

Lithuanian Public View on National Security in a Changing Environment

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Introduction

During his recent visit in Vilnius where he presented the Lithuanian version of his book *People, States and Fear*, the well-known security theorist Barry Buzan, in answering the question of what kind of threats prevail today in Europe, said that while so-called “soft” security issues are predominant in the region of the European Union today, the periphery is more likely to be exhausted by regional conflicts, military threats, outbursts of nationalism and ethnic hostility. Although Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have just recently appeared on the blueprints of security analysts their security situation, as a rule, is described widely as an extremely complex matter. It has been suggested that the security risks facing these countries differ greatly from those facing the states of the European Union, which are, first and foremost, concerned about their stable and secure development.

The security analysis of countries in transition is not an easy task, especially if it has to do with public opinion. A general characteristic of all countries in transition is that, due to the rapidly changing environment they suddenly find themselves in, that is, the increasingly complex world around them, the lack of debate about security and the limited number of local security experts, the public at large finds it difficult to articulate clearly its security needs as well as its foreign and security policy goals.

The goal of this study is not to discuss the level of the Lithuanian public’s awareness of security matters, nor to suggest that the public clearly understands the impact of political changes in Lithuania, and elsewhere in Europe for the country’s security situation. In fact, one of the main problems appears to be that there is a relatively large proportion of people who have no opinion on security issues at all. The main task here is to emphasize that Lithuanian society does not perceive the state’s security situation as an “extremely complex” matter and to suggest that Lithuanian people, like their fellow inhabitants of this core of Europe, are preoccupied primarily with ensuring a quiet life today and a coherent and peaceful future. This is also an attempt to highlight the fact that foreign policy and national security interests are well formulated publicly, and that there has developed a rather coherent foreign policy identity.

These conclusions can be drawn from the findings of a major public opinion survey on security issues, conducted in Lithuania in March 1998 on behalf of NATO’s Office of Information and the Press and the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry. The survey, conducted in Lithuania in such an exhaustive manner for the first time, has provided experts and politicians with a unique possibility to get a deeper insight into the public’s attitudes on current security issues and the security choices that the public feels are possible in order to put an end to uncertainties concerning the country’s security. The main purpose of this study was to identify the level of public awareness on a number of national security issues, the level of support for Lithuania’s membership in the EU and NATO, to measure attitudes towards regional arrangements and international security systems, and to examine views on bilateral relationships, as well as to identify the public’s main sources of information on these issues.

The Concept of Security and Potential Threats

There is no data available on the public's understanding of security issues before the great political changes of the late 1980s and the transition period which followed. The issue of Lithuanian security was an internal affair of the Soviet political, military and ideological elite. One could perceive, moreover, that as a single ideological and military doctrine dominated daily life at that time, the understanding of what constituted security was based purely on the level of state power.

With the changes in the security landscape of the continent, and with new actors emerging as players in security matters, the understanding of the concept of security has presented an ever more perplexing picture. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the Lithuanian understanding of security is increasingly departing from the traditional image of power relationships. On the one hand, the nature of the relationship between the state and the people has changed remarkably. The concept of security is increasingly linked with the concept of a free market economy, the development of a civil society, parliamentary democracy, obedience to the rule law, and the emphasis on individual liberty. On the other hand, diminished security threats in the Baltic sea region and Europe as a whole have paved the way for an increasing concern with issues of the environment, the economy and the nature of social relationships.

Society is in the process of understanding its new environment and distinguishing between immediate internal and long-term external security threats. There is a prevailing sense of a security situation in which the certain domestic developments and regional instability are seen as the biggest and most immediate threats. When asked what are the most dangerous threats to Lithuania, 45 percent of the respondents pointed to internal dangers. Residents of Lithuania were given a list of factors that might influence security and stability in their country. *Crime and corruption* was perceived by the majority of the population as the greatest threat to the country's stability: it was mentioned as a danger by 86 percent of respondents. The second most oft-mentioned problem and threatening phenomenon was the *ineffective control of borders* (69 percent). Two other threats were: the nuclear power station in Ignalina (64 percent) and instability in Russia (64 percent). Other concerns about Lithuania's stability and security mentioned by more than 50 percent of the population: the weakness of the Lithuanian army (52 percent), Russian military transit (52 percent) and the privatization of strategic enterprises in Lithuania (51 percent). Conflicts between Lithuanians and national minorities as well as ex-officers of the Russian armed forces living in Lithuania were not perceived as threatening to Lithuania's security and stability.

When asked to mention the most important threat to Lithuania's security and stability from all those listed in the survey, the most frequently mentioned dangers were crime, corruption and instability in Russia.

