

RUSSIAN-LITHUANIAN RELATIONS: WILL THE SUCCESS STORY LAST?

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By most accounts, Russian-Lithuanian relations have fared pretty well over the last decade. Lithuania was granted formal independence two weeks after the Moscow putsch of August 1991, and this independence has since never been questioned. Since that time, no Russian integrationist plan has included Lithuania. Russian military forces were withdrawn from the country in 1993, a year before they left Latvia and Estonia, or Germany, for that matter.

While Russia was generous, Lithuania was forthcoming. It deemed it wise to grant citizenship rights at independence to all its permanent residents, which included the Russian diaspora. It did not claim Kaliningrad but, instead, engaged the Russian enclave in a network of mutually beneficial contacts. Vilnius and Moscow were able to resolve the border issue in a treaty signed in 1997, and also a much thornier problem of the Russian military transit to and from Kaliningrad across the Lithuanian territory.

In general terms, the relations are not close (Vilnius prioritizes its ties with the West), but they are good. Russia does not find many reasons to publicly chastise Vilnius, as it does with respect to Tallinn and especially Riga. Day-to-day relations between ethnic Russians and the titular population are conflict-free. The absence of discrimination is met by the lack of irredentism.

Few empires, including those in Europe, have departed so gracefully. However, this situation may not last forever. The new Russian foreign policy concept talks about “good prospects” for relations with the Baltic States, and first of all Lithuania.¹ However, there are new challenges on the horizon which can be easily seen. Unless those Russians and the Lithuanians who are genuinely concerned with their bilateral relationship work constructively to respond to the coming changes in the environment, the second decade of modern Russo-Lithuanian relations may be considerably less successful than the first one.

Basically, there are two principle challenges which must be addressed. Neither is new, but both have moved close enough to start influencing the relationship directly. One is NATO expansion, and the other one, the enlargement of the European Union.

THE NATO DILEMMA

On NATO, there is already noticeable agitation in the runup to the next round of the alliance enlargement which could be decided in 2002. Among the candidates for membership, Lithuania presents a seemingly strong case. First, having secured the center of new Europe (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary), it now makes sense to shore up the flanks (i.e., the Baltic and the Balkans). Second, Lithuania has made substantial progress in economic transition, democratization, and the building of new armed forces. Third, it shares a border with NATO member Poland and does not border on mainland Russia. Fourth, it does not have conflicts with its neighbors, and is rather integrated

¹ The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, adopted on July 10, 2000. Source: “Rossiyskaya Gazeta,” July 11, 2000.

internally, with the minorities enjoying equal rights. Moreover, a package solution that includes Lithuania (but not necessarily Latvia and Estonia) would nevertheless send a political signal to Moscow, effectively placing the whole Baltic region under the Alliance's umbrella.²

At this time, Moscow appears confused. On the one hand, it continues to stick to the notion that NATO enlargement is a threat to Russian national security, and that the bloc's expansion across the former Soviet border would constitute a grave political provocation. If anything, skepticism with regard to NATO, which emerged as a byproduct of enlargement Phase I, grew into thinly-veiled hostility towards it in the wake of the Kosovo crisis. Suffice it to compare the 1997 and 2000 versions of Russia's national security policy blueprint, or the 1993 and 2000 editions of the military doctrine and the foreign policy concept.

On the other hand, the Russian government has realized by now that it has no real veto power on NATO's decisions. If the alliance had gone to war over Moscow's adamant objections, it could admit a member without first clearing its candidacy with Russia. The horror list of Russian counter-measures has consistently failed to impress the West who considers Russia's policies to be much more rational and its leaders much more cautious than their own pronouncements lead one to believe. Thus, when asked: "What will you do if a Baltic state is invited to join NATO?" Russian officials can only reply that they will take adequate measures. But what is "adequate?"

It would appear tempting to call the Russians' bluff again. After all, as recent history shows, Germany was reunited in NATO, the Central Europeans joined NATO, and Yugoslavia was bombed by NATO - all despite Moscow's protests. Make hay, one might say, while Russia is weak. It will be too late when she recovers and demands to be taken into account in a big way.

This view is firmly rooted in historical experience, but it assumes that the future will be essentially like the past, only the dividing lines will be drawn differently. This assumption *per se* may be intellectually correct or not; what is important, is that it helps to inform the future by offering the models of the past. True, Russia's reaction against NATO enlargement did not hurt NATO very much, and did not put a Zhirinovskiy in the Kremlin, but it pushed the center ground of the Russian political elite very much in the anti-Western, anti-American direction. For many in Moscow, NATO now stands not only for a past adversary, but also for the prime source of threat today. As a result, in terms of Europe's security, one is appreciably worse off than back in 1991 when the USSR collapsed and Lithuania became independent, raising hopes of a Europe "one and free."

