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The Russian-Lithuanian Relationship: The Regional Aspect

Already during a whole decade – since the beginning (in 1991) of the new stage in the Lithuanian statehood – Lithuania has been searching for its place in the international environment. In this relation, some Lithuanian politicians, in their assessment of the geopolitical situation, consider that Lithuania as a state is situated between Russia and the West.

Geographically Lithuania borders with Latvia, Belarus, Poland and Russia (in the sense of the Kaliningrad Oblast). From the geographical point of view, it would be unjustifiable to locate Lithuania only between Russia and the West, the more so, that the border of Lithuania with Russia lies in its south-west. However, political realities do not always conform to the requirements of natural sciences. In their essence, Lithuanian politicians are hardly the disciples of symbolism, this fashionable trend in the art of the 20th century, nevertheless, they are employing its underlying principles – “hidden reality” or “multiple allegorization.”

By this way, the acuteness of some of the Lithuanian foreign policy problems seems to become somehow diminished while others, on the contrary, get exaggerated. As an example, we may take the relationships between Lithuania and its immediate neighbors in the Baltic Sea Region and Russia, having in mind the Kaliningrad Oblast as a subject of the Russian Federation. As concerns this Baltic Sea itself, there seem to be no complicated problems, though it is certainly not an axiom, while in relation to Kaliningrad, such problems do exist and they warrant a corresponding attention.

The whole activity of Lithuanian foreign policy is being shaped on the three fundamental principles, proclaimed as far back as the beginning of the 90s, and declared as commensurate: integration into NATO, integration into the EU, and good relations with the neighboring countries. These priorities have remained immutable with the changes of the governments (they occur quite often – two or three times during the term of office of one Seimas). Different political forces come to govern the state but the strategic triad remains invariable. All this enables the authorities of the state to speak about the consensus in the Lithuanian foreign policy which enjoys the support of the inhabitants and the elite of the society.

Quite probably, a statement like that warrants some criticism, as in a democratic society, and Lithuanians seem to believe such a society to exist in their country, there must inevitably emerge political parties, and even their alliances, which would try to influence the public for the sake of revising and deviating from a number of foreign policy prospects proclaimed by the state government. It may be presumed that in Lithuania itself there is some resistance against the course of Lithuania to joining, for example, NATO, judging from, according to the mass media, the obvious concern in this respect on the part of the leader of the Conservative Party, a member of Seimas Vytautas Landsbergis.

This article, however, discusses how Lithuania, on the basis of the declared principles, builds its relations with Russia precisely in the Baltic Sea Region and, not without due foundation, expects reciprocity on the part of Russia.

As it is evident from the practice of the last decade, Lithuania has been developing its foreign policy in the Baltic Sea Region while in principle experiencing a good neighborly attitude from Russia. It is just enough to remember that Russia was the first to recognize the sovereignty of Lithuania, and Lithuania was the first state with which Russia established an agreement-based relationship. Good neighborly relations with Russia were beneficial for Lithuania in the sense that this as if somehow let it “play for time” for the sake of strengthening its international situation. It is necessary to say that Lithuania itself made a number of steps, which to a great extent assisted the spirit of good neighborliness. An example of such an action was the adoption of the “zero option” in establishing citizenship for the inhabitants of Lithuania.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to say that not everything is so placid in the relations between these two countries. Yes, Russia is disposed negatively towards the process of NATO expansion to the East, and in this aspect any profitable Russian–Lithuanian cooperation in the framework of one of the principles of the Lithuanian triad, namely – joining NATO – could never be expected. Nevertheless, Russia does not place it on the crest of the matter, as it is always possible to concentrate on the two remaining principles.

At the same time, according to the attitude of a number of Russian analysts, some actions of the Lithuanian politicians are to a great extent corporate, often liable to be influenced by personalities, and not always for the benefit of good neighborliness. An example is the law on the compensation of damages caused by the co-called “Soviet occupation of Lithuania,” which was passed by the Seimas on June 13, 2000, or the statement of one of the vice-speakers of the former Seimas that about a half of the personnel in the Russian embassy in Vilnius were engaged in espionage activities against Lithuania.

