

Lithuania and the United States

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When Lithuanians think of the United States they usually recall American moral support for Lithuania's independence during the 50 years of Soviet rule along with American ideals of a free and democratic society which helped guide Lithuania when it regained its independence. The United States is understandably and naturally seen as the principal partner to balance Lithuania's big neighbor in the East.

Both of these considerations - the U.S. as important to Lithuanian security and as a source of inspiration for Lithuania's democratic ideals - remain important for both countries. But as Lithuania deepens its democracy and consolidates its independence and security, both countries will have to adjust their views of the other and learn more about each other.

Lithuania in particular will have to balance its special ties to the United States, bolstered the sizeable community of Lithuanian - Americans, with its integration into Europe. These goals are not mutually exclusive, but will require a sense of how the United States and Europe differ in their perspectives toward their societies, histories and futures. Lithuania can benefit from both perspectives, if it understands the strengths and weakness of both principal pillars of "Western" culture.

First and foremost, Lithuania is culturally a European country, and the United States is not, however profoundly it has been influenced by European culture. Today Lithuanians are rediscovering their bonds to Europe, especially Central Europe and forging new ties as they prepare to join the European Union.

The United States and Europe share a larger common civilization, to be sure, and European culture has enriched and continues to enrich the United States. But the U.S. is primarily an immigrant country, and at the end of this century continues to adapt to new waves of immigration mostly from non - European countries. The U.S. is not a nation in European sense of a people sharing and preserving a unique and original language and culture, but a state of citizens bound together by agreement to certain principles and rules embodied in the U.S. Constitution and subsequent laws and court decisions.

Americans tend to live in the future and neglect the past. This makes us forgetful of history, which often makes us unaware of the special circumstances and perspectives of others. But it also makes us adaptable, creative, and ready to reach out to former adversaries, as we now do to Russia in its struggle for reform.

We are a country of innovators. "change" is probably the most overused word in the public vocabulary. For other countries, this means the U.S. often seems to be the source of modern troubles as well as modern miracles. For a small country that has struggled to preserve its distinct culture, Lithuania might fear the sheer force of American predominance in technology, finance, commerce and communications. That fear would be misplaced. The United States is not a country bent on shaping or dominating others, but a vast laboratory of experimentation with new ideas, not all of

which are worthy or successful. Those that are successful - like the Internet - tend to catch on elsewhere sooner or later precisely because they benefit all societies.

Lithuania can benefit from the ideas generated in the United States without fear of losing its unique culture and history. Paradoxically, the more the world seems bent on ever - closer integration, the more its distinct peoples strive to preserve their identities. It is no coincidence that regionalism, even nationalism such as Spain, Italy, Britain and others has grown along with the movement toward European integration. Freed of political domination by a foreign state, Lithuania is joining other European and western countries in the great enterprise of European and global integration, while celebrating and preserving its distinct national culture. It need not fear modern European, or American, influence. As long as it is not ruled by a foreign state, every country absorbs from others what it finds useful, and preserves what is best in its own tradition.

For example, perhaps inspired by the United States, Lithuania took the far - sighted decision after the restoration of independence to be a state of citizens, with equal rights under the law for people of diverse ethnic roots. This not only spared Lithuania a great deal of trouble, but corresponds to the contemporary reality that no open society, particularly a prosperous one, can seal its borders. Like it or not, Europe in the past couple of decades has been experiencing movements of peoples on a large scale, such that most of its major capitals have become international centers made up of people from all over the world. For many Europeans, this new phenomenon has been disturbing, even unwelcome. Americans understand that migration, preferably legal and in reasonable numbers, is both inevitable and beneficial in bringing energy and diversity to our societies. With increasing prosperity, Lithuanians too will find themselves living in a more and more diverse society.

Owing to our history as a country of immigrants seeking their fortune in a vast land with little government, Americans place great value on self - help - forming voluntary associations to advance their causes and interests. Today, the U.S. teems with non - governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to every imaginable purpose, including U.S. - Baltic and Lithuanian - American ties. Lithuania has also built up a considerable number of NGOs since 1990, many of which have been helped by official and private American organizations. Here the United States can continue to play an important role in working with Lithuanians to find counterpart organizations and individuals with a common purpose, from environmental protection to university research.

As Lithuanians get to know more about the United States they may understandably become dismayed that Americans know so much less about Lithuania. Partly that stems from the nature of American society, which is future - oriented and not steeped in national traditions and history. Partly it is the inevitable difference between a small country of 3.7 million and a huge country of 270 million people. Nevertheless, Lithuania shares very important common ideals and interests, above all a belief in freedom, democracy, and human dignity. Lithuania's struggle to restore these ideals to its people was heartening to all Americans. The two countries enjoy close and warm relationship because their peoples understand one another's ideals. Relationships between governments are important, but in the end what makes

Lithuania and the United States partners is the shared vision of their peoples and the conviction that independence and democracy require sacrifice and constant renewal.

With its size, resources and military strength, the United States today plays a commensurately large role in the world. There is hardly a dispute on the globe in which one, or usually both parties, does not look to the United States to help find a solution. From Northern Ireland to the Middle East to Bosnia the United States finds itself asked to balance local interests and work for solutions in the interest of all. This is not a role which the American people find easy. Yet it is one which they often support. America bears a tremendous responsibility for the working of the international system, for stability among the major powers, for preventing the threat of weapons of mass destruction, and for resolving conflicts around the world, where it can. The U.S. is today the only country (except perhaps the Vatican) whose interests are truly global... from Latin America, to Europe, to the Middle East, to Asia. Europe has interests nearly as broad, but has not yet unified into an entity capable of a single, coherent foreign and security policy with the means to pursue its common interests on a global level. That leaves the United States alone for the foreseeable future. I hope and believe the American people will not shy away from this great responsibility, and will use American power wisely. Lithuania, and many other countries that have struggled to find their place in the world, certainly relies on America's steady purpose in the world.