

## ARTICLES

### *Lithuania and its Belarusian policy*

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#### **Introduction**

The Soviet empire, created in December 1922, existed for 69 years. It disintegrated in 1991, also in December, when the then leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk, and Stanislav Shushkevich, met in Belovezhskaya pushcha, Belarus, and decided to create in place of the USSR the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Although the cooperation between the democratic movements in Lithuania and Belarus (the Restructuring Movement "Sąjūdis" and the People's Front, respectively) had already been started in the "perestroika" period of Mikhail Gorbachev, real interstate relations began to develop only after the unsuccessful putsch in Moscow in August, 1991 and the two countries recognized each other's independence in December of the same year. Diplomatic relations between Lithuania and Belarus were started in December 1992.

In the period between the unsuccessful Moscow putsch and the disintegration of the USSR, at the end of 1991 the so-called "sovereignty parade" of former republics of the Soviet Union took place (The Baltic states had already declared the restoration of their statehood in 1990). At that time it was difficult to predict what path the other (non-Baltic) former Soviet republics would take to establish their sovereignty. It is even now not easy to answer this question. This is primarily tied with the uncertainty about the future development of the CIS. Whether this commonwealth will be used as a mechanism for civilized divorce (the interpretation of most Ukrainian politicians) or as a new manner for integrating half sovereign states (the understanding of the Belarus political elite) will depend to a great extent not only on the former Soviet republics that declared their sovereignty but also on the aims and priorities of the internal and foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

Belarus, one of the four republics which formed the basis for the Soviet Union in 1922, clearly now supports the restoration of strong federal ties with Russia and the creation of a new Slavic state entity, which Ukraine should also join.<sup>1</sup> This current attitude of the leaders of Belarus (it is now supported by the majority of the inhabitants of Belarus) can in great part be explained by the complicated economic situation in the state. Belarus, as also many of the other former republics of the Soviet Union after its disintegration, was confronted with economic problems which it was unable, and most likely, did not want to resolve by using market economy principles to implement economic reforms. All this allowed a deputy of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet, a little known former collective farm chairman, Aleksander Lukashenko, cleverly using populist promises, to win the elections for president and begin to implement policies of restricting democracy and promoting the return to a planned economy from which Belarus had not departed too far.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen J. Mihalisko, "Belarus: retreat to authoritarianism". In: *Democratic changes and authoritarian reactions in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova*, Cambridge: University Press, 1997. pp. 223-281.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

After reestablishing its statehood, Lithuania began to implement policies for creating a free market and strengthening democracy. She fortified this decision by adopting a new Constitution in a referendum at the end of 1992. During the referendum the voters also approved a Constitutional Act that prohibited the Republic of Lithuania from joining any future interstate structures which would be created on the basis of the former USSR.<sup>3</sup> In the field of internal affairs, despite the considerable difficulties in restoring the rights of citizens to their former property, which had been nationalized when the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania, and the social tensions which arose when privatizing state property and implementing economic restructuring, Lithuania has not given up its chosen path, but tries to accelerate it. The foreign policy priorities of Lithuania are integration as quickly as possible into Western and trans-Atlantic political, economic, and security structures, including membership in the European Union and NATO. Among other foreign policy priorities one can also mention maintaining good, friendly relations with all neighboring states. Thus, despite all the complicated and different attitudes to many international problems, the relations between Lithuania and Belarus, hold an important position in Lithuania's foreign policy. In an exclusive interview with the author of this article, the President of the Republic of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus said that the different political orientation of the states must not affect neighborly relations. "It looks that this principle is more and more taking root in our cooperation with Russia and Belarus", he added.<sup>4</sup> The importance of these relations is determined not only by the political and economic interests of the two countries but also by questions of the security of Lithuania and the entire Baltic region.

### **The Historical Heritage of the 20th Century and Its Influence on the Internal and Foreign Policies of the States in Central and Eastern Europe**

Twentieth century European history with its complicated political changes and numerous losses of human lives and material goods left deep marks in the consciousness of its inhabitants. These are particularly distinct in Central and Eastern Europe. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of the countries and nations that had been in its structure tried to understand and evaluate their recent past and to find their place in the Europe of the 21st century. The Baltic States, including Lithuania, have a clear understanding of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocols, that led to their forced incorporation into the Soviet Union, which the partisan movement in Lithuania opposed with arms for more than five years after World War II.<sup>5</sup> Most current political figures and the majority of

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<sup>3</sup> *Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, 1992*, Vilnius: Publishing House of the Seimas, 1993, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> In the interview on March 15, 1999, answering the question: "What policy should the European Union, the USA, and other Western countries pursue in striving to integrate Belarus into the community of European countries?", Adamkus replied: "Lithuania welcomes positive changes in the dialogue between Belarus and Western countries. We view them as part of our own work. Lithuania has supported in every possible way a dialogue with Belarus and worked to open up all possible channels for contacts and cooperation. Our efforts have been supported by Western countries which also favor resuming and maintaining the dialogue with Belarus. Undoubtedly further relations between Belarus and the West will depend to a large extent on developments in Belarus. I am sure, however, that Western countries should maintain the dialogue with Belarus, rather than isolate it".

