

LITHUANIAN FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES AND BACKGROUND 1992-1996

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My involvement in foreign policy occurred in the second stage of its development. In the first stage our country had to resort to semi-official channels of diplomacy. I have in mind the period after the declaration of independence on 11 March 1990, before the international recognition of Lithuania in the autumn of 1991. At that time we were not in the position of establishing diplomatic representations or exercising full diplomatic functions.

During my term of office as Foreign Minister I had to turn to totally different issues. We had to develop a conception of Lithuanian foreign policy, to maintain pragmatic relations with our key partners, avoiding dangerous tensions and conflicts, to join international organisations, continue the development of the diplomatic network, etc.

Withdrawal of Russian troops

The withdrawal of the Russian army was the top priority during my term of office. It was basically the essential prerequisite for the consolidation of our independence. A country is sovereign when it exercises full control over its territory. The presence of the Soviet army in Lithuania meant that the issue of sovereignty had not yet been fully resolved. Therefore, this issue dominated the agendas of all the political forces in Lithuania in 1993.

The process was evolving under complex pressure, which was both external and internal. On one hand, influential forces in Russia were making their best endeavours to prevent taking a final decision regarding the withdrawal of the former Soviet army. It should be admitted that there were moderate politicians in Russia who believed that the withdrawal was feasible, but under an appropriate legal framework.

This view was upheld by then Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Andrej Kozyrev whom I had to contact frequently in person and by phone. Our consultations made it clear that, despite his public statements demonstrating “tough line”, he supported a softer line, especially with regard to Lithuania. The same would apply to then Deputy Foreign Minister and the incumbent Foreign Minister of Russia Sergej Lavrov. I saw him as an open-minded cultured diplomat.

But the fact was that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Russia was also home to hard-line supporters, the most arduous of whom, in my opinion, was V. Churkin, who did everything within his power to stop the informal phone consultations with Kozyrev on the withdrawal issue.

Still, in spite of the pressure coming from the adverse powers, the overall political balance in Russia in principle was positive for Lithuania – as, fortunately, the key players supported the soft-line policy.

The Lithuanian political climate was heavily charged at that time. The government did not enjoy overall public support. It was also encouraged by the opposition. Moreover, the opposition achieved their representation in the delegation for negotiations with Russia. As a result, the negotiations were driven to the point where the Russian occupation claim prevailed over the withdrawal issue, following the logic of internal political wrangling rather than national interests.

The Russian side in the negotiations on the withdrawal issue had nearly agreed with the indemnification in relation to the damage inflicted on our army in 1940 as well as the environmental damage incurred by the country due to the deployment of the Soviet troops. However, the overall occupation-related claim was too much for Russia, besides, public opinion would have hardly accepted it.

Often as we raised the occupation claim issue – and it was right in terms of history, integrity and negotiation tactics – we could not afford to put at risk the agreement made back in autumn of 1992 regarding the set withdrawal date, which was 31 August 1993. Thus the issue of the withdrawal of the Soviet army was the top priority on the negotiations agenda.

It was finally resolved after consultations between the Lithuanian and Russian presidents, Algirdas Brazauskas and Boris Yeltsin, when it seemed that the whole negotiation process had already been derailed. It was an

enormous political and diplomatic achievement for our country: we were the first in the post-communist area to exercise full and unconditional control over our own territory.

Issue of Kaliningrad transit

There was still Kaliningrad Region – another “headache” or geopolitical legacy from the Soviet past to be dealt with. Having sorted out the withdrawal issue, the issue of transit, especially military transit, started dominating the relations between the two countries. Russia tended to incorporate it into all other issues, primarily trade and state border demarcation. Russian politicians and negotiators insisted on Lithuania introducing facilitated transit over its territory as a trade-off for a favourable trade status with Russia and other important matters.

Lithuania stood strong and did not assume commitments which might have curtailed its sovereign rights in the future. The extritorial corridor through Lithuania would have been a substantive violation of sovereignty rights.

Russia resorted to various tactics: it announced in the Polish press about the potential transit corridor crossing Polish territory, thus attempting to raise debate among Lithuanian authorities, and pressing to consider the issue in the context of the overall package of agreements between Russia and Lithuania.

Lithuania withstood all the trials. The negotiations halting, in the autumn of 1994, Lithuania claimed that it would regulate transit to and from Kaliningrad unilaterally as of 1 January 1995.

Russia had but to accept the statement. Even though national sovereignty is considered inviolable in legal and political terms without any reservations, our young negotiators had to work hard to avoid the potential infringement on Lithuanian sovereignty. It was a victory, again achieved under difficult international and domestic conditions. Our commercial ties with the East played a vital role in the economy and it was hindered by the lack of a favourable trade status with Russia. Similarly to the withdrawal issue, it was subject to the pressures of enormous internal political tensions.

Ten years have passed. The procedure established at that time has not changed as yet, though there have been different political forces in the Government. The relevance of the established procedure has proved worthy.

State border demarcation

Another challenge for Lithuanian diplomacy in 1992-1996 was state border demarcation. Though our common borders were more numerous in comparison to the other Baltic countries, we succeeded in solving this problem quickly. A land border agreement with Latvia was made in no time. Border issue tackling with Belarus was relatively smooth. It should be stated that President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko largely contributed to this. In the autumn of 1994 it was agreed that the president of Belarus would pay a visit to Lithuania the following March. Both states agreed that the agreement on common border demarcation had to be ready for signing by that time. Both parties honoured the schedule.

