

# THE AMERICAN FACTOR IN RUSSIAN-LITHUANIAN RELATIONS

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The Russian Federation and Lithuania are two independent states with developed full-scale bilateral relations, but it is difficult to neglect the American factor in these relations. On the one hand, such controversial processes as NATO enlargement are strongly affected by Washington's policy. On the other hand, strong cooperation with the U.S. and its growing presence in the region is among key Lithuanian foreign policy priorities. Though Russia has its own interests in the Baltic region, it is also interested in arranging its relations with the U.S. in a non-confrontational way. The aim of this article is to investigate the impact of the American factor on Russian-Lithuanian relations.

In the early 1990s it was more legitimate to speak about the Lithuanian (or Baltic) factor in Russian-American relations rather than the American factor in Baltic-Russian relations. At that time, the legacy of the Cold War was stronger than the experience of cooperation with the newly emerged states. As a former superpower, Russia was used to solving issues directly with Washington, but it was quite inexperienced in building equal relations with its small Baltic counterparts. In the eyes of Russian leadership, the Baltic States were a special case. They were considered as countries where Russia had "natural" economic and political interests, first in the sphere of transit and also in relations with Russian-speaking minorities. The growing American presence in the Baltic States was perceived negatively in Moscow, similarly to how the U.S. was unhappy with having pro-Soviet Cuba in immediate proximity to its borders during the Cold War.

In turn, the policies of the Baltic States contributed to Russian concerns. Russian policies were largely viewed as directed against the Baltic States' interests - a result of deeply embedded historical prejudices. Moreover, the Baltics used to capitalise on their tense relations with Russia by seeking increased political attention and economic assistance in the West - from the U.S. and Europe. At the beginning of the 1990s, one of the largest American newspapers characterised Lithuania as a "roaring mouse"<sup>1</sup>.

Gradually both Russia and Lithuania realised the necessity to establish more pragmatic and constructive relations rather than just ignoring each other. Lithuania was at the forefront of this process among the Baltic States, partially for objective reasons (a marginal share of the Russian-speaking minority in Lithuania and the unavoidability of cooperation on Kaliningrad), and partially due to political strategies (Russia tended to "differentiate" its Baltic neighbors, while integration into the EU and NATO stimulated Lithuania to revise its policies vis-a-vis Russia in a positive manner). This fact was appreciated in the United States and helped to establish Lithuania as the frontrunner in the Baltic race for NATO membership. In 1999, contributors to the report "U.S. Policy Towards Northeastern Europe" wrote: "Which of the three Baltic states should be included in the next round of NATO enlargement will depend, to a large extent, on which one is best able to meet the responsibilities of membership at the time. At present, Lithuania has made the most progress in modernising its military forces. It also has the best relations with Moscow. Thus, its inclusion would provide the least controversy with Russia"<sup>2</sup>.

While the prospect of NATO membership encouraged Lithuania to improve its relations with Russia, NATO enlargement contributed to normalization of bilateral relations. Yet, one must admit that this positive momentum was not utilised equally. By sticking to the "red lines" policy Russia was keen to suspend the solution of certain bilateral issues in hope of preventing Lithuania

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<sup>1</sup> The Washington Post, 27 October 1992

<sup>2</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, U.S. Policy Towards Northeastern Europe, Independent Task Force Report (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, 1999),  
[www.cfr.org/pub3127/zbignew\\_brzezinski/us\\_policy\\_toward\\_northeastern\\_europe.php](http://www.cfr.org/pub3127/zbignew_brzezinski/us_policy_toward_northeastern_europe.php)

from entering NATO. For example, Lithuania was the only Baltic state to sign a border treaty with Moscow in 1997, but this treaty was ratified in the Russian parliament only in 2003. By much the same token it is hard to call the American policy in the Baltic Sea region consistent. Edward Rhodes describes the ambiguity of America in such a way: "Following the collapse of Soviet power (...) the United States found itself caught between a moral commitment to the independence and self-determination of the Baltic nations and a pragmatic concern with developing a *modus vivendi* with Russia"<sup>3</sup>. Notably, Washington's opinion and advice influenced the negotiation process on Russian military transit to the Kaliningrad Region.

