

When Basketball Is the Second Religion: The Politics of Fandom in Lithuania's Most Popular Team Sport

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to examine the political manifestations in the development of Lithuania's basketball fandom, with particular emphasis on the post-Cold War era of the country's regained independence and coinciding commercialization of its most popular team sport. Based on a qualitative research methodology, composed of an in-depth analysis of relevant textual sources serving as the primary data collection method and occasional participant observation as the accessory one, this case study demonstrates that broadly understood politics has been a notable feature in the development of the Lithuanian basketball fandom supporting the country's national team and especially its professional clubs. While in the former case it usually mildly reflected the corresponding state of Lithuania's foreign policy challenges and debates about national belonging, the club fandom has increasingly become more vocal and organized regarding both domestic and international political matters, often mirroring numerous related trends borrowed from their colleagues in football, including ideological agendas, forms and principles of self-organization, conduct of rivalries and friendships, and adopted political symbols and values. Paradoxically, the ongoing global polycrisis has recently contributed to the country's most organized club basketball fans' unprecedented rise as a relevant and recognizable societal phenomenon, with the expression of strong political views on their behalf being a key part of this process.

Keywords: basketball, Lithuania, fandom, ideology, identity, resistance, ultras, polycrisis

Introduction

In late October 2025, the President of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda, published an unexpected comment on his public social media account. Having first recognized that the times when it was possible to sleep calmly ended and that geopolitical challenges today bring new risky threats, he called for the charges of positive emotions and suddenly switched to the main topic he wanted to address – the anticipated transformation of the European club basketball, allegedly threatening its split along the lines of values-focused vs. commercial interests as a result of investment plans from

the US-based National Basketball Association (NBA), and thus also putting in peril his country's position in its most popular team sport, corresponding to 'part of Lithuania's identity, a tradition passed down from generation to generation, and a pillar of Lithuanian sports diplomacy' (BasketNews.com, 2025). The comment was broadly perceived as ill-timed and odd, given the ongoing governmental instability in Lithuania and apparent hybrid pressure on it by neighbouring Belarus and Russia, serving as yet another reminder of a particularly tense geopolitical environment since the 2022 beginning of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war (Delfi, 2025).

While Nausėda's message appeared hours before the home game of Lithuania's most decorated and popular basketball club, Žalgiris Kaunas, the country's only representative in the continent's top-tier club competition, and expressed clear support for both the team and the EuroLeague tournament, it also provided a notable reflection of some key debates and trends in Lithuania's sports community and the society as a whole, namely the complex interaction between the US as basketball's powerful birthplace and Europe as its increasingly prominent pursuer, the urge by Lithuanian elites to tactically use the popularity of this sport for their personal political or economic interest, and its unmistakable commercialization and resultant professional club hierarchies on both the national and continental levels. Indeed, during Lithuania's largest and most competitive national derby between Žalgiris and Rytas Vilnius that took place three days later in Kaunas, the guest fans from the capital decided to have their own say in the debate by displaying the much-discussed banner that called 'EuroLeague' (*sic*) the cancer of European basketball, hinting at its predominantly closed participatory structure, ironically more similar to NBA than to the continent's club competition system in association football, based on sporting principle when success in national championship conditions participation in continental tournaments (B Tribūna, 2025).

Given the impressive record of achievements in trying sporting and geopolitical circumstances (see below), it is surprising that the relationship between Lithuanian basketball and politics has not become the focus of more serious academic scrutiny. Popularly dubbed 'Lithuania's second religion', basketball has been occasionally researched from a political, rather than a purely historical, perspective only as a component of the nation's identity (Čingienė & Laskienė, 2004; Butautas & Čepaitienė, 2006) or as a tool of its soft power abroad (Čingienė et al., 2014). The last of these articles was published more than a decade ago, just before the 2014 eruption of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis, which markedly worsened Lithuania's security environment and had an impact on the eventual re-politicization of its sports, including, as we will observe, basketball.

The study of the relationship between politics and basketball outside Lithuania has predominantly focused on its birthplace, the US, where it became apparent in such prominent cases as complex racial integration,

star players' social and political activism, or NBA's role in recent domestic and foreign political debates, exemplified respectively by its support for the Black Lives Matter movement and a costly dispute with China, as the league's primary foreign market, over Hong Kong and human rights issues in general (TePoel & Nauright, 2021; Peng et al., 2022).

