

PAIR DISCUSSION NO.1

STUDENT A

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- summarise and conclude your discussion (**Student B**).



Lithuania Ranked Second-Best Tourist Destination in the World for 2025 by Lonely Planet

In a historic achievement, Lithuania has been named the second-best travel destination in the world for 2025 by one of the world's largest travel guide publishers, *Lonely Planet*. The Lonely Planet experts, known for their high standards, highlighted four key Lithuanian gems that make it a must-visit destination: Lithuania's capital Vilnius, the Curonian Spit National Park, the Hill of Crosses, and Aukštaitija National Park.

Lonely Planet evaluates several factors when choosing its recommended travel destinations, including tourism infrastructure, service quality, and a country's safety. Uniqueness, sustainability, and the authenticity of the travel experience are also key components of the selection process. Lithuania's growing reputation as a safe, affordable, and sustainable destination, combined with its ability to offer both modern urban experiences and untouched natural beauty, seems to have secured its place at the top of the list.

While this global recognition is a remarkable achievement, maintaining and building upon it may not be easy. One key concern is balancing increased tourism with sustainability. As more travellers will discover Lithuania's unique offerings, the country will need to ensure that its natural and cultural sites are preserved. The means used to prevent over-tourism and environmental degradation seem to be well known: managing visitor numbers, implementing eco-friendly tourism initiatives, promoting responsible travel – however, the real challenge lies in putting these ideas into practice effectively.

Another challenge is further enhancing infrastructure and service quality. While Lithuania has made significant progress in recent years, it will have to continue investing in transportation, accommodation, and digital services to meet the expectations of an expanding international audience. Additionally, as competition among global destinations intensifies, it must innovate marketing and tourism experiences to adapt to evolving traveller preferences, such as the rising demand for wellness tourism and off-the-beaten-path adventures. Finally, a strong reputation for safety and hospitality remains key to upholding Lithuania's appeal.

Global travel trends are continuously shifting due to geopolitical and economic factors, so it is the country's ability to adapt, innovate, and uphold the high standards that will ultimately determine whether it can maintain its place among the world's top destinations.

PAIR DISCUSSION NO.1

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World Publishers Release 25 New Books by Lithuanian Authors



Readers worldwide will soon have the opportunity to explore 25 new books by Lithuanian authors, translated into 19 languages. Two poetry books, nine novels, an art album, a guide for the theatre community, documentary artist notes, a special publication representing Lithuanian literature in a literary magazine, and ten illustrated children's books. The diversity of languages is impressive: Albanian, Azerbaijani, Belarusian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, French, Georgian, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latvian, Macedonian, Spanish, Swedish, and Ukrainian.

"Book translations and the books themselves reach readers worldwide as part of our consistent work with Lithuanian literature translators, publishers, visits of publishing professionals to Lithuania, support opportunities at international book fairs, the activities of the cultural attaché network. Each book becomes a window into our country's culture, history, and creative context," says Julija Reklaitė, Director of Lithuanian Culture Institute.

The album-catalog *Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis Tapyba* is being prepared by the Ukrainian publisher Helvetica Publishing House. The articles reviewing Čiurlionis' work, a comprehensive catalog of works, and other album texts will be translated into Ukrainian by Beatričė Beliavciv, the most active translator of Lithuanian literature into Ukrainian, who has lived in Lviv for more than two decades.

In 2024, the Lithuanian literature translation funds financed three translations into Belarusian, intended for publishers based outside Belarus. Translator Siarhij Shupa shares that he and his like-minded colleagues set out to publish the top 100 best Lithuanian books of the century. The first book of the hundred was Ričardas Gavelis' *Vilnius Poker* published in Belarus in 2019. After moving to Prague, Siarhij and his colleagues founded a publishing house and continued to implement their ambitious plan. Over two years, the novels by Antanas Škėma *Balta drobulė (The White Shroud)* and Jurgis Kunčinas *Tula* were released, and this year the publisher will release the first two parts of Kristina Sabaliauskaitė's tetralogy *Silva Rerum*.

The Translation Promotion Programme has been running since 2001, with 650 books translated into 43 world languages. This achievement reflects the literature professionals' continuous engagement, strategic partnerships, and constructive conversations about literary exchange. Individual efforts appear no less powerful to bridge literary worlds.

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The Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO Opposes Bridge to Curonian Spit



The Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO is concerned about Neringa Mayor Darius Jasaitis' suggestions to build a bridge connecting the Curonian Spit, a natural heritage site, to the mainland. The commission says the municipality's intention to ask UNESCO for 40 million euros for the Neringa quays is an "unreasonable expectation" and an "immature approach" that may affect the international community's trust in Lithuania. Ever since the Curonian Spit was nominated for listing as UNESCO World Heritage Site, the commission said, it was clear that there could never be a bridge connecting the spit to the mainland.