Most important threats to Lithuania	%
Crime and corruption	30.3
Instability in Russia	21.7
Nuclear power station in Ignalina	10.2
Absence of Lithuania's membership in a defense alliance	6.3
Privatization of strategic enterprises in Lithuania	5.9
Ineffective control of the borders	4.8
Weakness of the Lithuanian army	3.4
Conflicts between Lithuanians and national minorities	2.8
Russian military transit through Lithuania	1.9

Environmental pollution	1.3
Illegal immigration	0.8
Non-democratic political regime in Belarus	0.7
Former Russian officers living in Lithuania	0.4

Membership in NATO as a Means to Put an End to Uncertainty

Taken together, the integrated problems of social and political transformation as well as the historical legacy of fifty years of foreign occupation and the resulting absence of a coherent security structure in the region, both present a degree of uncertainty about the country's security situation. According to the opinion survey, Lithuanian citizens think that their security is not sufficiently protected. Such an opinion was expressed by 69 percent of Lithuania's inhabitants. For Lithuania, and probably for the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the fragility of domestic political and economic reforms and the regional security situation make integration with the West the only alternative to domestic and regional instability.

In Lithuania, more people believe that NATO membership is the best way (26 percent) to guarantee security and stability. The next option favored: NATO and EU membership together (23 percent) or neutrality (23 percent). Only 3 percent of Lithuania's population believe that EU membership without NATO can guarantee security and stability for Lithuania. Ethnicity is a factor differentiating the preferences on this issue: ethnic Lithuanians choose NATO membership first (28 percent), followed by neutrality (23 percent) and joint NATO+EU membership (23 percent), while non-Lithuanians prefer NATO+EU membership (26 percent) or neutrality (24 percent) versus NATO membership (11 percent).

Which of these would best guarantee Lithuanian security and stability?	%
NATO membership	26
EU membership	3
NATO+EU membership together	23
Neutrality	23
Other	1
DK/NA	24

The official Lithuanian goal of seeking increased integration and cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic security institutions is well reflected in the public's perception. The Lithuanian population is largely supportive of the country's efforts to join NATO: 55 percent of Lithuanians approve of the government's policy towards NATO and only 26 percent of the population disapproves of such efforts. In Lithuania, ethnicity is not the major differentiating factor in regard with the efforts to join NATO: among ethnic Lithuanians 57 percent support such efforts, 26 percent are against and 17 percent have no opinion. Among non-Lithuanian population, supporters are 45 percent, opponents are 31 percent and 23 percent have no opinion.

The attitudes towards Lithuanian efforts to join NATO are strongly related to the overall opinion on the necessity for Lithuania to join the Alliance and the public's view

of Lithuanian security. Lithuanian residents who believe that, at the moment, Lithuania's security is well assured, are less supportive of the efforts to join NATO (35 percent support such efforts and 30 percent do not) than those who consider Lithuanian security to be insufficiently protected (42 percent of such respondents support efforts to join NATO while 15 percent are against). At the same time, those who would vote in a referendum for Lithuania's joining NATO also usually support the country's efforts in this direction (60 percent support them and 3 percent do not) while those who would vote against the membership are split: 23 percent of them approve the efforts and 22 percent do not.

A number of motives underpin the population's positive view of NATO: first, the alliance is viewed as a functioning organization which holds the greatest promise for European security. In Lithuania the majority of respondents evaluated NATO as the organization which evoked the most confidence.

Level of confidence of the Lithuanian population in various international institutions and organizations	<i>Confident</i>	<i>Not confident</i>	<i>No opinion</i>
NATO	53	14	33
United Nations Organization (UNO)	49	9	42
European Union (EU)	48	16	36
Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)	34	11	55
Council of Europe (CE)	34	12	54
Baltic Council	33	10	57
Western European Union (WEU)	25	13	62
Nordic Council	22	13	65
Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	14	47	39

Second, almost a third of the respondents, especially the young and those with higher education, are the ones with strong links to the West; for them, NATO constitutes the embodiment of liberal democratic values. Membership is thus seen not only as furthering the external interests of the country's security but as a vital factor in achieving and maintaining domestic stability and democracy. Nearly 33 percent of respondents agree that NATO membership would strengthen democracy in Lithuania. Lithuanians are quite optimistic about the overall positive influence of NATO membership on the country. In addition to exerting a positive influence on the nation's security situation, much good is also expected for Lithuania's economic development and its attractiveness to foreign investors (37 percent and 53 percent respectively); there is also the belief in benefits relating to the development of science and technology (43 percent), as well as increasing confidence in the Lithuanian government (31 percent).

Third, membership in NATO is identified as the only viable course by which Lithuania can balance the might of Russia. If democratic and economic reforms fail and if Western structures are not opened up, and if the security situation in the region deteriorates, it is feared that Russia may be tempted to assume its former role. As many as 58 percent of respondents agree that, considering the proximity of Russia, it would be better for Lithuania to join NATO than to be outside the Western alliance.

Finally, the survey shows that membership is sought because people have insufficient confidence in their own or, for that matter, the government's ability to solve their domestic and external problems. In sum, popular perceptions are that, without

Western engagement, the chances of creating a stable and secure environment in the region are slim.