<sup>5</sup> Misiūnas, Romuald J. and Taagepera, Rein. 1983. *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1980*, University of California Press Berkeley and Los Angeles, translated edition 1992, *Baltijos valstybės: priklausomybės metai 1940-1980*, Vilnius: "Mintis", pp. 92-103.

the citizens in Lithuania as well as a large part of the emigration (more than 500,000), including postwar refugees, who primarily moved to the USA, Western Europe, and Australia view the period between the wars (1918-1940) as the period of the successful creation of an independent and democratic state.

On the other hand, both the current political elite and the majority of ordinary citizens in Belarus have in many respects a totally different understanding and evaluation of the former Soviet Union and World War II as well as their consequences for Central and Eastern Europe. The majority of the people in Belarus primarily view their almost 70 year history in the totalitarian Soviet state, disregarding all the Stalinist repression and cruelties, as the period of building socialism, of fighting fascism, and of the constant, even if meager, social guarantees given by the system of a planned economy and party nomenclature rule. Such a perception makes it more difficult to form and develop the principles of democracy in the state, and even more to make the transition from a planned to a market economy. The fact that the Belarusian population during the Soviet period never developed a sufficiently strong sense of national identity also has considerable influence on forming such a perception.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the repeated assertions by state officials about the multidirectional and balanced character of the foreign policy of Belarus, it has a clearly defined Eastern orientation. One should note that the orientation to the East, or more accurately to Russia, arose even before Aleksander Lukashenko became the President of Belarus. In practical terms it had never been directed in a different direction. Stephen R. Burant in his article *Foreign Policy and National Identity: A Comparison of Ukraine and Belarus* declares: “Belarusian political elites have demonstrated little willingness to try to establish a European, or Central European, identity for their country to distance it from Russia.”<sup>7</sup> This opinion is supported by the point of view on Belarusian-Russian relations expressed already in 1994 by former Belarusian Prime Minister Viacheslav Kebich. In a speech at the Belarusian parliament he said that Belarusian-Russian relations were the basic foreign policy priority of Minsk, “owing to the community of Belarusian-Russian culture, the identical interests of two fraternal peoples.”<sup>8</sup> One can assert that all the leaders of Belarus from Shushkevich to Lukashenko pursued the policies of closer relations with Russia and broader integration in the Commonwealth of Independent States. One can consider President Lukashenko as only a more active supporter of this policy and of deeper integration into Russia.

Despite different priorities and orientations in internal and foreign policies, Lithuania maintains quite active bilateral relations with its eastern neighbor. Explaining the necessity for maintaining active bilateral relations with Belarus, President Adamkus in an interview with the author of this article said: “The different orientation of states should not have a negative impact on neighborly relations... We exchange views with our neighbors about our integration into Western security and economic structures, emphasizing at the same time that this process is not an obstacle on the path to further cooperation. On the contrary, new possibilities arise, for example, to implement joint cross-border projects by using funds from the European Union. Apart from problematic issues, Lithuania shares a considerable number of tasks with Belarus: demarcation of the border, improvement of the capacity of border crossing posts and

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen R. Burant, “Foreign Policy and National Identity: A Comparison of Ukraine and Belarus”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol.47, No. 7 (1995): 1132-33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1133.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1136.

border control, implementation of joint projects in energy and transport sectors.” Cultural relations may be also enlivened by the establishment of the Francisco Skorina Fund which has been initiated by both Presidents.

### Questions of Economic Cooperation

In spite of the substantial efforts by the state to change their direction, Lithuania’s economic relations with foreign countries still remain to a great extent, especially in matters of trade, tied to the East, i.e. to Russia and other CIS countries. According to preliminary statistics for 1998, trade relations with them exceeded 30 percent, of which 65 percent was with Russia, i.e. about 20 percent of Lithuania’s total foreign trade. At the beginning of 1999, according to preliminary data, trade with Russia decreased to 17-18 percent. Although the levels of trade with Western countries, especially the European Union, increase each year (according to preliminary statistics for 1998 they comprised 42 percent of total foreign trade), the huge trade deficit, nevertheless, creates considerable worries for the Lithuanian government. In the area of investments, the amount of capital from Western countries exceeds by many times the investments from CIS countries. According to preliminary statistics for 1998, foreign direct investments in Lithuania reached 1,600 million USD, or 432 USD per capita.<sup>9</sup>

Recent statistics about the Belarusian economy and its relations with other countries are quite scant, and often not very reliable.<sup>10</sup> In the opinion of the World Bank after 1996 the foreign trade deficit of Belarus had grown considerably and its trade with non-CIS states was quite small.<sup>11</sup> The process of privatization has slowed down significantly in recent times. Similar results are also given in the report of the International Monetary Fund.<sup>12</sup> It declares that in 1996 barter trade became dominant with many countries, especially with Russia. Per capita foreign investments in 1995-1996 reached only 4 USD.<sup>13</sup> According to unofficial statistics the volume of Belarus trade with CIS countries reached 80 percent.