It is obvious that in such circumstances, the level of good neighborliness in the relations between Russia and Lithuania would be subject to certain fluctuations. Though, as it could be inferred from the statements both of Lithuanian and Russian politicians, neither of the parties would ever wish any stagnation of this level, not to mention its decrease. On June 12, 2000, President of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus, when congratulating his counterpart Vladimir Putin on the occasion of the Day of the Adoption of the Declaration on the State Sovereignty of Russia, expressed hope that “the Lithuanian– Russian relationship will further develop in the spirit of good neighborliness, mutual understanding, and cooperation of partners.”

The Russian side has also expressed a direct interest in the development of such relations. To a great extent the Kaliningrad Oblast is exactly this guinea pig on which the bilateral relations are built and their strength tested.

Naturally, this does not mean that the bilateral relationship depends exclusively on the attitude of Lithuania towards Kaliningrad. This would be a simplified approach. Kaliningrad represents only one of the numerous facets of the complicated inter-governmental relations which, naturally, could not be ignored. The district, on the contrary, presents a possibility of intensifying the development of good neighborliness. That is perfectly understood by both parties.

The problem of territorial isolation of the region from the “main” Russia was already identified in 1991 when an agreement between the governments of the Republic of Lithuania and the then RSFSR on economic, social and cultural cooperation in the

development of the Kaliningrad Oblast was signed. The importance of this Agreement is emphasized by the fact that in the general registry of the Russian-Lithuanian agreements, it is listed under number 2!

The objective necessity on the part of Russia to establish strong ties with its western region required from the two states to form a more comprehensive legal basis, and in the first half of the 90s, there was signed a considerable number of inter-governmental and inter-institutional agreements where, in one aspect or another, the issues of the interrelation between the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Lithuania were reflected. It is possible to mention in this connection the Agreement on Trade and Economic Relations which provided for the most-nation-nation treatment; the 1992-1993 inter-institutional agreements on transport; provisional inter-governmental agreement on interstate travel of the nationals of both states; and the 1995 agreement on the crossing points on the Russian–Lithuanian border. And finally, the 1999 inter-governmental Agreement for the Long-Term Cooperation between the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation and Regions of Lithuania ought to be regarded as a fundamental document of today on the relations of the neighbors. One of the steps in the practical realizations of this Agreement was the meeting in Vilnius on June 13-14, 2000 of the Lithuanian–Russian Council on the Long-Term Cooperation between Regional and Local Authorities of the Republic of Lithuania and the Kaliningrad Oblast.

It is necessary to note that such agreements are in conformity with the two principles of the Lithuanian foreign policy triad. The course of Lithuania to join NATO is left on one side. It might seem that the NATO-related issue is an exclusively inter-governmental matter and in has only indirect relevance to the problems of the relationship between the Kaliningrad Oblast and regions of Lithuania. Unlike the EU accession or the principles of good neighborliness, which directly affect the sphere of activity of the inhabitants on both sides of the border. But this is only the impression one can get at the first sight.

The periodic references in the mass media, mostly on the initiative of Lithuanian politicians, to the “problem of the Kaliningrad Oblast,” its demilitarization, are associated by the people of Kaliningrad with the expected entry of Lithuania into NATO. The extreme expression of such associations is the dilemma about the future development of the district: whether to strive for economic prosperity or turn it into a Russian outpost in the West.

Most obviously, the solution here might be in the co-ordination of the positions of both parties, which might be defined in the following way: Lithuania has the right to choose membership in any international organization, including NATO; Russia considers that its interests in the Baltic region must be respected by good neighbors.