At the same time, it is understood that membership in NATO is not an easily achieved goal and that much effort will be required in order to achieve it. For one thing, skepticism from the NATO side will have to be overcome. Between 20 percent and 22 percent of the Lithuanian population think that Russian influence and the unwillingness of NATO states to accept new members were the main reasons for not inviting the Baltic countries to join NATO during the first phase of expansion. On the other hand, 37 percent think that the main reason for not inviting Lithuania was the country's lack of readiness for NATO membership. When asked to specify what should be done about the problem of preparation, Lithuanians stress, first of all, the protection of borders and the country's international image. Only 5 percent of the people think that Lithuania is ready to join NATO now. About 25 percent think that it will be ready in two to three years.

What should be done first in order for our country to be prepared to join NATO? <i>(mean scores, 1 - the most important, 8 - the least important)</i>	Lithuania
Improve the protection of our borders	3,71
Improve our country's international image	3,86
Solve disagreements with neighboring countries on border issues	3,97
Adjust our army's standards to NATO standards	4,10
Equip our army with modern military equipment	4,74
Better inform the public about membership in NATO	4,83
Allocate a larger share of the national budget for the armed forces	5,01
Guarantee respect for the rights of ethnic minorities	5,78

Above all, Lithuania's efforts to join international security structures are determined by its security requirements. However, in the increasingly interdependent world, Lithuania's security is closely linked to global developments. Local disagreements and conflicts can have direct and indirect effects reaching far beyond the geographical region in question. Lithuanian defense leaders have repeatedly stated that their country would like to be not only a security consumer, but also a security producer within the European context. So far this idea has been accepted by politicians but without real substantive backing from the public. The survey has proved, however, that as much as 49 percent of the Lithuanian population approves of the participation of Lithuanian troops in joint peacekeeping operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Security and the Nation's Armed Forces

There is broad agreement concerning the security debate within Lithuanian society, a consensus that extends to the following propositions: (a) Lithuania cannot identify concrete enemies in the neighborhood; consequently, military preparations cannot be directed against any given country; (b) Lithuanian defense forces are not yet ready to defend the country in case of aggression.; (c) Lithuania should initiate military resistance if it is attacked by another country.

More than 95 percent of Lithuanians think that their country is not a threat to anyone. At the same time, the majority also think that none of the neighboring or other countries threaten Lithuania in a military sense. In most cases the political risks in

Lithuania's neighborhood have not developed into military threats. As in the case of the Russian crisis, threats may take the form of domestic instability and economic recession, carrying with them a danger of the international escalation of instability. National defense forces are viewed, first and foremost, as a deterrence to any possible threat in the future, and as a necessity for NATO membership.

However, only 17 percent of the Lithuanian population believes in the nation's army's ability to defend the country in case of aggression, while 72 percent of respondents do not believe in the ability of the armed forces. Such a negative stance has a strong influence on the attitude regarding the necessity of stronger defense systems. However, the majority of Lithuanians do not think that the Western countries would provide the necessary military assistance in the case of an attack on Lithuania. Despite this pessimistic view, the majority of the population would still support the idea of military resistance to aggression. But one out of three Lithuanians think that Lithuania should not resist militarily if another country attacks.

Another fundamental question relating to the national defense concerns the problem of the most appropriate size of the country's defense forces. In Lithuania, the most prevalent opinion is that the size of the army is right - 43 percent of Lithuanians think that the size of the defense forces should remain what it is now, but 21 percent of respondents would support an increase in the armed forces. Some 15 percent think that the number of troops is already too large and the army should be reduced. The number of the Lithuanian armed forces personnel permanently deployed in Lithuania is now approximately 10,000. In order to enhance their defense capabilities, Lithuanians also approve of the development of the voluntary armed organization known as SKAT. In the public's view, a combination of the regular army, civilian commitment to military resistance and the subsequent involvement of the populace in that resistance, as well as a well-trained voluntary force, are all factors which could make Lithuania unattractive to a potential aggression.

Concluding Remarks

There can be no doubt that a clearly formulated security concept has utmost importance for the future development of Lithuania. The coherent public perception of the security situation in Lithuania and agreement regarding the methods of ensuring security, as well as the domestic political situation, are factors which make it relatively easy to achieve a consensus in identifying national security interests that can be clearly communicated. Consequently, it helps Lithuania to send a clear signal about the country's security and foreign-policy interests. This is particularly the case regarding membership in NATO. None of the other international security organizations, especially the subregional or regional organizations, are seen by residents as a possible substitutes for real security. In Lithuania, these structures are clearly seen as secondary to achieving membership in both NATO and the EU. Since independence this aim has been the single most consistent foreign policy goal expressed by the population. In turn this goal has been met by equivocation on the part of these organizations. Nevertheless, the commitment of the Lithuanian people to future membership has been unwavering: there is no lack of will in the society to understand and support the basic goal of Euro-Atlantic integration.

One should not neglect, however, the substantial portion of society which finds the discussion of national security issues an insignificant matter. Almost a third of the citizens finds it difficult to articulate an opinion on national security issues. Therefore

one of the main goals of the government should be to bring debate over national security closer to the citizens by providing this debate with greater clarity and opening it up to the public at large.