairly efficient. Cellular phones are increasingly popular because the networks are cheaper to use than existing phone lines.

Education

Children attend basic school for ten years. After graduation, students may begin working, go to a vocational school, or pursue two years of secondary school at a gymnasium. At the gymnasium, pupils can choose an area of emphasis, such as humanities, social, or hard sciences. Education is provided free at all levels. General education schools offer an optional course in religion. Sunday schools are open for Jews, Karaites (people who practice a religion similar to Judaism), and other religious minorities. Ethnic minorities have the option of attending schools that teach in their language. Difficult entrance exams are required for the dozens of institutions of higher education, including Vilnius University, the University of Vytautas Magnus, and Kaunas Technical University.

Health

Lithuania has a national healthcare system, though quite a few private health clinics also exist. The system provides for basic needs, although modern equipment and supplies are lacking. Many people use home remedies, and long recuperations are common. Lithuania has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe. Alcoholism and a lack of economic opportunity,

especially in rural areas, are considered to be contributing factors.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania, 2622 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20009; phone (202) 234-5860; web site www.ltembassyus.org. Lithuanian National Tourism Office, 86 Gloucester Place, London W1U 6HP, United Kingdom; web site www.lithuaniatourism.co.uk.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	3,545,319 (rank=131)
Area, sq. mi.	25,212 (rank=122)
Area, sq. km.	65,300

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	44 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	33 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$15,500
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 100% (female)
Infant mortality rate	6 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	70 (male); 80 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).