

Vytautas Landsbergis

The Russian Riddle and Lithuanian Reality

When eleven years ago, in January 1990, Sajūdis called on the people of Vilnius to extend a respectful welcome to Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the **neighboring country**, it was not only the guest and his environment who expressed unconcealed annoyance. The local Communist establishment, although more and more often speaking out in favor of independence of action, was unprepared for such terminological radicalism yet either. A different country, well, maybe, **although not exactly** – such, most probably, was the line of thinking and perception, because there also existed an opposition to Sajūdis (then and for a long time after) with monotonously often repeated words: “why do we need to sever the ties so rudely”, how is it possible “to cut them off completely”, how shall we live “in separation” and so on.

Ten years after, Russia is a different state indeed, even though it promised to “stay while leaving” and in certain respects has accomplished this idea successfully. Either it has partially stayed or it is returning via the economy and energy policy, i.e. “to continue to be present” (*prisutstvovat*) politically. The Lithuanian public, and thereby, the future of the country is currently confronted with another version of the old issue: is Russia **one** of the foreign states, or is it the main, **the most important** country? Political forces in Lithuania, connected to the past, naturally follow the arguments appearing in front of their eyes: Eastern markets (the source of welfare, despite the lesson of 1998), traditional contacts (“the Kremlin corridors”), the omnipotent geopolitics (we cannot escape it), maybe some profit, and the hopes of staying in local power (“*na mestach*”) longer and with a stronger sense of protection. To those who are less strongly connected and who have freed even their sub-consciousness of the syndrome of a Russian periphery and have no wish to be Russia’s governors (ruling representatives of its interests), Russia is one of the great powers of the world, among whose intersecting interests and desirable influences the new pro-independence activists will have to maneuver.

Such is **the Russian dilemma in front of Lithuania**, to which the pro-independent activists of the last decade may still respond by reminding of certain things: **what** Russia, **which** Russia are we talking about?

As before, the answer to this question lies in **the Lithuanian dilemma in front of Russia**. Are we, or are we not a **different** state for Russia altogether and forever, or is it just **temporary**?

The phrases which occasionally slip from the tongues of contemporary Russian politicians (abundant quotations can be provided) have not so far given much ground for optimism. We are a “lost territory” to them (the losses should be regained), and our freedom is no source of joy for our neighbor (Russia has suffered “humiliation” as a result and, strangely enough, such terms and such concept have infiltrated even Western politicians, therefore – no more “humiliation”!).

Such is the reality for Lithuania and the core of mutual relations.

Still, let us not forget the mass demonstrations in Moscow and Leningrad speaking out for the freedom of Lithuania (“hands off!”), Boris Yeltsin’s words addressed in January, 1991 to Mikhail Gorbachev (“bring this disgrace /bezobrazije/ to an end), and, finally, an opinion poll carried out only a couple of years ago to find out the attitude of all Russian citizens on Lithuania’s membership in NATO (over 70 percent said, “it is a matter for

Lithuania itself to decide”). Therefore, although lately the stench of chauvinism there has been getting stronger, it should not be forgotten that the ruling elite does not account for the entire country.

The Russian riddle – it is not just the possibility of aggressiveness of the “newcomers”, which is being demonstrated, and the potential threat of that country, the scourge of which, displayed alongside with a piece of cake, can secure various concessions from the West. (Why not from Lithuania, too?) The Russian intelligentsia maintain quite sufficient understanding and good will towards Lithuania; there is also the wish to change, simply to be Europeans.

Somebody is going to say right here – was it then worth for Lithuanians to provoke the Russian irritation by bringing up the issue of compensation for damage brought by the occupation? Russians themselves fell victims to their own executioners...

In that case, I will have to go back to the beginning of the article - we are a different state! “**Own**” executioners and an attack against **another** country – these are different things, and the responsibility is different, international in this latter case. When someone is trying to negate their responsibility on behalf of a foreign state, they at the same time insist that we have been and that we are **not** a different state. Would anyone in Lithuania today dare agree with this stance?

No, there is the victim and the responsible party or, at least, its successor. And in such a case, after we have agreed about the **victims**, a friendly and constructive talk is possible: brothers Russians, you are in need, thus, let us not discuss only the money and the issue of payment today. Go ahead and promise to compensate for the deposits of our people’s rouble savings until 1990, and the International Monetary Fund will not criticize us for paying out the compensations by ourselves (as much as we can in the time being), until an enriched Russia starts giving it back in time. We will boost our economy also with the help of foreign investment. Then we can see it double and triple (as in Poland and the Czech Republic in one year’s time), to get new jobs and salaries with this new capital, after you permit the West to accept us into NATO! (It could be an informal talk, because formally nobody recognizes the veto right for Russia.) Conclude a long-term crude oil sale contract with our refinery, and we will all benefit, and Lithuania can then wait for the billions of compensation. Ordinary people understand simple talk in a simple way; this also is the key to a diplomat’s mind, and from my experience I recall that it used to be fruitful.

At this point, we should take it into notice once again that the psychological “Russian riddle” should not be the source of our fear, as it can be solved with openness and constructiveness. Then one is able to stand firm, without surrendering and without getting angry. It indeed is very important to maintain the natural links among nations and professional groups, to keep old friendships, to provide correct information, and, instead of developing superficial, not to speak of some fear-ridden and ingratiating, relations, pursue good, normal and humane relations. “The people’s diplomacy” that used to be so fruitful 10-12 years ago, becomes relevant and indispensable today. It brings the high diplomacy closer to the ground, and we can see the future better.

Some day, hopefully soon, the squabble: who is "for" Russia and who is "against" it should be done with. We are **against** the bad past, thus being **for** freedom from it. We prefer future Lithuania and future Russia.