"This is Lithuania's international commitment to the conservation and sustainable management of this UNESCO World Heritage Site," the national commission stressed, pointing out that constructing a bridge was what led to Germany's Dresden Elbe Valley being removed from the UNESCO World Heritage List.

"A bridge to the Curonian Spit would also pose ecological challenges that would contribute to the decline of the Curonian Spit as a world heritage site," says Agnė Jasinavičiūtė, Chair of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO.

The Lithuanian part of the Curonian Spit is currently reachable by boat. There is a regular ferry service from Klaipėda. Neringa Mayor Jasaitis claims that the construction of a bridge to the Curonian Spit would reduce pollution at the Smiltynė ferry and would not disturb fish migration. Neringa Municipality supports the idea to build a bridge to the Curonian Spit. Local politicians believe a bridge would be a more environment-friendly means of interconnection than the existing ferry that makes 23,000 trips a year and burns tons of diesel fuel polluting the environment.

The commission admits that in January, the Curonian Lagoon flooded Nida, Pervalka and Juodkrantė due to its old and too-low quays, so Neringa mayor's statement about his intention to ask UNESCO for financial support for the reconstruction of the Curonian Lagoon quays is certainly a source of debate. However, the commission remains critical, stating that the idea of building a bridge reflects an immature approach.

The Curonian Spit was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000.

PAIR DISCUSSION NO. 3

STUDENT B

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Lithuanian researchers use AI to diagnose depression



Researchers at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) have developed an artificial intelligence model that helps identify depression based on speech and brain neural activity. This offers a new approach to depression diagnosis. Approximately 280 million people worldwide suffer from depression, according to the World Health Organisation. In Lithuania, over 50,000 people are diagnosed with depression yearly.

“Depression is one of the most common mental disorders, with devastating consequences for both the individual and society, so we are developing a new, more objective diagnostic method that could become accessible to everyone in the future,” says Rytis Maskeliūnas, a professor at KTU and one of the authors of the invention.

While most diagnostic research for depression has relied on a single type of data, the new multimodal approach can provide better information about a person’s emotional state. The combination of speech and brain activity data achieved 97.53 percent accuracy in diagnosing depression, significantly outperforming alternative methods.

For the Multimodal Open Dataset for Mental Disorder Analysis (MODMA), data was collected over five-minute sessions while participants were awake, at rest, and with their eyes closed. In the audio part of the experiment, the patients participated in a question-and-answer session and several activities focused on reading and describing pictures to capture their natural language and cognitive state.

In the future, this AI model could speed up the diagnosis of depression, or even make it remote, and reduce the risk of subjective errors. However, Maskeliūnas adds, the latter aspect of the research might raise some challenges. “The main problem with these studies is lack of data because people tend to remain private about their mental health issues,” he says.

Another key challenge is ensuring the algorithm can explain its diagnostic reasoning to medical professionals. “The algorithm still has to learn how to explain the diagnosis in a comprehensible way,” says Maskeliūnas.

This is why explainable artificial intelligence (XAI), which aims to explain to the user why the model makes certain decisions and to increase their trust in the AI, is now of utmost importance.

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Vilnius kicks off European Green Capital



Vilnius has officially launched its European Green Capital 2025 events. The opening ceremony, held at the Contemporary Art Centre, marked the city's political commitment to the Green City Accord. The event was attended by mayors and deputy mayors from cities such as Aarhus, Krakow, Treviso, Valletta, and Varna, among others.

Over three days, Vilnius offered its residents and visitors a variety of free activities focused on environmental protection: film screenings, creative workshops, guided tours, hikes, quiz competitions, orienteering races, and children's performances.

"We wanted to involve as many Vilnius residents as possible in the Green Capital programme, which is why we organised a broad range of activities throughout the city," Vilnius Mayor Valdas Benkuskas said. "This year, we will focus even more on sustainable mobility, biodiversity preservation, and climate change mitigation," he added.

The European Green Capital title is awarded annually to cities with over 100,000 inhabitants in recognition of their efforts to improve the environment, economy, and quality of life. The awards recognise and reward local action towards a transition to a greener, more sustainable future. Winning cities include their citizens in this transition, improve the urban environment, combat pollution and prepare for more resilience to climate change. A greener city is a place that attracts investors and tourists.

Mayor Benkuskas described the title as a significant achievement for the Lithuanian capital, offering both a moment of pride and a responsibility to continue advancing sustainability efforts.

Yes, indeed. Winning the European Green Capital title is not just an honour but also a responsibility that demands sustained action from both the government and the public. Responsibility in this context means implementing real, lasting changes in urban planning, energy use, waste management, and transportation policies. So, the question is how well-prepared are Vilnius and its residents to uphold these commitments beyond the celebratory events. Will policy measures be ambitious enough, and will citizens actively participate in sustainable initiatives? The success of such a title depends not only on symbolic gestures but also on long-term dedication to creating truly green cities.