Despite quite different orientations and priorities in foreign economic relations, Lithuanian-Belarusian foreign trade developed quite dynamically and in 1997 exceeded 500 million USD. Lithuanian-Belarusian foreign trade in 1995-1998 is given in Table 1.<sup>14</sup> Belarus is in fourth place among foreign exporters (after Russia, Germany, and Latvia). In 1998 about 5 percent of Lithuania’s total foreign trade volume was with Belarus.

**Table 1.** Lithuanian-Belarusian Foreign trade (millions USD)

	<b>1995</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>
Total	424.16	450.26	532.6	462.7
Exports	291.03	342.03	396.6	328.6
Imports	133.13	108.23	136.0	134.1

<sup>9</sup> Department of Statistics to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania.

<sup>10</sup> *Belarus Monitor*, *НІСН Восток-Запад и АЦ Стратегія*, 1999, p.41.

<sup>11</sup> IBRD. World Bank, - *Country study: Belarus*, 1997, p. 15 and p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> IMF report: *Belarus - Recent Economic Developments*, November 1997, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Statistics to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania.

In 1997 10.3 percent of Lithuania's total exports went to Belarus (3rd place among trading countries) and 2.4 percent of imports (13th place) came from there. Lithuania's exports to Belarus were mostly products of chemical and allied industries, mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation, vehicles other than railway or tramway rolling stock, electrical machinery and equipment with parts. Belarusian exports to Lithuania comprised textiles and textile articles, products of the chemical and allied industries, mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation, bitumen products, and mineral waxes. One should note that these levels of trade were reached even though the states did not have a working free trade agreement. One should also mention the quite complicated way the two countries make settlements for electricity. Lithuania provides Belarus with about 25 percent of the electricity it consumes. The settlements for it are primarily not paid in hard currency, but in various goods about whose selection and price disagreements frequently arise. In March 1999 the Belarusian debt to Lithuania reached 100 million USD. Quarrels and Lithuania's threats to end providing electricity have begun. Knowing that Lithuania does not have the possibility without making new agreements and investments to deliver to other countries its excess electric energy, produced at the very powerful (2.6 MW) Ignalina Atomic Power Plant, Belarus does not hurry to resolve the problems of paying for the electricity.

One should note that the volume of Lithuania's trade with Belarus, especially in the last two years, is significantly higher than that of Latvia and Estonia. For example the volume of Belarusian trade with Lithuania in 1997 (329.7 million USD) was almost twice as large as the combined trade with Latvia and Estonia (167.9 million USD).<sup>15</sup> The difference becomes even greater when the costs of Lithuanian electric exports are added. This can be explained by the fact that Estonia and Latvia consider Belarus mainly as a transit country for their exports to Ukraine and Central European countries, while Lithuania also tries to expand bilateral trade, which is closely tied with the settlements for providing electricity to Belarus.

For Belarus the Baltic states, especially Lithuania and Latvia, are important not only as trade partners, but also probably even more as transit routes for trade with the West. Due to the low current trade levels with the West, this question today is not particularly urgent for Belarus, but in the future the shortest route to the only non-freezing seaport in the Baltic states, Klaipėda, can become quite urgent for Belarus if it decides to expand its trade ties with Western countries. At the current time about 10 percent of cargoes, handled in the Klaipėda port, are in one way or another connected with Belarus.<sup>16</sup> For several years Lithuania and Belarus have been conducting negotiations for a long-term agreement "On Providing Transport and Other Services for Shipping Cargoes through the Klaipėda State Sea Port". Belarus has suggested that the draft of this agreement be supplemented by the articles of the United Nations Convention on transit trade for internal continental states which provide for the free transit of cargoes through the territory of neighboring states which have access to sea waters.

On the other hand, Belarus is important for Lithuania as a transit state in its trade with the East, especially Russia and Ukraine. There are also numerous unresolved problems in this field. Belarus limits the issuance of free permits to Lithuanian shippers transporting cargo by trucks. Russian shippers traveling through Belarusian

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<sup>15</sup> *Baltijski kurs*, Osen/Zima 1998, (according to the data provided by the Ministry of Foreign Economical Relations of the Republic of Belarus), p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

territory to Lithuania make unlimited use of such permits. This limits the possibilities of Lithuanian shippers to compete with Russian shippers in transporting goods to Russia, Ukraine, and other CIS countries, as well as from them to Lithuania. A useful project for Belarus, Russia, and Lithuania to expand bilateral economic relations might be the functioning of the shuttle type train Mukran (Germany) - Klaipėda - Minsk - Moscow. The putting into practice of this project has been hindered by the difficulties that arise in coordinating transit tariffs and quotas. The projected beginning of the shuttle train route in 1998 was postponed until 1999.