Far more advanced and possessing a definite content is the relationship of Lithuania and Russia in the Baltic region in relation to the EU. It may possibly be determined by particular economic traditions which took shape during the half of a century period when Lithuania and Russia both were parts of one state. This is especially evident in the relations of the regions and institutions of Lithuania with Kaliningrad.

Until 1992, the economic complex of the Oblast used to get from Lithuania up to 10.5 percent from the total volume of various products, materials and resources. In the beginning of the 90s, most of the economic ties were broken. Lithuania, as well as other

republics of the former Soviet Union, started taking exceptional interest in the West. However, the economic reality revealed a need for a diverse market. Most of the economic traditions were restored, already on a new foundation. And quite expeditiously too. According to some data, in the period of 1994-1996, the Lithuanian trade turnover with the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation increased by more than four times. Kaliningrad started importing approximately a third of Lithuanian products from the total trade turnover.

It is necessary to note here that one of the essential factors which facilitated such intensive development of the commercial-economic ties, was the introduction of a visa-free regime for the travels of the citizens of both Lithuania and Kaliningrad.

Turning back to geography and taking a look at the map, it is possible to see that Lithuania directly borders with Russia only in the region of the Kaliningrad Oblast. Most probably, it is mainly due to this circumstance that the Russian-Lithuanian relations to a great extent have a Kaliningrad-related content. There are the quite well developed economic relations, regional political contacts and a shared desire of both states to employ the factor of Kaliningrad for the further intensification of cooperation. Former Vice-minister for Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Vygaudas Ušackas, who was coordinating on the Lithuanian side the issues of cooperation with Kaliningrad, already in 1998 observed: "Our partner number one in Russia is the Kaliningrad Oblast. The relations with it is a question of stability."

There is no doubt that Lithuania will endeavor to develop good neighborly relations with Russia. They are, actually, of vital importance for it. There is no coincidence that Lithuanian politicians, commenting on the present difficult economic situation in Lithuania, relate it with the consequences of the economic crisis in Russia in August 1998. At the same time, Lithuanians understand that by absolute indices they have never played any particular role for Russia and, most probably, never will, for quite objective reasons. In the political sense – yes, but not in the economic. That is why Lithuania prefers to "bite off" only as much as it is able to "chew" and, disregarding the quite frequently re-occurring unfavorable circumstances, is trying to follow the course of cooperation it has chosen.

In this respect, namely the commercial-economic relations are the most informative. Until the 1998 crisis, the bulk of Lithuanian exports went to Russia. In 1999 it decreased – by 70 percent to Russia and by more than a half to CIS. Though, according to the information presented by Lithuanian experts, trade relations with Kaliningrad have a tendency to grow: in 1998 its volume constituted 150 million USD, in 1999 – about 200 million, which in total is comparable to the scope of Kaliningrad's cooperation with Poland, though the capacities of Lithuania and Poland for such a cooperation are, naturally, different.

The Russian side is perfectly aware that there is a high degree of probability in the aim taken by Lithuania to join the EU being realized. But all this is still future, albeit not so distant. Such mutual understanding finds its expression in concrete forms of cooperation.

Thus Lithuania, in the process of establishing itself in the West European structures, is still trying to retain its markets in the East and, if possible, to expand them. Russia is co-operating. As an illustration, there is the construction in Kaliningrad of the Lithuanian meat-processing factory "Klaipėdos Maistas." There have not yet been any

precedents of implementing such a project with the construction of a factory involved. It is, first of all, the most substantial Lithuanian investment into the district's economy amounting to 5 million USD, and, secondly – it only took about 15 months to construct the factory with the productive capacity of 30 thousand cans of meat and 5 tons of sausages in one shift.

In general, the situation with the Lithuanian investments into the economy of the Kaliningrad Oblast is shaping quite agreeably. Thus in 1999, as compared to 1998, they increased by six times and constituted 4.7 million USD. In addition to the aforementioned “Klaipėdos Maistas,” there have been opened a branch of Šiauliai confectionery mill, workshops for the assembly of television sets and a number of other enterprises. Actively engaged there are Lithuanian construction workers and road builders.