Despite numerous suggestions by Moscow to conclude a comprehensive bilateral agreement on this issue, the Government of Lithuania insisted on maintaining the transit regime under the national legislation. It is argued that this policy line was suggested by U.S. administration and Lithuanian policy makers followed their recommendations.<sup>4</sup>

Although the American presence in the Baltic States was not specially directed against Russia, it was still perceived in Moscow as an adversarial act aimed at ousting Russia from the region. Thus, the Northern European Initiative, presented by the Clinton administration to encourage cooperation with Russia's northwestern regions, was considered a tool of accelerating secessionism in the border regions. The conclusion of the Baltic Charter, which established special U.S. relations with the Baltic States and demonstrated U.S. commitment to integrating the three Baltic republics into transatlantic structures, contributed to this view of weakening Russia's role in regional security. However, the implicit nature of U.S. guarantees regarding Baltic accession to NATO, which were laid out in the Charter, bred certain optimism among Russian leadership.

The consequent U.S. policies can be easily connected into a comprehensive chain of an adversarial U.S. strategy towards Russia. The privatisation of the Lithuanian Mazeikiiai Oil Refinery ("Mažeikių nafta") is a remarkable example. This company was sold to the American "Williams" Corporation despite local criticism and Russian demands to sell it to the Russian "LUKoil" company. American officials and diplomats were closely involved in the privatisation process and, it is believed, had contributed to the political process in Lithuania. According to the Russian daily newspaper "Nezavisimaja gazeta", top Lithuanian leadership was highly motivated by geopolitical considerations and pressure from Washington.<sup>5</sup> A few years later the U.S. State Department indirectly recognised this fact in its welcome statement regarding the reselling of "Mažeikių nafta" by "Williams" to the Russian oil company "YUKOS".

The victory of American citizen Valdas Adamkus in the 1998 Lithuanian presidential runoff was another signal of Russia losing its influence in the former Soviet republic. Moscow showed scarce enthusiasm about this victory. On the contrary, it was accepted as additional evidence of the widening American influence in Lithuania. "Zero-sum" thinking clearly dominated Russian politics of that time, but, as practice showed, President Adamkus' role in Russian-Lithuanian relations was hardly negative. He was the only president of the Baltic States to make an official visit to Moscow in 2001, and in relations with Russia he proved himself as a moderate, consensus-seeking politician.

At the beginning of the George W. Bush Presidency, U.S. focus on the Baltic Sea region diminished. On the one hand, the American administration was preoccupied with military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, the Baltic region was undergoing stable and peaceful development, which left little reason to worry about it. But the division of Europe

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Rhodes, "Rethinking the Nature of Security: The U.S. Northern Dimension", COPRI Working Papers, 7 (2002) (Internet version: [www.copri.dk](http://www.copri.dk))

<sup>4</sup> Laurinavičius Č., Lopata R., Sirutavičius V., „Rusijos Federacijos karinis tranzitas per Lietuvos Respublikos teritoriją“, Politilogija, 4 – 2002 (Internet version: [www.vul.lt](http://www.vul.lt))

<sup>5</sup> Рик Пайп, «Тэлботт наследил в Литве. Американские политические и деловые круги способствовали отставке правительства», Независимая газета, 29 октября 1999

over the U.S. military operation in Iraq revealed the unique pro-American dedication of the Baltic Sea nations; hence the U.S. administration had to follow-up.

The new initiative Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (also known as e-PINE), which was presented to the public in October 2003, reflects a new meaning of the Baltic States for the U.S.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, it is impossible to overlook the fact that e-PINE and the EU “Wider Europe – New Neighborhood” Initiative were presented almost simultaneously. Back in 1997, the U.S. Northern European Initiative and the EU Northern Dimension were presented with the same pattern. Therefore, e-PINE can be perceived not only as a foreign policy line towards the Baltic Sea region but also as an instrument for promoting American interests in the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Russian leadership has not yet expressed their official position on e-PINE; however, it is conceivable to predict that it will be very cautious. Some reasons can be given to support this argument.