A problem remaining in resolving transit questions is the capacity of the border crossing posts. From time to time long lines of cargo automobiles form at the border posts. In 1998 President Adamkus raised this question with the Belarus president in a telephone conversation (in March) and during the meeting in November at the Medininkai-Kamenyi Log border post.<sup>17</sup> The Lithuanian side at this time can inspect and pass 2,000 vehicles per day through the main transit trade post at Medininkai - Kamenyi Log, while the capabilities of the Belarusian side are several times smaller. As part of the TACIS Program, the European Union has granted Belarus 3 million ECU for the reconstruction of this border post. One might expect that the border crossing capacity from the Belarusian side would also be increased at other Lithuanian-Belarusian border crossing posts.

To summarize the problems of Lithuanian-Belarusian economic development and foreign economic relations, one can assert that both countries face large, although of a different nature, problems. While Lithuania is striving for a free market economy and hastens privatization by trying to attract more investments from Western states, Belarus in practical terms has stopped privatization, tries to preserve collective and state farms in agriculture, does not seek to restructure its industry or to attract foreign investments. The state subsidized inward oriented industry of Belarus limits the possibilities to expand export markets, and increases its dependence on Russia. All that, no doubt, creates additional problems for expanding further economic cooperation between Lithuania and Belarus.

### **Cooperation on Humanitarian and Democracy Developing Questions**

In spite of major economic difficulties and shortages as well as restrictions on democratic rights, the internal political situation in Belarus is sufficiently stable. This once again confirms the fact that the patience of many former Soviet Union nations and especially of the Belarusian nation is indeed very great. Numerous politicians from foreign countries and international organizations, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the European Union (EU), have expressed their opinions on the restrictions on the independent press, the questionable legitimacy of the current Supreme Soviet (parliament), and the limitations placed on the activities of opposition organizations. The scientific coordinator of the Belarus Analytical Center "Strategy", candidate in history Valerii Karbalevich in his article "Going into a Crisis" in the annual publication *Belarus Monitor: politicheskie i ekonomicheskie itogi goda* has provided a comprehensive analysis of the internal political situation and the foreign policy of Belarus.<sup>18</sup> The internal political and economic situation in Belarus, undoubtedly, influences its foreign policy and relations with neighboring countries, including Lithuania. Lithuania is interested in the

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<sup>17</sup> *Izvestiya*, 14. 11. 1998, p.3.

<sup>18</sup> *Belarus Monitor*, 1998, p.3.

political stability, the improvement of the economic situation, and the development of democracy in Belarus because this has a direct influence not only on Lithuania's security, but also on the general stability of the Baltic region. Without doubt, the citizens of every state and their legitimate authorities have the right to select the form and methods of ruling their state, to make decisions on how to solve internal political and economic questions, and to determine foreign policy priorities. Lithuanian political figures, including representatives at the highest level, however, have more than once declared that the problems of Belarus have to be decided according to the universally recognized principles of democracy and a legitimate state, strictly adhering to the principles of human rights and freedoms.

In an interview in the newspaper *Beloruskaya gazeta*, a former Lithuanian ambassador to Belarus, perhaps being too candid, said: "... we declare openly: Lithuania is interested that a civil society be formed more quickly in Belarus, that all the democratic forces be allowed to express themselves more freely, that all human rights and freedoms be guaranteed more firmly. We are interested in a democratic and stable Belarusian government which would carry out economic reorganizations<sup>19</sup>." In maintaining this view, Lithuania tries to maintain as broad as possible ties with Belarusian social organizations, science and education institutions, media representatives, and the Belarusian community in Lithuania. In recent times contacts between the universities and youth organizations of Lithuania and Belarus have become more active.

In December 1997 in Minsk the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science signed an agreement for cooperation in the field of education for 1998-1999. At the end of 1998 Vilnius University and the Belarus State University signed a broad bilateral treaty. It provides for the exchange of instructors, students, general projects for scientific research, cooperation between student organizations, etc. The International Relations and Political Science Institute (Vilnius University) established ties with the European Humanitarian University in Minsk. In the future seminars for instructors and students are planned once a month in Vilnius and Minsk. In them lecturers and known political figures from both countries would make speeches. OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group Head Ambassador Hans-George Wieck promised to support the implementation of this project. The Council of Lithuanian Youth Organizations is planning a cooperation project with Belarusian youth organizations.