As to Moscow's preference, it would be for Lithuania to stay outside of NATO or, at least, for the decision to take her in to be deferred indefinitely. This Russian view betrays the same logic of dividing lines and exhibits the geopolitical baggage of buffer states and zones of influence. In the recent past, Russia's harsh reaction against the membership bid of the Central Europeans did contribute to the latter's swift and smooth admission to NATO. Moscow's dark warnings and thinly veiled threats backfired against her, bringing back the image of a bully, only this time deprived of its teeth. Should Russia use the same tactic again, it is sure to lose. Its argument about a red line running along the former Soviet border is not particularly convincing. From a different point of view, a failure by

² Darius K. Mereckis. Lithuania as a NATO Partner. *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 1999, 4, p.37-50

Lithuania to win invitation to NATO in the second group of new members after so much effort (e.g., international Vilnius conferences of NATO hopefuls) could lead to frustration among at least part of its elite.

To avoid frustration (in case Lithuania is not invited in 2002) and crisis (in case it is), both Vilnius and Moscow need to broaden their focus and work to discard some traditional notions. Lithuania's security presently rests on several pillars, including the U.S. political commitments, NATO's proximity (via Poland), what can be termed candidate membership in the European Union, and last, but not least, its treaty with Russia. It is inconceivable in the present-day European environment that the country would again be threatened with outside military pressure, not to speak of aggression. Of course, the situation may change for the worse (no contingency planner is short on scenarios), but this deterioration is not inevitable. Moreover, this risky backward-leading road can be effectively barred. The way to do it is for Lithuania to think European, not merely Western. Europe's (and in particular, Lithuania's) security can only be achieved through integrating Russia into a security community with the rest of Europe, and the United States. This is the true security guarantee.

Of course, the bulk of that task will be the responsibility of the United States, its leading European allies, and of course (in the first place) Russia itself. Still, there are important things that smaller Central European and Baltic countries can do. In fact, their contribution is not only unique, but indispensable. Russia will only be accepted as a European country (rather than a power in Europe) after it has fully normalized relations with the countries which it historically dominated or even absorbed. Such normalization is no easy thing for any ex-empire, but it is a prerequisite for acceptance. Not only former empires require acceptance: a democratic policy, a decent treatment of minorities and non-aggressive behavior toward neighbors have all become the required qualifications for passing a Europeanness test, but fallen hegemonies are watched with particular scrutiny, especially in their relations with the former satellites, provinces, etc.

This is where Lithuania comes in. It has built a generally good relationship with Russia, and commands a measure of respect, which it can now put to good use. Occasionally, Vilnius may make a misstep, of course. For instance, public pressure on Moscow to pay indemnities for Soviet occupation has been counter-productive. It strengthens the hand of those in Russia who make a political career of post-imperial arrogance and xenophobia. Passivity, however, is no option. Psychologically, it may make sense to wait until the bigger partner takes a step first (and in fact it did, but this happened to be a flop, as the Russian 1997 offer of security guarantees), but in practice the smaller one can well engage its behemoth neighbor. Lithuanians may be still afraid of Russia, but the Russians are no less afraid of seeing NATO in the Baltic. Both fears are equally unfounded in the present circumstances, but both are firmly rooted in history - and the people's psyche.

It would do a lot of good to increase mutual transparency. One avenue leads toward an ongoing dialogue on security issues among private citizens wielding enough influence in their respective countries. Another one is through exchanges at the level of security and defense officials and military officers. Bilateral contacts can be supplemented by multilateral ones, to include Poland, Belarus, Scandinavian and Baltic countries. Multilateral context is especially beneficial for joint military exercises, e.g. BALTOPS. In the wake of the *Kursk* disaster, search and rescue operations have achieved new prominence. The Russians and the Lithuanians must learn the habits of daily cooperation

in security-related fields.

Military security in the traditional sense, however, has de facto ceased to be a relevant concern in the Baltic Sea area. Other aspects of security have come to the fore, and they need cross-border interaction. Russia and Lithuania need to expand and intensify cooperation among their police forces and legal agencies to fight international crime which thrives upon the lack of close coordination between the two countries' law-enforcement establishments.