Therefore, the aim of this article is to examine the political manifestations in the development of Lithuania's basketball fandom, with particular emphasis on the post-Cold War era of the country's regained independence and coinciding commercialization of its most popular team sport. Based on a qualitative research methodology, composed of an in-depth analysis of relevant textual sources serving as the primary data collection method and occasional participant observation as the accessory one, this case study will demonstrate that broadly understood politics has indeed been a notable feature in the development of the Lithuanian basketball fandom supporting the country's national team and especially its professional clubs. While in the former case it usually mildly reflected the corresponding state of Lithuania's foreign policy challenges and debates about national belonging, the club fandom has increasingly become more vocal and organized regarding both domestic and international political matters, often mirroring numerous related trends borrowed from their colleagues in football, including ideological agendas, forms and principles of self-organization, conduct of rivalries and friendships, and adopted political symbols and values.

The article proceeds as follows. First, a concise review of basketball's history in Lithuania provides the necessary background for the case study in question. The subsequent analysis of the political manifestations in the development of Lithuanian basketball fandom is based on chronological principles, applied to define and separately examine the main historical periods leading to the current state of affairs in late 2025, namely the initial era of this sport's rise in the country under the peculiar geopolitical conditions of accumulating international tensions and the eventual Soviet occupation (1930s–1990), the three initial decades of Lithuania's post-Soviet independence that roughly coincided with the most prominent achievements of its basketball and relative international calm (early 1990s–late 2010s), and the last several years of its fandom's evolution under intensified pressures of

the so-called global polycrisis. Finally, the concluding section discusses the main findings within the broader context of international sports and politics.

Basketball in Lithuania: an overview

Basketball is a team sport invented in the US in 1891 by a Canadian-born physical educator, James Naismith. Having since evolved into one of the world's most popular sports, it has thus become the most successful American contribution to the practice and viewership of team sports on a global scale (Grasso et al., 2015). Although the US has dominated internationally since men's basketball's debut at the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, this team sport has at different times gained top popularity in other countries, including China and the Philippines in Asia, as well as the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in Europe. The latter group is particularly remarkable, given their outsized contribution to the development of international basketball despite association football's primacy across the rest of the European continent and their own disappearance as independent countries from the political map for half a century due to Soviet occupation.

Although Latvia became one of the eight founding members of the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) in 1932, winning the first European championship (EuroBasket) three years later, and while both Estonia and Latvia participated in the 1936 Berlin Olympics basketball tournament, it was Lithuania that soon after emerged as the leading Baltic powerhouse in this sport. The southernmost Baltic state won two subsequent EuroBasket championships, both held in the region – Latvia's capital, Riga, in 1937 and Lithuania's temporary capital, Kaunas, in 1939 – before all three countries were overrun by the Second World War and ultimately occupied by the USSR. Lithuanian contribution to basketball in its first hundred years of existence spread much beyond the interwar republic itself. For instance, all three of perhaps the most significant Olympic gold medal teams throughout that era had Lithuanian undertones. The inaugural US squad at Berlin 1936 included Frank Lubin (Pranas Lubinas), a Lithuanian-American nicknamed the 'godfather of basketball' in his ancestral country for his key later assistance to the sport's success there. The 1972 Soviet team, which for the first time snatched the Olympic gold from

the US in one of the sport's most controversial games ever played, was captained by Modestas Paulauskas, another Lithuanian great. Finally, the twelve-member 1988 Soviet squad that retrieved the gold by defeating both the US and Yugoslavia, the third traditional powerhouse in the game, had four Lithuanians on board, including Arvydas Sabonis and Šarūnas Marčiulionis, two stars who would later access the world's top club league, the NBA, gaining a hall of fame status there and also leading the staggering national revival of their homeland's basketball soon after it became the first republic to regain independence from the crumbling USSR in early 1990 (Grasso, 2011; Stonkus, 2022).