The Lithuanian government according to its financial possibilities supports the activities of the Belarus community (55,000 people) in Lithuania. The state radio in Lithuania transmits programs every day in the Belarusian language. The state television also has a weekly half-hour long program. Two newspapers are printed in the Belarusian language, one of which receives government support. There is Belarusian high school in Vilnius as well as Belarusian classes in a Russian school in Visaginas, and Sunday schools in Kaunas and Šiauliai. The Vilnius Pedagogical University has a department of Belarusian language, literature, and ethnology. In Belarus there are two Lithuanian schools that were constructed with Lithuanian funds. The Belarusian government maintains one of them, while the maintenance and service costs of the other are fully financed from the Lithuanian budget.

While discussing mass media, one should mention that some Belarusian newspapers are printed in Lithuania. The Belarusian president in a September 1997 interview with the Lithuanian daily *Respublika* responding to the question of when the opposition press in Belarus will be able to publish in their homeland answered: "... We are living

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<sup>19</sup> *Belorusskaya gazeta*, 1998. 05. 11, p. 14.

in Europe and everyone has the right to publish their newspapers where they want to". He added that if they found it cheaper to publish them in Lithuania, they could publish them there.<sup>20</sup> Of course, he "forgot" to mention the different price scales in Belarus for the press supporting and opposing the government.

At the beginning of this year another kind of problem arose which may introduce friction in Lithuanian-Belarusian relations. Former Lithuanian Minister of Communications and Information, Seimas deputy Rimantas Pleikys announced his intention to form the radio station "Baltic Waves" which would transmit programs to Belarus. One of the aims of this station would be to provide the inhabitants of Belarus with objective news information. Belarusian Ambassador to Lithuania Vladimir Garkun in commenting about the foreseen transmission of such programs declared them to be interference in the internal affairs of the sovereign Belarusian state. The idea of creating the radio station is supported by some influential Seimas deputies and one of the journalists' organizations backing the ruling Conservative Party - the Lithuanian Journalists' Association. However, members of the Seimas Foreign Affairs Committee after its meeting in February 1999 declared that the Lithuanian state does not support the "Baltic Waves" radio, the Seimas has nothing to do with it, and its creation is a private undertaking.<sup>21</sup> The Lithuanian Government has not officially expressed its opinion on the matter. In the area of expanding humanitarian relations, it has suggested that Belarusian state institutions make an agreement to transmit radio and television programs in the Lithuanian language (prepared in Belarus) over Belarusian radio and television on a parity basis. Analogous programs could be also transmitted in the Belarusian language over Lithuanian state radio and television. Since 1994 there have also been discussions with Belarusian representatives on the request by Lithuanian Catholics in Minsk to have Masses in the Lithuanian language in one of the churches in the city.

It is well known that the trust in political parties in post-communist states is not very high. But it is strangely paradoxical that the trust in political parties by the people of both Lithuania and Belarus, in spite of their state structures having different principles of formation and representation, is similar (7 and 5 percent, respectively).<sup>22,23</sup> The political organizations in the Lithuanian Seimas are parties that existed in the pre-war period or were established after the restoration of independence (except for the Democratic Labor Party, which was formed on the basis of a reformed Communist Party) and function as social-political institutions strengthening democracy. In Belarus the political parties and organizations in the Supreme Soviet (Communists, Agrarian, Liberal Democratic, Movement for Social Progress and Justice, and others) are not a real opposition to the authoritarian regime of Lukashenko and do not assist the creation of a democratic society in the state. The current low popularity among the Belarusian population of political organizations (both in opposition or having representatives in the parliament), and their leaders, allows President Lukashenko to maintain quite high rating in public opinion polls.

From time to time members of some parties in the Supreme Soviet, especially the Belarusian Communist Party, stage a protest or organize a picket in front of the Lithuanian Embassy in Minsk opposing the court proceedings in Lithuania against

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<sup>20</sup> *Respublika*, 1997. 09. 06, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Atgimimas*, 1999. 02. 05., p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Lietuvos rytas*, 1999. 02. 27, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Manayev, O. *Nezavisimiye issledovaniya i obshestvenoye razvitiye: Beloruskii variant*, Analiticheskii Biuletten, No 3, (Oktiabr-Dekabr) 1998, p. 7.



former Lithuanian Communist Party activists Mykolas Burokevičius and Juozas Jarmalavičius, who are accused of trying by force to overthrow the legitimate state authorities and of active participation in the events of January 13, 1991. That day Soviet armed forces stationed in Lithuania seized the Radio and Television Building and the television tower in Vilnius. During the encounters with the unarmed defenders of the television tower 13 people were killed. The then leaders of the Lithuanian Communist Party (CPSU), including Burokevičius and Jarmalavičius, were active organizers and participants in these activities.