The Polish border was quite an issue for some time. Though both countries politically recognised the border *de facto*, the negotiators on both sides could not find a formula pleasing Poland and reflecting the legal situation after 1945. I remember how Polish Foreign Minister D. Rosati and I sorted the problem out in no time at all during one of our meetings. The border issue with Russia was more complicated.

The maritime boundary with Latvia was a hard nut for the negotiators to crack. It was special in the sense that we had to hold negotiations with a friendly neighbour, supposedly facilitating the process. Nevertheless, the negotiations were tough, primarily, due to the fact that Latvia covertly had signed an agreement regarding oil exploration in the Baltic Sea shelf. Such conduct, when Lithuania was advised after the fact, could be justified neither morally nor legally. It had a negative impact on the bilateral relations. Some Lithuanian politicians believed that friendly relations with Latvia were more important than a few square kilometres in the Baltic Sea. My view has always been different on this issue. I have always believed that a good relationship must be based on mutual trust, fairness and mutual benefit

Foreign economic policy

Foreign policy economisation was another issue to be handled. As an economist in foreign policy, I considered it my duty to achieve economic dimension strengthening. A small country usually resorts to export and import as major sources for the formation of its national product. We had to radically redirect the foreign trade balance, as during Soviet times actual foreign trade, including other countries from the Soviet block, but outside the USSR, constituted but a few per cent, to compare to over 90% with the other Soviet republics. The breakthrough in relation to export destination points happened in a few years time. We targeted global, primarily Western European markets.

As much as I remember, during my term in office, 283 agreements were concluded. The majority of them were economic. The most important, I would say, was the Free Trade Agreement with the EU signed in July 1994. This type of agreement was concluded with Central Europe, EFTA countries, Ukraine, etc.

There was a funny side to it as well. I remember a serious business organisation criticising us, diplomats, in spring 1994, for the delay in signing the free trade agreement with the Council of Europe.

The conclusion of the above-mentioned agreements and the introduction of a favourable trade regime with Russia provided our business with better tools for acting abroad and opened up better opportunities for economic growth.

Integration into the West

The paradigm of the integration into Western organisations underwent gradual development. There was time when the topic of integration into Western organisations, especially NATO, was avoided equally by the left as well as the right wing. This was preconditioned by the general political background. The withdrawal of the Russian troops from Lithuania in autumn 1993 encouraged the discussions on this issue.

The background for discussions was not as easy as it might seem to current political analysts. First and foremost, in addressing such an issue it is important not to confuse the goal and the means. The goal of our integration into the

Western structures was national security and public welfare. Integration is but a means to achieve the goal.

On the other hand, it was not only us that had to face the issue of integration. Western political consciousness also had difficulties in coping with stereotypes and inert thinking. For instance, in spring 1993, when visiting the headquarters of an important international organisation and seeing the top officials, I was shocked to notice on the office wall an outdated map detailing the USSR, and certainly with no mention of independent Lithuania. It had been over three years since the declaration of our independence and two years since international recognition. I thought to myself: if a large well-funded organisation could not change the map in this time, how much longer could the change in thinking take?

In Lithuania, the majority of politicians took their decision regarding integration into the Western security structures right after the Russian Duma elections in December 1993, when Vladimir Zhirinovskij, having repeatedly insisted that the Vilnius and Klaipeda regions were not part of Lithuania, got a quarter of the votes. Added to the influence of the Russian communist block, which persistently stuck to the idea of the Soviet Union, the picture of future co-operation with this country looked predictable. Therefore, considering the context, the most logical solution for Lithuania was integration into the democratic Western structures.

However, in taking this decision it had to be first realised that it entailed both hard and soft security welfare guarantees. NATO addresses hard guarantee issues, while the EU and the good neighbour relations were to be understood as a precondition for soft, more subtle, and less visible and perceived security. The co-ordination of these two directions could ensure sustainable, all-inclusive and long-term security.

Lithuanian image

Now, I would like to touch upon the issue of country image formation. Initially it was not a top priority. On one hand, there were seemingly more important issues at stake; on the other hand, our country had enough publicity throughout global media. Nevertheless, when the critical situation was resolved, Lithuania's name was gradually phasing out of the public media,

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at the same time, the approach to the country was becoming more critical. At that time it was becoming popular to compare countries in the same region based on their political and economic achievements. The Baltic countries were no exception either.

Estonia held a clearly competitive position with regard to its neighbours. Lithuania and Latvia, meanwhile, were dubious as to which position to assume – competitive or friendly – and how to react to Estonian challenges.

It was not only and not so much the statements of Estonian leaders that they were the best in the Baltic region, as their arrogant declarations with regard to the other two countries in the region. By doing so, they breached the principles of fair competition and political marketing: you can say that your washing powder is the best in the world, but you are not allowed to name the rivals. We tried to improve the situation in every way possible. This experience made us give more thought to the idea of closer co-operation with Poland.

In conclusion, I would like to express my delight at the achievements and growing resources of our diplomacy. It is true that the young Lithuanian diplomacy has done a lot. However, it is worth noting that free, open and self-critical discussion about national interest implementation opportunities in foreign policy might be the best way, preventing us from possible diplomatic dead ends.