The rapidly revived Lithuanian national basketball has become a significant factor in two main processes that defined the successful development of this team sport in the post-Cold War era – its further internationalization and commercialization. As basketball gained unprecedented global attention due to the first-ever participation of elite professional American players at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, forming the original 'Dream Team', the second most popular national squad there was the Lithuanian one. Having been quickly assembled largely thanks to Marčiulionis's individual efforts while his reborn country was essentially broke, and ever since associated with the cult tie-dyed skeleton T-shirts produced in cooperation with the famous Californian rock band Grateful Dead, the Lithuanian Olympic national team succeeded in winning a bronze against the so-called Unified Team composed of the strongest former Soviet players (McCallum, 2012).

Throughout a third of a century since, Lithuania has firmly re-established itself as a basketball powerhouse of its own, having won two more Olympic bronzes (Atlanta 1996 and Sydney 2000), five additional EuroBasket medals, including its third gold (Sweden 2003), and a bronze at the FIBA World Championship, the least competitive of these three tournaments (Turkey 2010). Although the men's team has failed to win a medal in a major international competition since 2015, Lithuania remains one of the most successful countries in basketball worldwide, particularly considering its size and a half-century absence from major tournaments (9th in the current global ranking; FIBA, 2025b). In the post-Cold War era, this status has been further solidified by its occasional achievements in women's basketball (EuroBasket gold in 1997), men's 3x3 basketball (bronze at the 2024 Paris Olympics), youth basketball, especially

boys (8th in the current global ranking; FIBA, 2025b), and, finally, its professional men's basketball clubs, particularly Žalgiris Kaunas, the holder of five Soviet league titles and the winner of entire Europe's second and top-tier club competitions during the independence era (in 1998 and 1999, respectively), and Rytas Vilnius, twice the laureate of the continent's second-tier championship (in 2005 and 2009).

Politics and Lithuanian basketball fandom before 1990

The rise of Lithuanian basketball has been intertwined with politics since the interwar era, when the young republic became increasingly squeezed between hostile neighbouring great and middle powers – the USSR, Germany, and Poland. Having been introduced by Steponas Darius, a Lithuanian-American aviator and sports enthusiast who would later die in a 1933 non-stop flight attempt from New York City to Kaunas along with his co-pilot Stasys Girėnas, basketball turned out to be closely associated with the Lithuanian diasporic community in the US, forming the core of Lithuania's two national teams that won the second and third EuroBasket tournaments and thus triggering occasional criticism about unfair practices from other contenders. While the mysterious crash of Darius and Girėnas' plane, *Lituanica*, in Germany resulted in the duo's tragically iconic status and contributed to mistrust of Berlin in their homeland, it was basketball that became the cause for Lithuania's souring relationship with its only remaining friendly neighbour, Latvia. The rivalry reached its apogee during the inaugural game of the 1939 EuroBasket in Kaunas, when the hosts and defending champions defeated the first title holder and another leading powerhouse on the continent by one point, with Lithuanian spectators reportedly exhibiting raucous behaviour (Senn, 2015).

In the meantime, three ultimatums by Poland (1938), Germany (1939), and the USSR (1940) had radically worsened Lithuania's security environment, leading to its swallowing by the latter two contending great powers and finally the Soviet (re-)occupation in 1944. Having lost their independence and thus a national team, Lithuanians gradually shifted to supporting their emerging sports clubs. As early as 1944, the Soviet authorities permitted the creation of the Žalgiris sports

society, which mirrored the union's pattern of such 'voluntary' entities equivalent to professional clubs in the West. For anti-German wartime propaganda purposes, Moscow agreed with the society's proposed title, which borrowed the Lithuanian name for the 1410 Battle of Grunwald, marking the most significant victory of the Polish-Lithuanian joint forces against the Teutonic Order. Two of Lithuania's largest and most popular clubs in basketball and football, respectively, Žalgiris Kaunas (est. 1944) and Žalgiris Vilnius (est. 1947), had their origins in this key decision (Butautas & Čepaitienė, 2006). While other Lithuanian clubs occasionally succeeded in the Soviet-wide top-tier basketball championships, as was the case with third places won by Statyba Vilnius (est. 1964; bronze in 1979) and Kibirkštis Vilnius (est. 1961; four bronzes between 1969 and 1984) men's and women's teams, respectively, both Žalgiris clubs during those decades had functioned as proxies for the national team in their respective men's sports, overshadowing their republican contenders in terms of popularity and results achieved (Stonkus, 2022).