It is thus easy to understand why Lithuanian parties and political organizations do not maintain practically any ties with the Belarusian political parties in power. It is more difficult to understand why Lithuanian parties and political organizations do not maintain more active ties with the social political organizations (Belarus People's Front, United Citizens Party, Social-democratic "Gromada" of Belarus and others) in the Belarusian opposition. This may, perhaps, be explained by the splintering of the Belarusian opposition forces and the very low popularity of their leaders in the eyes of the public<sup>24</sup> as well as the neutral position of most Lithuanian political party leaders to the political processes in Belarus.

As examples of the efforts to enliven these relations, one can mention the visit to Lithuania by a group of former Belarusian Supreme Soviet deputies, headed by Stanislav Bogdankevich, who met with the leaders of the Seimas in early 1998, and the participation of two Lithuanian Seimas deputies, members of the Conservative Party, at the Belarusian Democratic Forces Congress in Minsk in January 1999. In both cases the Belarusian Ambassador in Lithuania in meetings with high officials of the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry expressed his country's displeasure with such political contacts, declaring that they do not help develop friendly relations between the states.<sup>25</sup> In Lithuania, in turn, government and non-government institutions are concerned with the restrictions of democracy in Belarus and support the declarations of the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Council that the results of the referendum on November 24, 1996 are not legitimate. Thus, Lithuanian political parties and organizations ought to maintain contacts and cooperate more actively with related political organizations and thus assist the development of democracy in Belarus.

### **Lithuanian-Belarusian Bilateral Relations and Their Influence on the Security of the Baltic Region**

In discussing official interstate relations between Lithuania and Belarus, which began less than 10 years ago, one should note that they were never strained or full of conflicts. This is probably in part due to the moderate policies toward Belarus of former Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas (1993-1998). It appears that current President Adamkus also maintains a similar policy. One of the most important events in Lithuanian-Belarusian relations was the 1995 visit to Lithuania by Belarusian President Lukashenko during which a good neighbor and cooperation treaty as well as a treaty marking the state borders were signed. In 1993-1997 Lithuania and Belarus also signed agreements on international cargo transport by trucks, pension guarantees, simplified border crossing for residents of the border area and others. One of the most urgent questions for Lithuania is the signing of a readmission treaty with Belarus.

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<sup>24</sup> Navini, 1998. 12. 30, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 1998. 03. 05., p. 2.

After long negotiations including even a further review of the draft treaty in 1998 after which at the request of Belarus the treaty was corrected so that it would go into effect only after ratification by the parliaments, Belarus continues to refuse to sign it. Belarus explains its inability to sign the agreement by noting its obligations to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which plans to prepare a single readmission policy for all the states belonging to the Commonwealth. The failure to sign the readmission treaty is but one example of how Moscow influences Belarusian foreign policy.

The Lithuanian National Security Statute mentions among the risk factors which can influence the country's security: obstacles for Lithuania to obtain international security guarantees, the stationing of armed forces of other states along the Lithuanian border, the military transit of foreign countries through Lithuania, illegal migration, etc.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the movement through Belarus to Lithuania of refugees, who seek asylum in the West, as well as the slow pace of completing the demarcation of the state border in the part assigned to Belarus, environmental protection questions in border areas, and especially the size of the Belarusian armed forces and the location of their stationing, are directly connected to questions of state security. The recent more active efforts of Belarus to speed up the process of integration, including military, with Russia raises considerable danger to the security and stability of Lithuania and the Baltic region. Polish political scientist Anthony Kaminski correctly observes that for the neighboring states the very existence of a union between Belarus and Russia is not as important as the circumstances in which it develops.<sup>27</sup> Lithuanian President Adamkus expressing his position on the integration of Belarus into Russia said that foreign policy orientation, the selection of allies and alliances was a matter of each state. But he added that such a choice must be based on a consensus within the society.<sup>28</sup> It means that Lithuania just like other countries, including Belarus, has the right to freely choose defense alliances. The frequent and unexpected changes in the Russian government, the poor health of President Yeltsin, the certain strain in the relations between Russia and Ukraine, and finally the prolonged financial-economic crisis can hardly assist the successful creation of a union of states. In addition one should note that it is not the democratic, but the conservative forces in Russia that most actively support the more rapid total integration of Russia and Belarus. Their leaders, such as Gennadii Zyuganov, Vladimir Zhirinovski, Albert Makashov, have more than once declared that Russia should seek the reestablishment of the CIS with the territorial borders of the former Soviet Union.