Nevertheless, the greatest importance from the part of Lithuania is attached namely to political cooperation. In general, it is possible to compare its policy towards Kaliningrad with the policy of Poland towards Lithuania. Lithuania is trying (besides, quite convincingly!) to play in regard to the region a role of a “locomotive” which will pull Kaliningrad to the “station” named “EU.”

Such patronage may be based on two purposes. On the one hand, it enhances Lithuania's potential to become a regional leader in the south-eastern Baltic region, on the other, reinforces its chances to appear before the European Union as a state which, even though experiencing certain difficulties in politics and economy, is already “mature” enough to “play” as an equal member in the pan-European “orchestra.”

Quite illustrative in this sense is the more active involvement of Kaliningrad into the Northern Dimension Initiative. The author of this project was Finland and its initiative was mainly directed towards the north-east of Europe (for Russia – towards its north-west). The Kaliningrad prospects were hardly discernible in this Finnish Initiative.

Under these circumstances, Lithuanians made an attempt – and not without success either! – at playing an individual role in one of the European regions. For some time there was a search for an appropriate form to be given to this, the Lithuanian initiative. One thing was obvious: the implementation of this initiative would be directed towards Kaliningrad. That was predetermined by the whole logic of Lithuanian-Russian relations.

For example, as it has already been mentioned, since the very beginning of the new stage of Lithuanian statehood, Lithuania and Russia have had definite, agreed on commitments in regard to the Kaliningrad Oblast. In 1999 Lithuania increased the level of its consular presence in Kaliningrad by transforming its Consulate into the Consulate General; in the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs there is an office of Ambassador for Special Missions who exclusively deals with Kaliningrad-related issues; in the period of the last two or three years, due to the efforts of Lithuania, there have been organized a number of scientific and specialized conferences, seminars and meetings on different levels to deal with the problems of Kaliningrad.

According to the opinion of the former Lithuanian Consul General in Kaliningrad Jonas Voronavičius, all this activity was in conformity with the strategy worked out in Lithuania – to lead Kaliningrad to a new stage of relationship with Lithuania, which in the near future will probably become a member of the EU.

Such commitments of Lithuania took their expression in the concrete and efficient activity of the President of the Committee of Senior Officials of the Council of the Baltic

Sea States Dalius Čekuolis during the Lithuanian presidency in that organization. Taking advantage of his right as the President to choose the venue, Mr. Čekuolis selected Kaliningrad for the meeting of his Committee. On February 17-18, 1999, such meeting took place, with the issue of the bilateral relations between Lithuania and the Kaliningrad Oblast high on the agenda.

Later Lithuania took a very serious attitude towards the proposals arising from the EU Common Strategy for Russia, which was adopted in the summit in Cologne in June 1999, and from the analogous Russian “Strategy,” the text of which was submitted by Vladimir Putin at the summit in Helsinki in October of the same year.

A special attention of Lithuanians, whose attitudes were expressed by the above-mentioned Vygaudas Ušackas, was drawn to one of the parts of the Russian text – Part 8. Trans-border cooperation. Point 8.2., was about “introducing a substantial content to the Northern Dimension Initiative in the development of cooperation,” while Point 8.3 emphasized that it was necessary “to work towards the conclusion, if necessary, of a special agreement with the European Union for ensuring the protection of the interests of the Kaliningrad Oblast, as a subject of the Russian Federation, in the process of the European Union enlargement, likewise towards a possibility of transforming it into a “pilot” Russian region in the cooperation between Russia and the European Union in the 21st century.”

Taking advantage of the fact that it takes a long time to implement any agreement with the EU, Lithuania showed initiative in the frameworks of both this Strategy and the Northern Initiative.