Several trends in Lithuania's basketball fandom were prominent throughout the Soviet era. Given its local popularity, Lithuanians perceived basketball as one of the few opportunities where they could outdo their occupiers, demonstrate their political defiance, and occasionally gain visibility on the international stage. Therefore, basketball games between Lithuanian clubs and their contenders from elsewhere in the USSR, especially its Russian core, mirrored a much lighter version of highly charged Soviet team sport rivalries with politically subjugated but nominally independent European satellites, such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. However, in a more strict Soviet domestic environment, political expressions of the Lithuanian basketball fandom were also more constrained. It was no coincidence that a genuine shift in this process occurred as late as the 1980s, when the consistent rise of both Žalgiris clubs intensified rivalries with Russian teams, while their supporters gradually found themselves in a particularly transformative socio-political environment, associated with a deepening perception of a systemic crisis but also sudden opportunities provided by the reformist agenda of *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

The 1980s basketball rivalry between Žalgiris Kaunas, led by Sabonis, and CASK Moscow, the USSR's most decorated team that symbolically represented the Soviet army, reached an iconic status in Lithuania.

However, in contrast to football, where an increasingly organized fandom of Žalgiris Vilnius had begun to engage in anti-Soviet sloganeering and occasional acts of violent hooliganism against the supporters of visiting teams, more raucous expressions of politics inspired by basketball had occurred in places of mass youth gatherings during and after the televised games, rather than in and around the home arena itself (Butautas & Čepaitienė, 2006; Butautas, 2020). Moreover, it was Lithuania's first-ever organized fan group in any sports, Pietų IV (est. 1985) of Žalgiris Vilnius, that served as an inspiration for similar entities not only in football but also in basketball, the first of the latter being Green Death (est. 1987) of Žalgiris Kaunas (Kubilius, 2020a).

While the charged competition between Žalgiris and CASK, broadly perceived as respectively Lithuanian and Russian national squads, overshadowed potential rivalries within the small republic, vast social differences between its two largest cities, Vilnius and Kaunas, had long been present in the background, fuelling occasional parochial contests between their representatives. For instance, Marčiulionis claimed decades later that his consistent failure to enter the Soviet national team in the mid-1980s stemmed from Žalgiris's advocacy on behalf of its players and his treatment as a traitor for having left his native Kaunas to play for Statyba Vilnius (Butkauskas, 2021). Lithuania's bold declaration of independence in early 1990, as Marčiulionis had competed in his first NBA season, put on hold all of these recent developments in the nation's basketball fandom.

Picture No. 1. Ultras style support for Lithuania's men's national basketball team against Argentina in Istanbul, Turkey (September 2010)



Source: Photo by Raimondas Kikalas, used with permission.

Inconsistent development of basketball fandom after regained independence

As elsewhere in the post-socialist and especially post-Soviet part of Europe, the radical transformation of the social, political, and economic order in the early 1990s resulted in numerous immediate challenges that negatively affected the sports domain (Parks & Zwicker, 2020). In Lithuania, two main developments made this transition smoother for basketball in comparison to other team sports popular there, such as football and handball, namely the revived national team's early success at the game-changing 1992 Barcelona Olympics and the creation of the top-tier Lithuanian Basketball League the following year, with Marčiulionis presiding over both these efforts associated with an embrace of commercialization (Butautas & Čepaitienė, 2006).

From the perspective of fandom, these developments introduced a hitherto non-existent division between support for Lithuania's initially more successful national basketball team and long-struggling professional clubs. For decades, the latter domain mirrored broader negative trends in the region's professional sports environment, including clubs' financial instability, lack of sustainability, and administrative takeovers by opportunistic people with shady backgrounds. To illustrate the point, out of the eight Lithuanian clubs that formed the top-tier league in 1993, only three remain there today under their roughly original names, all of them traceable to the Soviet era (LKL, 2025). Even for the historically privileged Žalgiris Kaunas, it took some two decades to finally rid itself of the sponsorship and management by erratic businessmen tied to Russia, with the latest of these, Vladimir Romanov, even attempting to enter Lithuanian politics before fleeing to Moscow for good from a large-scale embezzlement investigation (BNS, 2021).