This opening to Russia will not make the NATO enlargement issue go away. Nevertheless, it could help avoid a concentration on the old and largely irrelevant security agenda (overland aggression, internal destabilization, foreign occupation, and the like) and would constitute an investment into the future. Looking into the future, Lithuanians will appreciate that their best external security guarantee is a democratic Russia moving ever closer to Europe's economic, political and security institutions.

Of course, there is only so much that can be achieved between Lithuania and Russia. To seriously improve the situation in Europe as a whole, it is Russia and NATO who must overhaul their relationship, consolidate the common ground which has been there despite all the problems, sort out the issues that separate them, and start to narrow their differences, making the 1997 Founding Act work. This is not a mission impossible, over the medium and long term: in principle, the West and Russia are ripe for a beginning to gradually demilitarize their relations. In carrying out this tremendous task, the role of the European Union and its ties to Russia can hardly be underestimated.

THE EU ENLARGEMENT

In 1999, Lithuania was added to the list of official candidates for membership in the European Union, which was undoubtedly a major victory for its government. It is not clear when the membership will actually come – probably not too soon, and not automatically – but one can assume that it is more likely to happen within a decade or so. This has important implications for Lithuania's neighbors which will not join the Union, namely Russia and Belarus.

Moscow has too long treated the European Union as the lesser evil, or even as a benign organization - in comparison to NATO. What it liked about the EU were not the things that the EU had - the level of knowledge about the Union and especially the understanding of how it worked were never too high - but rather the things that the EU lacked, namely, the American presence and an integrated military organization. Officially, Russia pronounced EU enlargement "organic", in contrast to NATO's which was branded dangerous and destabilizing.

Still, the closer the prospect that some of the neighboring countries would actually join the EU, the more concerned Moscow became. It had to discover that whereas NATO was geared to contingencies, the EU operated on a routine day-to-day basis. The terms of trade would undergo substantial change, as would movements of people across the new EU boundaries. Speaking of the dividing lines in Europe, the true barriers were likely to be erected between those who belonged to the Union, and those left outside of it. The prospect of a Schengen curtain added poignancy to that bleak view.

Not only Russia will lose from an abrupt tightening of economic contacts with the neighbors. Lithuania will suffer no less. While after the 1998 Russian financial collapse

her exposure to the Russian market has shrunk, it remains an important market, especially in view of the agricultural policies of the European Union. Reducing Lithuania's exposure to the Russian market, while a sensible policy for the period of crisis, would be a preposterous notion if taken as a general proposition. In fact, it is cross-dependencies which cement the relations between countries, and it makes not only economic but also political sense, e.g., for Russia to see the Lithuanians value the Russian transit, and for the Lithuanians to welcome Russian private investment in their country.

With the prospect of EU enlargement in mind, it makes perfect sense for Lithuania, the Union and Russia to enter into consultations about the effects of the enlargement on the trade and economic contacts between Lithuania and Russia, and the ways of dealing with these effects. It would not be in anyone's interest to arrive at a situation in which the EU-Russia boundary becomes a wide moat hampering economic intercourse between neighbors, and confining Russia to the margins of a new Europe. Thus, in-depth negotiations, largely on the nitty-gritty of commerce, are a must.

If anything, the position of Kaliningrad as an enclave wedged between Lithuania and Poland, must concentrate the minds of Moscow officials on the need to think ahead and prepare for the eventual encirclement of the Oblast by the EU territory. So far, the federal authorities have been mainly concerned with the region drifting away, and its links with the Federation becoming loose. However, keeping Kaliningrad Russian, but allowing it to become a black hole of the Baltic region is not an attractive prospect. Russia will need to develop a view of Kaliningrad as a forward position inside the future EU, and integrate this into a general approach toward the European Union. Faced with the new reality along its western frontier, Russia will have to face the choice of either withdrawing into hopeless isolation, or of moving closer to its neighbors in a novel way - not through Russifying them, but through Europeanizing itself. It is not too easy to tell which will be her choice. There is no doubt however about which would be the best one.

Lithuania's relations with Russia are laden with the heavy baggage of the past which it would be better to put to one side and examine from the ethical and historical, rather than just the political point of view, as is the case today. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact is a shameful document which deserves full and unconditional repudiation, but the theme of the 50-year-long Soviet occupation can hardly win many Russian hearts and minds for Lithuania, and thus its effect on the relationship at this time can only be negative. The past should not be allowed to obscure the problems of today and the prospects for the future. Identifying the existing and coming problems and addressing them in a constructive manner is the best way to ensure that the relative success of Russian-Lithuanian relations can be consolidated and translated into a blossoming and mutually satisfying relationship in a future wider Europe.