In its Declaration on State Sovereignty (in 1990) Belarus declared that it would seek the status of a neutral state not joining any blocs.<sup>29</sup> But this declaration was only of a strictly declaratory nature and Belarus never based its security policies on it. Although Belarus formally participates in the "Partnership for Peace Program," the

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<sup>26</sup> Gricius A. "Vlijanie 'Belorusskovo faktora' na vneshniuju politiku Litvi i stabilnost v Baltijskom regione". In: Sherman Garnett and Robert Legvold (Eds.), *Belarussia na pereputije: v poiskah mezhdunarodnoj identichnosti*, Moskva: Tsentr Carnegie, 1998, p.157.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> The Lithuanian President expressed this position during an exclusive interview with the author of this paper on March 15, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Military policy specialist at the Ukrainian National Strategic Studies Institute Grygory Perepelytsia analyzes in detail the military-political integration of Belarus-Russia, changes in the Belarusian security policies as well as its position in regard to the expansion of NATO. See: Sherman Garnett, p. 87. He asserts that the 1990 Belarusian statement on its status as a neutral state, not joining any blocs, was only a transitional tactical maneuver.

state leadership and especially President Lukashenko oppose NATO expansion to the East. Speaking at the plenary session of the 52nd United Nations General Assembly on September 26, 1997, Belarusian Foreign Affairs Minister Ivan Antonovich declared that if NATO ever advanced to the Belarusian borders (a reference to Poland), Minsk will have “to analyze in a serious manner ways to ensure the security of the state.” Antonovich also stated that in recent times “internal changes” were occurring in NATO indicating that the organization could become a council of Euro-Atlantic partnership. In unofficial conversations Belarusian state representatives admit the inevitability of the process of NATO expansion to the East, but always stress that Belarus still considers such expansion to the East a “historical mistake.” In bilateral meetings with Lithuanian representatives, Belarusian state officials recognize Lithuania’s right to join international defense unions and security structures. This assertion is fixed in the joint statement of the Lithuanian and Belarusian presidents made after their meeting at the end of 1998 at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border post of Medininkai. As the Russian newspaper *Izvestiya* notes during the meeting the position of the Belarusian president towards the question of Lithuania joining NATO was considerably more moderate than that of his Russian counterpart.<sup>30</sup> Although Belarus often expresses active support for the creation of a nuclear free zone in Eastern and Central Europe, Lithuania can not ignore the considerably larger Belarusian armed forces (about 100,000 soldiers), their restored close cooperation with the Russian armed forces as well as their expressed hints that nuclear weapons would come in handy.<sup>31</sup> The military land and sea forces stationed in the Kaliningrad district, which according to the Lithuanian-Russian agreement have the right of military transit through Lithuanian territory, also create a danger to the security not only of Lithuania, but of the whole Baltic region.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the April 1999 NATO summit meeting in Washington and the decisions on the further expansion of the alliance, that will be taken there, will be very important for Lithuania as well as for the other Baltic states.

Lithuania is interested in the development of democracy, stability, and economic growth in Belarus. This has a direct effect on the security of Lithuania and the general stability of the region. The Lithuanian and Belarusian presidents during their meeting at Medininkai reaffirmed the goal of their states to develop their mutual relations on the basis of the Good Neighbor and Cooperation Treaty signed in 1995. The heads of state recognized the importance of the effective activities of local governments, the determination to respect the values of mankind, human rights, and fundamental freedoms. It was decided to cooperate in the preparation and implementation of programs for training state officials. The presidents also expressed support for personal contacts between citizens, the development of cooperation between non-governmental organizations and the mass media. Trade, economic, and regional cooperation, the passage through border posts, illegal migration and other issues were also discussed during the meeting. As one can see, Lithuania is trying to maintain an active dialogue with Belarus. It believes that the international isolation of Belarus would have negative effects on its political and economic development, on its relations with neighboring countries. Lithuanian Presidential Advisor on National Security and Foreign Policy Albinas Januška in an interview with “*Beloruskaya*

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<sup>30</sup> *Izvestiya*, 14. 11. 1998, p.3.

<sup>31</sup> *Respublika*, 1999. 02. 27., p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> The Polish weekly newspaper *Czas* (BNS, 1997.10.26) wrote about the dangers for Lithuania and Poland coming from the Kaliningrad district.

*Gazeta*” said that Lithuania held a slightly different position than the EU countries on relations with Belarus.<sup>33</sup> He noted: “In all conceivable circumstances we will always remain neighbors with Belarus and that means that we have to maintain friendly relations and cooperate. It is pleasant that, despite certain contradictions, both sides understand this.”