As Lithuanians cheered their national team's continued success throughout the first decade of their post-Soviet independence, an essential shift in the country's club basketball had occurred by the end of the 1990s. The gradual takeover of Statyba Vilnius by Lithuania's then-largest daily led to the rise of the eponymous challenger to Žalgiris's traditional hegemony, Lietuvos Rytas, kickstarting several processes in the country's developing club fandom. On the national level, the reinvigorated sporting clash between its largest cities had a positive effect on

the declining popularity of the league, further emotionally fuelled by the allegedly inciteful reporting of the capital club's parent daily and the creation of B Tribūna (est. 1998), the renamed club's fan group, originally formed mainly of ethnically non- or partly-Lithuanian teenagers from the outskirts of Vilnius. Their ethnolinguistic minority background and the sometimes violent takeover of the stands from the original fans of Statyba contributed to the rise of the national basketball derby with Žalgiris Kaunas and the capital's local one with Sakalai Vilnius (1991–2013), a smaller club whose ethnically Lithuanian fanbase had grown thanks to some incoming supporters of Statyba. It also led to occasional tensions with Pietų IV football fans, who represented the entire country's pioneering fan group and were known for their Lithuanian nationalist positions.

By 2003, the crucial year marked by Lithuania's EuroBasket victory and last preparations before the country's dual EU and NATO accession in 2004, an unprecedentedly vibrant organized club fan scene had gradually emerged in Vilnius, led by Pietų IV, Sakalai Ultras (est. 1999), and B Tribūna, with the latter two basketball groups displaying their banners at the victorious EuroBasket in Sweden. Given B Tribūna's decision to do so as 'Rytas Ultras' for the first time and the birth of Vakarų Banga (initially carrying an English-language title of West Wave, est. 2003) that same year as the fan group of the historic Neptūnas Klaipėda team (est. 1964) from the third largest Lithuanian city (Šmigelskas, 2024), the country's organized club basketball fandom had made a key step towards embracing the ultras style of a particularly passionate support. This gradual transformation logically completed with the creation and rise of Green White Boys (GWB, est. 2007), composed of younger fans of Žalgiris Kaunas who would eventually clash with older Green Death members over the principles of organized support for their club (Kubilius, 2020a).

Ironically, the victorious EuroBasket 2003 marked the high point for both Lithuanian basketball in general and joint support by fans from different backgrounds for the national team in particular. Ever since then, and in contrast to Lithuanian football, a divide between the emerging basketball club ultras and the national team fans has grown wider, with both sides occasionally exhibiting behaviour related to politics. In the latter case, the fandom has been increasingly composed of

their men's national team supporters who would value it at least as much as their preferred clubs and organize in big numbers to travel across the world following the country's best players, with their signature huge national flags, drums, and carnivalesque outfits in eye-catching and easily recognizable national colours of yellow, predominant green, and red as well as various iterations of the tie-dyed skeleton T-shirts still visible in the festive crowd (Urbonas, 2017).

While these fans' national team support often reflected a perceived sense of heightened international rivalries, based on sporting history in both more friendly (vs. neighbouring Latvia) and more adversarial (vs. fellow basketball powerhouses – Serbia or Spain) terms, particularly emotional when politics was clearly involved (vs. Russia before its ban from international team sports), their conduct has generally been less politically-charged than that of Lithuanian club ultras. Among two notable exceptions to that trend is their pride in remaining a rare case of the national squad that has never accepted a naturalized player or a head coach without ethnic Lithuanian roots, a principled policy in part inherited from the Soviet-era sports clubs composed of exclusively republican representatives, and widely condemned rare incidents caused by individual fans charged of racism while supporting their team abroad (15min.lt, 2012; FIBA, 2025a).