Firstly, despite the repeated claims about an “indestructible” partnership between Russia and the West, and especially between Russia and the U.S. on the one hand and Russia and Europe on the other, discrepancy and lack of understanding between these strategic partners is only widening. The war on terrorism (especially in Afghanistan) has produced a certain conjunction of interests between Russia and Western democracies, but common values and common routines of institutional cooperation have not been developed.

Secondly, the question of differences in values between Russia and the West is still open. Russia and the West have different approaches towards building democracy, human rights and market economy. European and American governments still criticise Russian policy in Chechnya, which brings a painful reaction in Moscow. Russia is also concerned about the consolidation of pro-Western regimes in post-Soviet territory, first of all in CIS countries and partly in the Baltic States. Russia’s policy failures in Moldova, Georgia and, increasingly, Ukraine have strengthened these concerns.

Dmitry Trenin has related Russian policies in the post-Soviet territory with Russian interest in gradually restoring its former international status and influence: “There is every reason to believe”, he argues, “that during his second term in the Kremlin President Vladimir Putin will start [a new strategy of] gradual restoration of Russia’s international role and influence. The main goals of this strategy in a foreseeable prospect are the reconstruction of post-Soviet territory and the creation of an international “power center” led by Russia. This new Moscow strategy can be labeled a ‘CIS Project’”<sup>7</sup>. Trenin also believes that the Baltic States will be, to a lesser extent, included into this newly reemerging Russian-led territory.

During Putin’s first term, Russia’s role in the Baltic States was rather marginal. Interestingly, this period of “marginalization” coincided with the weakening involvement of the U.S. in the region. But now Russia’s interest in the Baltic States is recovering. “The Baltic dimension” of Russian foreign policy is getting more pragmatic and constructive, seeking to balance Russia’s traditional interests with the new opportunities opened up by Baltic accession to the European Union and NATO. This does not mean that the issue of compatriots has been excluded from the agenda of Russian foreign policy. In other respects the policy is getting more active and effective, supplemented with the necessary instruments, demonstrating that the problem of Russian-speaking minorities is not a pure policy instrument in relations with the Baltic States.

“Exporting success” is one of the declared characteristics of e-PINE, which stipulates that the economic and political experience and expertise of the Baltic States could be utilised in assisting the Western CIS countries (Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus) and the South Caucasus nations (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan). It is important to note, however, that Baltic involvement in

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<sup>6</sup> e-PINE Mission Statement stipulates that “These [Baltic Sea] states are important U.S. allies and friends”. See: U.S. State Department Homepage, [www.state.gov/p/eur/rt/epine/c10621.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rt/epine/c10621.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Дмитрий Тренин, «Realpolitik Москвы. Россия замыкается в постсоветском пространстве», Независимая газета – Дипкурьер, 9 февраля 2004.

the CIS area was encouraged long before formal presentation of the e-PINE initiative<sup>8</sup>. This issue was also briefly discussed by Per Carlsen in the previous issue of “Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review” (footnote). Moscow’s enthusiasm about the Baltic role in promoting Western values and transition experience in the CIS is rather limited, largely due to Moscow’s fears that such actions could damage the political and economic integration of the CIS nations and lead to their gradual integration with NATO. Russia is equally critical about the “Eastern dimension” of EU foreign policy, the so-called Wider Europe – New Neighborhood Initiative. To quote Russian Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Vladimir Chizov: “We assume that the new doctrine of the EU will contradict neither our bilateral agreements with the EU nor the integration trends in the CIS area.”<sup>9</sup>

The American line on widening U.S. presence in the CIS region has another negative impact on Russian-Lithuanian relations. Russia insists that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia should accede to the Adopted CFE Treaty as soon as possible in order to create a better security environment in the region after NATO enlargement. But rather than being dealt with at the bilateral level, this issue has become part of the broader U.S.-Russia agenda. The U.S. has blocked ratification of this document by relating it to the fulfillment of Russia’s international commitments made at the Istanbul OSCE Summit in 1999 to withdraw its troops from Georgia and Transdniestria (Moldova).

