The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Russia's Neighbors Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

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June 30, 2026

Anti-nuclear weapons protesters in Britain in 2016. **CC BY 2.0**

Mindaugas Sinkevičius, the incoming prime minister of Lithuania, said on June 30 that he supports removing from the country's Constitution the ban on stationing weapons of mass destruction on Lithuanian territory.

Not long ago, the very idea that Lithuania or its neighbors might host nuclear weapons aimed at Russia seemed mad and dangerous. People feared Moscow's reaction; they feared becoming targets of a nuclear strike; they feared the unforgiving logic of the Cold War itself.

Today, it is no longer the presence of the bomb that seems dangerous, but its absence. In a world where Russia openly resorts to nuclear blackmail, countries unfortunate enough to live beside it are arriving at a simple and cynical conclusion: to preserve their independence, they need a nuclear weapon — preferably more than one.

Does what I am saying sound blasphemous? It is. It should not be this way. Nuclear weapons should never be used again. One would hope that, since weapons of mass destruction exist, their sole function would be for deterrence, never to be used in real life.

But that is precisely why the threat of using nuclear weapons works. Even a very large country like Russia would be sent back to the Stone Age after the destruction of critical infrastructure hubs. Ethical doubts and questions of conscience are an unaffordable luxury for Russia's neighbors; the Kremlin sees all of this as a sign of weakness and grounds for pressure and blackmail.

Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Finland have come to consider taking part in a common European nuclear deterrent and even hosting the weapons on their own soil, not because life has been good. The experience of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, as well as their own, does not merely suggest but scream that the Kremlin only respects those who are strong and ready to resist. The question that keeps coming up is whether Putin would have invaded Ukraine had it not given up the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal in 1994.

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For a long time, such a discussion was considered almost indecent. After leaving the U.S.S.R. and restoring its independence, Lithuania wrote into its Constitution a ban on hosting weapons of mass destruction and foreign military bases on its territory. At the time, it seemed that the country's security could be guaranteed by international law, political alliances, democracy, the European Union and NATO. We wanted to believe that Europe's borders had become inviolable; that Russia had become a trading empire that preferred rubles to tanks, confining nuclear weapons to films about the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War.

Well, none of that happened.

The Kremlin quickly explained that the liberal international order was an illusion. Russia continued to wage wars: first in Chechnya, then in Georgia and Syria, and it has now been at war with Ukraine for 12 years. The full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which began four and a half years ago, became the largest war in Europe since the end of World War II.

Moscow revived and began actively employing nuclear blackmail — the promise to bomb European cities — in its everyday rhetoric. Russian officials, experts and propagandists discuss live on air which capital to strike first. The message is: fear us, or we will press the nuclear button.When you are constantly intimidated and blackmailed with the threat of a nuclear strike, you stop being afraid and begin to, as Stanley Kubrik would say, "love the bomb."

You only fear your own weakness and defenselessness. Before the war in Ukraine, the main argument of opponents of firm deterrence was that Russia should not be provoked.

But the Kremlin made it clear that it needs no provocation. Moscow cannot bear the thought that its neighbors live freely, do not wish to bow deeply to their former occupier and are not in a hurry to fulfill its geopolitical wishes. Neither Ukraine, Georgia nor Moldova threatened Moscow with nuclear weapons or any other weapons. That did not save them from Russian

aggression.

That is why the question should not be whether Lithuania will become a target of Russian nuclear missiles if nuclear weapons appear on its territory or if it joins NATO's nuclear-deterrence program. We should ask whether the absence of those weapons ever provably made Lithuania and its neighbors safer.

Of course not. It is possible that Russia's General Staff have already marked us out as targets. All that lacking nuclear weapons has done is make our countries hostages to someone else's resolve: NATO's determination to defend us and Moscow's determination to annex disobedient neighbors.

The very democracy and international law of which we still speak require a force capable of defending and preserving them for our descendants and for us. The sovereignty of a country bordering an empire exists only so long as the cost of attack remains unacceptable to its large, predatory neighbor. Diplomacy alone in the face of a nuclear power hellbent on blackmail sounds little better than pleading.For Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Finland, NATO remains that argument of force: soldiers, bases, air defense, defense plans and the American nuclear umbrella. But these threats only work if an adversary believes them to be credible.

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Nuclear weapons must not be turned into an idol that will solve every problem alone. That's how the Kremlin views things. Nuclear deterrence requires discipline, control and an understanding of the consequences. But it is certainly unsafe to believe that the Kremlin can be negotiated with and that if we do not mention weapons of mass destruction, they will disappear from Moscow's strategy. That won't happen.

For Moscow, the bomb is an instrument of policy and pressure for threatening and raising the stakes. For the countries neighboring an empire, the bomb — or, more precisely, the nuclear umbrella supplied by allies — is a way of making the cost of invasion so high that it remains nothing more than arrows on maps in the Russian army's General Staff and ends before it begins.

No one in Vilnius dreams of pressing a button that would send nuclear missiles flying toward Russia. Politicians and military officers in Warsaw do not dream of nuclear war either. All they want is for war never to happen again.

To "love the bomb" does not mean that one should stop fearing nuclear war. No sane person can love nuclear weapons. In reality, it means saying goodbye to the illusion that fear of the bomb makes us safer by itself.

Yes, we once feared that the mere presence of nuclear weapons in our country would make us a priority target for attack. Now everything has changed. It has become clear that we are the targets of our aggressive neighbor because we are on their border and stand in the way of their expansion while reminding them that freedom is worth living for and worth fighting for — and precisely because we do not possess nuclear weapons.

We should stop being preoccupied with how to avoid irritating Moscow. Our focus should be on ensuring that the rulers in the Kremlin never decide to test how ready we are to defend ourselves.

Nuclear weapons do not make the world a better place. Quite the opposite. But in our region, their absence may make war more likely. That is why the most terrible thing in the world suddenly begins to seem like the final argument capable of preserving peace.

And if that requires nuclear weapons, then they should acquire nuclear weapons. Preferably, more than one.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/06/30/how-russias-neighbors-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-the-bomb-a93134