On the other hand, the most organized part of Lithuania's basketball club fandom, the self-proclaimed ultras, had gradually ceased to support their country's national team in an 'official' capacity, namely by displaying their group banners in those games. This trend marked a recognition of numerous differences between the two styles of support and the need to prioritize in the context of growing monetary constraints, especially apparent following the 2008 global financial crisis, which also had a toll on the EuroBasket 2011 held in Lithuania without producing a much-anticipated medal for the home team. Instead, having usually encountered the widespread opposition from their football ultras counterparts in the three main cities, stemming from the natural competitive displeasure with a 'new group in town' but also arrogant scepticism about basketball fandom in general, the most organized club basketball fan groups gradually embraced all of the main features associated with an ultras style of support, including chanting, singing, and synchronous gesturing at the command of a leader (*capo*) while never sitting down;

displaying permanent group banners, flags, and *ad hoc* choreography; using pyrotechnics; marking their 'territory' or 'presence' beyond it with graffiti and stickers; adopting symbols, musical tastes, and clothing brands recognizable within the broader subculture; following one's team to all away games; and forming both adversarial and friendly relationships with other such groups domestically and abroad, including occasional outbreaks of violent hooliganism in the former case.

There were two principal manifestations of politics in the early development of Lithuania's basketball ultras subculture. The first had to do with an apparent embrace of extreme right-wing views by the pioneering groups in the capital, as showcased by displaying Celtic cross banners and the adoption of a skinhead outfit, both commonly associated with white nationalism and neo-Nazism. Another manifested itself in what scholars refer to as the equivalent of sports, rather than ideological politics, namely protests against laws, regulations, and other decisions that affect their enjoyment of the game, sometimes putting them at odds with the top-tier league authorities, law and security enforcement, and rival or sometimes even their own club management (Doidge & Lieser, 2018). Among the most recurring related topics in the Lithuanian fandom, including basketball, have been fines for offensive chants directed against opponents, attempts to limit the use of pyrotechnics, and the general urge to more strictly regulate their behaviour (Andrijauskas, 2019).

While Lithuania's principal ultras groups, belonging to both football and basketball, sometimes conducted synchronous protests for the sake of a better impact, their often conflictual relationships with each other contributed to the generally negative image of this subcultural phenomenon within society as a whole and even among the regular supporters of their own clubs. As the Lithuanian ultras scene got increasingly crowded since the late 1990s, the main groups from both football and basketball had sometimes engaged in other joint initiatives, such as participating in fan sports tournaments, supporting their country's national football team, or providing a common front against visiting big names among European football ultras and hooligans, such as the Croatian Bad Blue Boys of Dinamo Zagreb who came to Panevėžys, Lithuania's fifth largest city, in 2006 for a game against the local Ekranas (Butautas, 2020). On the other hand, violent clashes between opposing basketball ultras groups,

Picture No. 2. B Tribūna celebrating the seventh national title of Rytas Vilnius on their home court (June 2024)



Source: Photo by Marius Kolenda, used with permission.

particularly across the lines of the national (B Tribūna vs. GWB) and capital (B Tribūna vs. Sakalai Ultras) derbies, had also become a regular occurrence, with other groups often becoming involved due to their more or less official coalitions, such as Pietų IV's pioneering friendships with Vakarų Frontas (est. 1996) of Atlantas Klaipėda football team and Sakalai Ultras, or a later friendship between the capital's B Tribūna and Klaipėda's Vakarų Banga.

In general, however, until the late 2010s, these had been rather marginal phenomena, involving dozens rather than hundreds of competing individuals, with the 2008 global financial crisis having taken a serious toll on their capabilities and also on the well-being of their clubs. Among the most telling examples of this negative trend, the sporting rivalry between Lietuvos Rytas Vilnius and Žalgiris Kaunas had greatly diminished due to the former's much larger difficulties in weathering the economic crisis and the latter's resultant re-establishment of its hegemony in the league for a dozen years, reminiscent of the 1990s era. Meanwhile, the struggling Sakalai Vilnius finally went bankrupt in 2014, effectively ending the capital derby. The following year, Lithuania's men's national basketball team won its last medal in a major tournament (silver at the EuroBasket 2015). It would later fail to qualify for both Olympics held since their last participation at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro games. Dark times seemed to lie ahead for Lithuania's basketball and its fandom.

