

Russian-Lithuanian Relations: An Overview

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This past October marked nine years of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Lithuania. What are the main results and problems of the period? What is the score as the neighboring countries enter the tenth year? What is the likely impact of the parliamentary elections in Lithuania on the bilateral ties? All these are the most important questions, and the executive authority, legislators, diplomats and political scientists in Russia are now trying to find the answers to them. I think that members of the new government coalition in Lithuania - and not just them alone - have a similar interest. Indeed, a clear idea of the partner's views is the keystone of a productive dialogue, better understanding, and broader cooperation.

Our ties have a long and eventful history. It has examples of the most close relations, fruitful cooperation, economic and cultural fusion, joint struggle against external foes, wars, fierce hostility and inability to understand each other. All that has naturally had an effect on our relations being built today on a new, sovereign basis.

The most important gesture of good neighborliness that gave additional impetus to bilateral relations in the early 90s was the decision by Lithuania's authorities to grant Lithuanian citizenship to all the country's permanent residents who would wish it. This removed one of the thorniest humanitarian and legal issues that still unfortunately lingers in our relations with Latvia and Estonia. On the other hand, the decision helped form a stronger bond between citizens and the Lithuanian state (or Russia, for those who preferred Russian citizenship), paved the way for normal resolution of the problems of national minorities - Russian and Russian-speaking minorities in Lithuania, and the Lithuanian minority in Russia - on a democratic basis and in accordance with European standards.

The policy of good neighborliness and understanding, regard for the partner's interests and concerns has helped us solve over recent years a number of really big problems, including the formidable problem, as far as Russia is concerned, of speedy withdrawal of its troops from Lithuania and make a substantial progress in building a contractual and legal foundation for cooperation between our countries. The bilateral Intergovernmental Commission for trade, economic, scientific, technical, humanitarian and cultural cooperation has played a vigorous role.

Formed in 1996, it is co-chaired by Lithuania's Foreign Minister Algirdas Saudargas and Russia's Minister of Transportation Sergey Frank. Currently in effect there are some 30 interstate and intergovernmental treaties and agreements and more than twenty instruments signed between various departments of both countries. The signing of border treaties between our countries in 1997 was a signal event.

The Russian State Duma is currently ratifying Russian-Lithuanian economic agreements. They can be described as a strategic plan intended to encourage and mutually protect capital investments and avoid double taxation. Putting them into effect will move commercial and economic ties between our countries to a qualitatively new level. Russia is interested in further expanding in every way cooperation between our countries in the sphere of economy. It is ready to consolidate the basis of this cooperation through investments and it hopes there will be no political obstacles along this path.

We attach special significance to cooperation with Lithuania so as the Kaliningrad oblast of the Russian Federation could live and develop normally. The existing mechanisms enable us to sustain partnership in this area on a high level. This includes Russian military transit across the territory of Lithuania, but things that used to satisfy us in the initial stage call for improvement. The inter-governmental agreement on long-term cooperation between Russia's Kaliningrad oblast and regions of the Republic of Lithuania signed in 1999 has been working successfully. A bilateral commission to realize this agreement has been formed and it is functioning successfully. We are confident that cooperation in this area will benefit both Lithuania and Russia. We naturally reject any external interference in the internal development of the Kaliningrad oblast and attempts to influence the solution of questions that lie strictly in the sphere of Russian sovereignty.

Having in mind Kaliningrad and other examples, we are ready to encourage in every way broader contacts between various regions of our countries. Cooperation with Lithuanian partners of the municipal government of Moscow, for example, indicates that there is a virtually inexhaustible potential of such contacts.

Cultural contacts remain the most important factor in shaping a climate of good neighborliness between Russia and Lithuania. At the same time, independent development of our countries has given rise to visa, information, language and other barriers, which do not help these contacts at all. It would be therefore shortsighted to continue to rely in this sphere on practices of former times: they may only satisfy old and middle-aged people. If we wish that Lithuanian and Russian musicians, performing artists, stage and film directors, authors and cultural figures of various styles and schools should continue to be well-known and admired, as they are today in both countries, we should address these matters on a systematic basis. At a minimum this calls for moving from the existing short-term protocols on cultural exchanges over to a sizable intergovernmental treaty the drafting of which has been started, and we hope that the sides would address it earnestly and dynamically.

While on the subject of the main aspects of relations between Russia and Lithuania, I cannot but dwell on those that cause our biggest worry. I have in mind first of all the Law on Recovery of Damages resulting from the occupation by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics passed by the Lithuanian Seimas (Diet) this past June. The Russian Foreign Ministry opportunely appraised it as an instrument unfriendly toward Russia. Stressing that we could not accept attempts to interpret our shared history in this unilateral and politicized manner, we elucidated the international-law grounds upon which we regarded as unfounded the claims formulated by the Lithuanian parliamentarians. Today I would like to emphasize the main thing: This "initiative" absolutely futile from the practical point of view hinders both the process of ratification by the Russian State Duma of the border treaties between our countries the importance of which has been mentioned above, and the start of preparations for a visit to Russia by Lithuania's President Valdas Adamkus. It is desirable that there should be a clear realization in Lithuania of the fact that attempts to realize the "recovery of damages" law are incompatible with the purposes of good neighborly expansion of Russian-Lithuanian relations.

Let us turn to another problem. Members of the Seimas who initiated the above law cited among other things the preamble of the "greater" Russian-Lithuanian Treaty of 1991. It contains general statement of the parties aimed at building mutual confidence (note that now these statements are being used to fan differences between the two countries). In our view it would benefit the cause of good neighborliness

much more if members of the Lithuanian diet, who are well aware of the Russians' worries over the criminal activities of Chechen separatists and terrorists, should analyze whether the Lithuanian side and members of the Seimas themselves fully comply with the provisions of Article 3 of the Treaty. Let me recall that it contains the obligation of the parties "to stop the formation and activities on their territories of organizations and groups, as well as the activities of individuals who have as their aim forcible abolition of independence, sovereign statehood and territorial integrity of the other High Contracting Party."