Russia is also concerned about NATO plans to relocate part of its European troops to Central and Eastern Europe. Though U.S. and NATO officials declare that contemporary threats originate on the southern flanks of Europe, Russia still cannot be sure that NATO military bases will not appear in the Baltic States. High-ranking Lithuanian officials, including Defense Minister Linas Linkevicius, have declared on various occasions Lithuania’s interest in having NATO military presence on Lithuanian territory. Such developments would cause extremely negative reaction from Moscow and would deteriorate the cooperative environment between Russia and Lithuania.

Last but not least, Russia’s place in the framework of e-PINE deserves special attention. According to the Mission Statement, e-PINE covers five Nordic and three Baltic States. Russia’s role is mentioned from a critical point of view: “Northwest Russia, including Kaliningrad, has not progressed as fast as the rest of the region”<sup>10</sup>. At the same time e-PINE underlines the necessity to resolve transborder problems; thus, implementation of the initiative will unavoidably include northwestern regions of Russia.

Fifteen years after the Soviet collapse Russia remains sensitive to foreign attempts to establish direct links with its regions, bypassing the central authority. So far the U.S. has pursued low profile policies in Russia’s regions, avoiding greater visibility and activism. Now the U.S. will be able use the Baltic States as an indirect channel of developing cooperation with Russian regions. For example, Lithuania can become a promoter of American interests in Kaliningrad.

All this will lead to the consolidation of Russia in the e-PINE framework as a “second-class” participant, meaning that Russia will be excluded from the formulation of e-PINE agenda. In terms of constructivism, e-PINE will contribute to the expansion of Western identity in Russia’s northwestern regions rather than to the building of shared Russian-Western identity. From this perspective, e-PINE will not be welcome in Russia.

It is necessary to stress that the aforementioned points of Russian dissatisfaction are hypothetical. The details of the e-PINE initiative still have to be developed. In the long-term perspective, the implementation of e-PINE should not deteriorate Russian-Lithuanian cooperation. Three circumstances contributing to this view must be outlined. Firstly, despite ongoing local competition, both Russia and the U.S. are interested in preserving partnership or, at least, constructive cooperation. Washington’s influence in the Baltic region is a real thing which Russia

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. e.g.: Charles Ries, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, “The Baltic Sea Region From a U.S. Perspective”, Remarks at Baltic Development Forum Summit, Copenhagen, Denmark, 15 October 2002, U.S. State Department Homepage, [www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2002/14539.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2002/14539.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Выступление заместителя Министра иностранных дел России В.А.Чижова на международной конференции «Широкая Европа: усиление трансграничного сотрудничества в Центральной и Восточной Европе», Киев, 10 ноября 2003 года, Russian MFA Homepage, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru)

<sup>10</sup> e-PINE Mission Statement

must, and most likely will, take into account. Besides, it would be wrong to continue to stick to the view that U.S. policy in the region is directed against Russia.

Secondly, Russia is not interested in the destabilization of the situation in Lithuania, because it would have negative consequences for transit to the Kaliningrad Region, as well as Russian business interests in Lithuania.

Finally, Lithuania has explicitly demonstrated its commitment to play the role of a “bridge” between Russia and the West, instead of being a permanent opposition to Russia on the international arena. Lithuanian initiatives to foster cooperation with Russia’s northwestern regions will certainly help to counterbalance the possible negative consequences of “exporting success” to CIS countries. These initiatives will hopefully be promoted despite the political processes in Lithuania itself.

The experience of Russian-Lithuanian cooperation shows that the American factor is not an obstacle for the development of a mutually beneficial relationship. During the decade, Russia and the U.S. have not engaged in a *strategic rivalry* over the Baltic States, although *local competition* has taken place in certain fields. At the same time, Russian-Lithuanian relations are gradually gaining a systemic character, which is less dependent on the influence of external factors.