The surprising growth of the Lithuanian basketball fandom during the polycrisis

At the time of writing, it seems prudent to highlight the recent gains in popularity and societal impact achieved by the Lithuanian basketball fandom, particularly the one focused on the country's professional clubs, despite many apparent odds. As is the case with the now fashionable term of polycrisis, which defines a situation where numerous distinct crises and shocks – economic, (geo)political, environmental, and others – interact to produce an even more overwhelming effect than the sum of its parts (Tooze, 2022), it is hard to pinpoint precisely where the defining shift in the interrelated development of the Lithuanian basketball fan scene occurred. Given that many international observers would cite the beginning of Donald Trump's first presidency in 2017, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, or Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as the defining crises, the transformation of the Lithuanian club fandom coincided with these events and was significantly impacted by the latter two. As will be shown below, fans' unprecedentedly active engagement with domestic and international political issues was a key ingredient of this process.

Mirroring the national team's decline since the mid-2010s, so did the international achievements of Lithuanian basketball clubs. In fact, the only truly notable success in this regard since the global financial crisis to the time of writing has been a bronze of the continent's top-tier EuroLeague taken in 2018 by Žalgiris Kaunas, bringing a rough thousand fans led by some fifty GWB members to the Serbian capital, Belgrade, which then hosted the final four stage of the tournament (Kubilius, 2020a). As the EuroLeague evolved into an increasingly closed structure, the entry threshold for other Lithuanian teams expanded significantly, with Lietuvos Rytas Vilnius and Neptūnas Klaipėda having last competed there in 2014 and 2015, respectively. Given that Žalgiris has secured a long-term spot in this tournament, creating particularly appealing conditions for sponsorship, this arrangement contributed to a self-perpetuating cycle of its hegemony in the national league.

As elsewhere around the globe, the 2020 outbreak of the pandemic brought the sporting world to a standstill, with immediate negative repercussions to Lithuanian basketball and its fandom. Paradoxically, however, it provided fertile ground for a return to competitiveness

among Lithuanian clubs as well as unprecedented energy and surprising societal appreciation of their most organized fans. A central story to this process unfolded in Vilnius, where a new generation of B Tribūna led their club's fan scene through a painful transition in its ownership, management, and international tournament priorities, while themselves experiencing a notable ideological transformation. Having become national champions five times in the 2000s, Lietuvos Rytas completely ceded positions to its rival from Kaunas in the next decade, with two cup titles (in 2016 and 2019) serving as a small consolation. A string of sporting setbacks finally led to a key shift in its ownership structure in 2017, marked by the departure of the eponymous daily following a scandalous racist remark made by then head of both the club and the media group, Gedvydas Vainauskas (Pingue, 2017).

While the historically problematic relationship between B Tribūna and their club's administration had not recovered immediately, they succeeded in convincing the new owners to retain the team's colours and the central part of its former name, rebranded as more straightforward Rytas Vilnius. On the occasion of their nineteenth birthday in late 2017, B Tribūna organized an away national derby trip to Kaunas, joined by an unprecedentedly large crowd of around 500 fans, thus marking the start of an era of such 'massive' endeavours, particularly notable for their common embrace of an ultras style of support (Kubilius, 2020b). The new generation's urge to spotlight their uniqueness, more critical embrace of the punk and counter-culture, establishment of friendly contacts with antifascist representatives from neighbouring Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian football ultras, hooligan, and punk scenes, and the negative reputational trail left by the club's previous administration have all led to B Tribūna's official shift towards anti-racist position and other manifestations of socio-politically progressive agenda. The 2018 establishment of an official friendship with Dzūkų Tankai (est. 2001), an ultras group of the historic Dainava Alytus football club (est. 1935) from Lithuania's sixth largest city, allowed to successfully counteract the reignited opposition from their counterparts of both Žalgiris teams, GWB and Pietų IV, on the stands and streets, leading to strengthening of contacts between the latter two as well (Hooligans.cz, 2023).

The missing ingredient for a real breakthrough in the Lithuanian basketball club fandom finally materi-

alized in 2022, when Žalgiris Kaunas for the first time failed to reach the finals, despite operating a larger budget than all of the league's other clubs combined. Moreover, a national title reclaimed after twelve years did not bring any consistent respite to Rytas Vilnius, because of the creation of an ambitious but short-lived Wolves club (2022–2025) by the country's wealthiest businessman, Gediminas Žiemelis. Given his controversial business history in Russia, now an open aggressor against Ukraine, and the thinly veiled plans to take over club basketball in the capital, all of this contributed to a more competitive and politicized national fan scene as well as unprecedented broader societal and political interest in it. The latter trend has been facilitated by the ultras' more committed engagement with social and mass media, addressing better the general society's longing for post-pandemic spectacle and its changing socio-political views.