In February 2000, Vice-minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Ivan Ivanov was working in Kaliningrad. On February 9, he left for Nida for a meeting with his Lithuanian counterpart Vygaudas Ušackas. During this meeting, there were co-ordinated joint proposals to the European Union in the sphere of trade, investments, transport and energy sector, environment protection, education, health care, combating crime, strengthening border control and cross-border cooperation. These proposals were given the name of the “Nida Initiative” and sent to the representatives of Russia and Lithuania in Brussels to be included into the Northern Dimension Action Plan under preparation.

Then there followed some supplementary actions on the part of Lithuania. Thus, for example, during his visit to Kaliningrad in March 2000, Vygaudas Ušackas presented information on the highlights and priorities, Nida Initiative included, not only to the local politicians but he also met with the public of Kaliningrad at the State University.

It is worth mentioning that the Vice-minister was quite cautious about his statements and did not insist on unconditional integration of Kaliningrad into European structures, though he had no doubts whatever in such prospect, and did his best to emphasize the specific role of Lithuania in this aspect: “People themselves will determine the specifics and scope of integration. We do not wish you to feel independent [from Russia].” For Lithuanians, he implied, as always it was important to co-operate namely with Russia.

Such active efforts of Lithuanians in regard to Kaliningrad resulted in the Russian – Lithuanian relations reaching a clearly more advanced level of development. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have in mind that the political component of good neighborliness simply tones down those problems which still persist in the Russian–

Lithuanian relations. It is possible to attribute here frequent cases of discrimination of the Russian-speaking population and the Russian language (Russians account for more than 8 percent of the inhabitants in Lithuania). According to some media reports, that is especially pronounced in the places where the Russian-speaking population is the densest (e.g. Vilnius, with up to 50 percent of the total Russian population in Lithuania and Klaipėda, where this percent amounts to 40).

In Vilnius there are Cultural Centers for Polish, Jewish and other peoples. However, the problem of opening a Russian Cultural Center is still awaiting its resolution. An illustrative example here might be the establishing in Kaliningrad in April 2000 of the Regional National-Cultural Autonomy for the Lithuanians in the Kaliningrad Oblast (total number of Lithuanians residing in the district amounts only to 2 percent of the total number of inhabitants).

Among other problems which obstruct the good neighborly relations, there could be mentioned the problem of transit to the Kaliningrad Oblast through the territory of Lithuania, consisting both of persons and cargoes, including military ones (at present it is regulated by the so-called provisional agreement); Lithuanian politicians often issue statements concerning a revision of the Potsdam Treaty of 1945, and question the legitimacy of Kaliningrad's belonging to Russia, in support of Chechen separatism. These and some other negative aspects in the Russian–Lithuanian relations cast a distinct shadow on the good neighborliness Lithuania is advocating. There is no doubt that this circumstance also affects the formation of its image as one of the leaders in the Baltic region.

Relations with Russia continue to be one of the cornerstones of the regional policy of Lithuania. At the same time, according to some experts, even the aspirations of Lithuania for NATO and the EU membership, supported by most of the countries in Europe, cannot prevent Russia from realizing its interests in the Baltic region. A considerable part of the Russian interests (political, economic and cultural) are expressed through the Kaliningrad Oblast, which borders with Lithuania. Consequently, Kaliningrad will further remain one of those principle points of intersection in the Russian–Lithuanian relations.

The government of Lithuania is fully aware of that and will strive to develop relations and contacts with Kaliningrad. Russia is likewise interested in such a policy. In the eventuality of a successful localization of separate negative moments which surface in Lithuanian politics, such as the exaggeration of the historic particularities of Kaliningrad, their elevation with the possibly resultant development of separatist tendencies in some parts of the region, likewise periodic activation of “Minor-Lithuanian” (from the term “Lithuania Minor”) sentiments, the development of Lithuania's relations and contacts with Kaliningrad might be employed for the strengthening of the Russian–Lithuanian relationship, disregarding even the unequivocal character of Lithuanian aspirations concerning NATO and the EU.