PAIR DISCUSSION NO.5

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Lithuania Ranked Among the World's Leaders in E-Government Development



Lithuania has become one of the world's leaders in e-government development, according to the latest 2024 United Nations (UN) E-Government Development Survey. The country moved up three places and now ranks 21st among 193 UN member states. This puts Lithuania in the group of countries with very advanced digital government services.

The UN survey ranks countries based on three main factors: the quality of online government services, internet and technology infrastructure, and the skills of people using these services. Lithuania improved its position mostly because of better digital services and technology, making public services more efficient and easier to access.

Lithuania has also made great progress in e-participation, moving up 38 places to 29th position globally. The e-participation index shows how well digital tools help people get government information and take part in decision-making. Lithuania's big jump in this area proves its efforts to increase public involvement through technology.

In the next two years, Lithuania plans to continue its digital growth. The government will invest €110 million in digital projects to improve services in 40 state institutions and 35 municipalities. These projects will focus on areas such as child protection, healthcare, education, and data access. New technologies, including artificial intelligence, will help modernise and improve these services.

Lithuania's achievements in digital government are recognised not only globally but also in Europe. The E-Government Benchmark 2024 report places Lithuania 6th among 37 European countries for digital public services, confirming its strong position in this field.

Despite these successes, Lithuania still faces challenges. The country must ensure that digital services remain secure and accessible to all citizens, including older adults, people with limited digital skills, and those living in rural or remote areas. Cybersecurity threats are another concern, requiring continuous efforts to protect sensitive data and public trust. Additionally, rapid technological advancements mean that ongoing investments and policy adaptations are necessary. And finally, to maintain its strong position, Lithuania must balance innovation with inclusivity, ensuring that digital progress benefits the entire population.

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The growing importance of Lithuania's bicycle industry

As early as the 19th century, the Lithuanian city of Šiauliai had developed into an economic hub. Today, factory buildings and warehouses still line the roadside of "Pramonės gatvė". Bicycles and bicycle components have been manufactured here for 75 years, and now the factory "Baltik Vairas" is the largest bicycle producer in the Baltic States.

"We are one of the best-known companies in the region and also one of the most traditional. For several generations, a significant part of the inhabitants of Šiauliai have had some kind of relationship with the bicycle factory," says Iain Mackay, a Dutchman who has been working as a sales manager for the Lithuanian company for seven years.

Originally one of the most important bicycle manufacturers in the Soviet Union, the factory managed to successfully transition after Lithuania regained independence in 1990. Today, it is one of Europe's leading producers of bicycles and e-bikes. "We currently employ 660 people and have the capacity to produce up to 500,000 bicycles and e-bikes annually, along with up to 50,000 cargo bikes," Mackay explains.

Beyond Šiauliai, Lithuania continues to attract major international players in bicycle manufacturing. The Dutch *Pon Group* recently opened a new factory in Kėdainiai. The company's seventh and most advanced worldwide facility incorporates cutting-edge technology and maintains the highest sustainability standards. It specializes in producing electric bicycles, a sector experiencing rapid growth. The investment is expected to create around 600 new jobs, further strengthening the region and Lithuania's role in the industry.

Algimantas Gedvilas, Plant Manager of the *Pon.Bike* factory in Lithuania, emphasised the company's commitment to sustainable growth: "We have assembled a strong team of local managers and specialists who have smoothly integrated into the international organisation. From day one, our factory has operated at the highest industry standards. The hiring process for new employees continues, and we aim to grow sustainably, ensuring high quality throughout."

In recent years, Lithuania has emerged as a strategic location for international investment. With its skilled workforce, favourable business environment, and commitment to innovation, Lithuania is becoming an increasingly attractive destination for global manufacturing and technology companies.

PAIR DISCUSSION NO.7

STUDENT B

You are going to read a news item.

You have to respond to the news and discuss it with a partner.

Your partner has also read the same news item.

You have **5 minutes** to read the text and prepare for the discussion.

The discussion should take up to **5 minutes**.

You are expected to:

- summarise the content / state the issue presented in the text (**Student A**);
- exchange opinions and / or emotions with the partner about the news; evaluate;
- make personal comment; relate the issue to your own experience or knowledge;
- summarise and conclude your discussion (**Student B**).



The growing importance of Lithuania's bicycle industry

As early as the 19th century, the Lithuanian city of Šiauliai had developed into an economic hub. Today, factory buildings and warehouses still line the roadside of "Pramonės gatvė". Bicycles and bicycle components have been manufactured here for 75 years, and now the factory "Baltik Vairas" is the largest bicycle producer in the Baltic States.

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