Thus, since 2022, Lithuania's club basketball has regained a derby atmosphere, more spectacular and popular than ever before, with the best ever choreography and occasional thousand-strong away trips. More broadly, this period has also been marked by the main basketball ultras groups' more regular appearance at their club franchises' junior (B Tribūna, GWB), football (GWB, Vakarų Banga), and women's (Vakarų Banga) teams. Finally, the Lithuanian club basketball fandom acquired novel manifestations of political activism by the ultras, such as expression of symbolic support for Ukrainian defenders, including previously unimaginable joint chants by B Tribūna and GWB, collection and delivery of material support to embattled Ukraine, conflicts with Žiemelis and the wealthy mayor of Kaunas,

Visvaldas Matijošaitis, because of their business links to Russia or reluctance to openly criticize it (15min.lt, 2024), and the beginning of Žalgiris fans' deeply politicized EuroLeague rivalry with Crvena Zvezda Belgrade due to their respective divides along the lines of the Russo–Ukrainian conflict (LRT, 2023; Reuters, 2025). In general, all of this marks the high point in the embrace of politics by independent Lithuania's basketball club fandom.

Conclusions

Throughout its century-long existence in Lithuania, basketball has been closely intertwined with politics, and its fandom has developed as a key component and agent of this phenomenon. While the fifty-year-long Soviet occupation interrupted this process, the developing Lithuanian basketball clubs, especially Žalgiris Kaunas, had gradually acquired the role of a conduit for the nation's political aspirations and anti-Soviet resistance. Only since Lithuania's return to independence in the early 1990s has a certain divide emerged in its fandom between the supporters of the country's national team and the increasingly commercialized clubs. In the former case, the primary manifestation of politics usually mildly reflected the corresponding state of Lithuania's foreign policy challenges and debates about national belonging, such as fans' participatory reflection of their country's geopolitically perceived friendships and rivalries as well as the general aversion to naturalization of players with no traceable Lithuanian descent, while increasingly embracing the talents from their sizeable diasporic community, just as happened in the 1930s.

Mirroring their colleagues in football, however, it is actually Lithuania's basketball club fandom that has increasingly become more vocal and organized regarding both domestic and international political matters, as reflected by the adoption of ideological agendas, forms and principles of self-organization, conduct of rivalries and friendships, and the appropriation of political symbols and values. Along with a committed embrace of social media and the general society's longing for spectacle in the post-pandemic environment, the organized club fan groups' often bold and outspoken willingness to engage in broader debates of a political nature, especially on the all-important topic

Picture No. 3. GWB thanking Žalgiris Kaunas for its close EuroLeague victory against Paris on their home court (March 2025)



Source: Photo by Rokas Lukoševičius, used with permission.

of the Russo-Ukrainian War, has recently become one of the main reasons behind their sudden rise from a small and marginal subculture to a much more sizeable and recognized phenomenon.

At the time of writing, it appears safe to conclude that Lithuania's organized club fans, especially ultras groups, have matured by largely overcoming the principal challenges associated with socio-economic crises, generational changes, negative public opinion, and opposition from their football counterparts to become essential and firmly embedded parts of their urban environments and (sub)cultures as well as a nationally significant factor. Given the special role of basketball in Lithuania, it is particularly notable that some of them decisively shifted towards becoming a societal vanguard in opposition to racism (B Tribūna), something entirely logical for a sport so deeply intertwined with the African-American superstars and increasingly global practice, while others are in the process of emerging as a key additional actor in the national and club fandom of football (GWB), thus showcasing a reverse process to that which occurred elsewhere in Europe.

In the meantime, the passionate derby between Rytas and Žalgiris has become truly national, with a never ending debate about whose 'fan atmosphere' is better along the quality vs. quantity lines, pitting the former's more broadly embraced ultras style of support in overall smaller numbers against the latter's continuous sold-outs in the EuroLeague games, as well as being representative of a respective clash between Rytas's 'support your local team' principle on the one hand and Žalgiris's self-marketing as 'entire Lithuania's club' on the other. With a club scene like this, Lithuania's national basketball should eventually recover the status that it objectively deserves.

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