We know only too well that internal political factors strongly influence Russian-Lithuanian relations today. But why should this influence be necessarily negative? The Russian executive authority intends to continue to work to have the activities of all state organs of Russia help the shaping of understanding and neighborliness with the country's partners abroad and first of all with its close neighbors.

I admit that Russia closely followed the election campaign in Lithuania and especially the views on the Russian-Lithuanian relations of the principal contenders for the seats in the new Seimas. The statements heard during that period from the leaders of the parties that now comprise the coalition majority in parliament make it possible for us, we think, to hope for the elimination of the irritants that have emerged over recent months and for constructive joint efforts in the future. We expect this course to take on concrete outlines in documents of the Seimas and in activities of the new government.

In addition to their potential of bilateral relations, Russia and Lithuania have a sizable potential for working together in the Baltic region, Europe and internationally. This potential has already found expression in concrete deeds that benefit both countries. This potential is based on similar fundamental foreign-policy interests of the two countries: the desire to form a belt of good neighborliness around the perimeter of their borders and prevent conflicts in the adjacent regions; the desire to be active participants in the fundamental and dynamic changes in today's world, to direct its development along the road of democratization of international relations, priority of law, and the strengthening of the mechanisms of collective solution to the key problems: of the world on the basis of the UN Charter. Russia and, we are confident, Lithuania are well aware of the fact that their affiliation with the Baltic region with its unique historical, geographical, economical, ethnographical and political features provides us with additional possibilities in realizing our countries' national interests. At the same time it commits them not only to consolidating but also to contributing to the fabric of cooperation that has taken ages to form for the benefit of the peoples in this part of Europe.

This is why we attach special significance to deepening mutually advantageous cooperation with Lithuania within the framework of regional organizations such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States and initiatives. A good example of looking for new solutions is the Russian-Lithuanian proposals for the EC "Northern Dimension" action plan - the so-called Nida initiatives covering a broad range of regional projects of importance to both countries, which have already been highly assessed by EC and European Commission members.

We are ready to expand cooperative efforts in our countries' relations with the European Union. Unlike Lithuania that is negotiating its entry into the EC, Russia's relations with this organization are based on a bilateral partnership and cooperation agreement. At the same time we have a problem with having our interests appropriately taken into account as the European Union expands. This expansion will

give rise to new international realities in Europe. It is important that these changes should consolidate European unity and rule out the return to dividing lines on the continent. We expect that our joint efforts with the active participation of EC and European Commission members will result in solutions that would rule out possible losses to bilateral trade and economic cooperation after Lithuania has met the EC admission requirements and standards.

Russia's consistent policy to reduce the role of the factor of force in international relations while simultaneously consolidating strategic and regional security appears to be in line with Lithuania's interests. We are ready to make steep cuts in both the nuclear potential and conventional arms for these purposes provided the fundamental international and bilateral documents that guarantee the maintenance of strategic stability remain preserved and gain added strength. This applies foremost to the ABM Treaty. Aspiring to greater stability and mutual confidence in the Baltic region, Russia has in recent years cut its group of ground forces in its northwest by 40 percent and reduced its naval forces in the Baltic. The statement by Lithuania's President Adamkus in early 1998 on confidence- and security-building measures was seen in Russia as evidence of the correspondence of our approaches and the possibility of a positive evolvement of the Russian-Lithuanian dialogue on these problems. One of the practical results of this dialogue was an understanding reached between Russia and Lithuania on annual conventional weapon verifications in addition to those under the 1999 Vienna accords.

All these things strengthen our conviction that a solution to the Baltic security problem satisfactory to all the sides can be achieved through consistent regional measures aimed at greater mutual confidence and stability. These measures are supposed to, first, be concerned not only with the military-political sphere but also with the economic, social, ecological and humanitarian spheres and suggest answers to new nonmilitary threats and challenges and, second, to be based on a firm democratic and well-balanced system of European security of the 21st century. Our countries already work jointly on such a system within the OSCE framework. It would be generally beneficial to make this cooperation more productive in order to make the maximum use of the unique potentials and advantages of this multi-purpose European organization to strengthen security and cooperation in the Baltic region and in Europe as a whole and remove problems that cause concern among the countries in the region.

We regard the other approach to protecting security of the Baltic states, including Lithuania, based on their incorporation into NATO as profoundly fallacious and introducing in the Baltic region division, mistrust and liable in the final analysis to inevitably result in destabilization. Far from being "NATO-phobes," we are interested in broader partnership with the alliance. Today's NATO political and military tenets, unfortunately, take no account of Russia's security interests and some of them directly contravene these interests. Therefore, never denying in principle any state the right to decide on how to protect their own national security, we at the same time reserve the right to see how it would affect the interests of our security and to draw the appropriate conclusions.

I am confident that statesmen, responsible politicians and, most importantly, the peoples of our countries have learned well what seems to be one of the most important lessons of our common and eventful history: every time a narrow understanding of national goals prevailed in Russia or Lithuania, or an attempt was

made to solve important military-political, economic or other problems to the detriment of the neighbor, the result was opposite to the one hoped for.

Successes, if any, were short-lived while the fundamental interests of the Russian and Lithuanian peoples - good neighborliness and cooperation - suffered and proved hard to remedy.

It is important today not to succumb to political opportunism but to look for answers that measure up to the challenges of the times. Relations between our countries over recent years have created a good potential, which, if properly used, could move the Russian-Lithuanian partnership to a qualitatively new level in the coming century.

Translated by Violeta Stankūnienė