U.S. Ambassador to Lithuania Keith Smith views the efforts of Lithuania to maintain a dialogue with Belarus and especially the last meeting at Medininkai very favorably. He declared: “Washington welcomed the November 12 summit of the presidents of Lithuania and Belarus, hoping it will help promote democracy in the region.”<sup>34</sup> The ambassador also noted that the United States strongly supports the formation of closer ties between Lithuania and Belarus and the efforts of state institutions aimed at strengthening the values of democracy and human rights. This statement by the ambassador is noteworthy in that it shows that the U.S. government hopes that Lithuanian President Adamkus as an ardent supporter of democracy can influence in a positive manner the development of political events in a neighboring country. The future will show how realistic are these hopes of American and Lithuanian politicians. In pursuing bilateral Lithuanian-Belarusian cooperation, Lithuania also supports the activities of the OSCE mission in Belarus and by concrete methods and events supports the fulfillment of the recommendations of this organization. In November and December, 1998 Lithuanian experts participated in the seminars organized by the OSCE Advisory Monitoring Group for training Belarusian election observers and invited Belarusian representatives to observe the elections in one of Lithuania’s voting districts (November, 1998). The election observers from Belarus were acquainted with the way elections in Lithuania are carried out. One can regret that Belarus’s neighbors Poland and Ukraine in recent times do not maintain active contacts with Belarus. The same can also be said about Latvia, which views the political and economic developments in the neighboring state in a quite passive manner.

Lithuania views in a positive manner the restoration of the EU-Belarusian negotiations which provide the opportunity to finish the process of ratifying the EU and Belarus partnership and cooperation treaty. As we know, these relations became even more complicated after the eviction of the ambassadors from their residencies in the “Drozdy” area of Minsk. Most of them were recalled to their countries for consultations. Lithuania behaved in a different manner than the other countries of Western and Central Europe; its ambassador returned home for unlimited vacation. With the resolution of the conflict at the beginning of 1999, the Baltic states hope that the renewed contacts of the EU and Western states with Belarus will help not only the process of successful EU expansion, but will also strengthen the stability of the Baltic region. This stability and Lithuanian security would increase even more if the Baltic states were accepted into the EU in the next five years. This would speed up the development of their economies as well as provide the so-called “soft security” which would provide the opportunity to influence in a more active manner the development of democracy in Belarus.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

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<sup>33</sup> *Belorusskaya gazeta*, 1998. 09. 21., p.6.

<sup>34</sup> *Minsk News*, 1998. 11. 24-30. p.1.

There can never be too much democracy. All the states that have chosen the path of developing democracy constantly confront questions on how to preserve and develop it. This question, without doubt, is especially urgent for post-communist countries. In the analysis of the relations between states the primary attention is not always directed at the perfection of their political system or violations of human rights. However, discussions about Belarus and its relations with other states usually mention its president Lukashenko, his authoritarian rule, and the weakness of democracy in the country. This is probably due to the fact that for many Western democratic states the neighbors of Belarus, such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and even the Ukraine, are states which, in spite of their socialist system heritage, differ, to a greater or smaller degree, from Belarus in respect to their political systems, beliefs of their inhabitants as well as in the path chosen for development. At the same time, all of them are in transition and Belarus in many respects is in the last place in this process. One can not assert that a consolidated democracy has already been established in Lithuania and other post-communist states. However, the basic democratic principles are maintained, the market economy is being implemented more rapidly, efforts are made to get rid of the one-party methods of rule used in the past.

In talking about Lithuanian-Belarusian relations one should first pay attention to the factors that influence them. If Russia is still clearly capable of influencing the course of Lithuania's economy and foreign trade, its influence is much greater on Belarus not only in economic, but also in foreign and security policies as well as in internal political affairs. Lithuania is expanding its bilateral relations with many democratic states and international organizations while the bilateral relations of Belarus in recent times have been limited to trips to several not very democratic foreign countries and the CIS states. Such international isolation of Belarus can have a negative effect on Lithuanian-Belarusian relations. Lithuania's relations with Belarus, without doubt, are also influenced not only by a different attitude to democratic values, but also by different foreign policy priorities and opposing vectors of geopolitical orientation.

Summarizing Lithuania's relations with Belarus, one can assert that the relations of Belarus with Lithuania are more advanced than the relations of Belarus with Poland and Latvia. In spite of certain restrictions, which arise because Belarus is a member of the CIS and has difficulties in paying Lithuania for provided electricity, the volume of trade and the established economic ties allow one to expect a growth, even if limited, in the future. Even though most problems arise in cooperating on questions of developing democracy, one can assert that these disagreements are not severe and will not worsen bilateral relations. The absence of inter-parliamentary relations is explained by the fact that the European Union and the Council of Europe at this time do not recognize the legitimacy of the current Belarusian Supreme Soviet. One can only regret that the political parties of the neighboring states have not developed inter-party relations which could promote in a more active manner the formation of a democratic multiparty system in Belarus.

The current political regime in Belarus and its foreign and security policy create many problems, first of all, for the security of the Baltic states and the stability of the Baltic region. This question could become quite acute if the political situation in Russia becomes worse or if social disturbances develop in Belarus. Lithuanian state institutions believe that this problem can be solved not by isolating Belarus from democratic Europe, but by expanding contacts and dialogue with government institutions and various levels of society, especially with youth and non-governmental organizations. As one can see from the materials in this article, Lithuania has been

carrying out this task quite successfully. In concluding one can only wish that other states would also participate in this not easy dialogue whose results might not be felt very soon.