

A View from the Side: Lithuania

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Two weeks Warsaw held a historic event. President of the United States of America George W. Bush arrived in the capital of Poland. During visit the US President submitted what in fact is a principal stance in support of the continuity of NATO enlargement, transparency of this process, and its “proximity” to the states-candidates. One could claim that the choice of the site of a visit – that is, Warsaw, the capital city of Poland – was by no means accidental. In some respect it entitles Poland to a new role – the role of a chain between West and East Europe. This signifies a new value for the entire North-Central European region. Beyond doubt, Lithuania as a neighbor of Poland and as a good friend whose bilateral relations with Poland are known as strategic partnership gains additional weight as well. In this new situation, at least it looks like new, the two states affirm their common goal – direct their effort towards the establishment of an integral and indivisible, stable and secure European house that is devoted to ensure the welfare of people and which is construed on the basis of new values.

Novelty, freshness and vitality are the features which could contribute a lot to the unique forms of Lithuanian-Polish cooperation established during the last decade and the daily efforts of the institutions responsible for implementation of them. The upcoming decade is a new epoch both in physical sense. Besides, if compared to the beginning of the 1990s it could launch a totally new geopolitical phase. In the forthcoming few years Lithuania should be entrusted membership in NATO, both states should be invited into the EU. Our states will be given means and channels to become part of the cause of creating the aforementioned new values and implementing them.

Present relations between Lithuania and Poland are identified by dynamics and intensity of their relations. More and more often a question arises: what is hidden behind this façade called ‘excellent political relations’? Are the various opportunities structures of cooperation provide exercised sufficiently, is their content filled? First of all, this could be said with regard to the development of economic ties, not least because we are soon to be bound by common rules of the game, common EU free trade area, and common obligations on custom duties. In the coming years, save Lithuania and Poland are joined together in the NATO and EU framework, commercial contacts, various economic projects will soon have the focus shift onward to them. Once Lithuania becomes NATO member, foreign investors, among others, will have the opportunity to enjoy its enhanced security. The example of Poland confirms this – Polish membership in NATO is one of the main factors for the huge influx of foreign capital into Poland.

We are happy of the fact that Poland has become one of our main foreign trade partners. In 2000 the turnover of trade amounted to almost half billion USD. As regards imports, Poland is the third largest trading partner of Lithuania, as regards exports – it occupies the fifth spot. Fine to know that in comparison to 1999 in 2000 the volume of trade between two countries increased by 50 percent. On the other hand, we must not water down the fact that Lithuania’s trade balance vis-à-vis Poland is negative. It reached 58.4

million USD deficit in 2000. This amounts to an invitation for Lithuanian businessmen 'to recall' one of the Europe's largest markets and to learn healthy management aggressiveness from the Poles.

One of the opportunities open – the trade fair of the Polish producers "POLEXPO", held annually in Kaunas. We should not forget exhibitions of Lithuanian goods in Poland. There is no doubt in my heart that Lithuanians will soon "launch into" Poland and start organizing equivalent trade fairs in Bialystok, for instance. (Kaunas maintains close relations with Bialystok).

Lithuanian Embassy in Poland has embarked on stimulating commercial contacts. The Embassy seeks to provide assistance for businessmen of both countries. Of course, one should not limit to activities in Poland, or in nearby region of Suwalki. Our main purpose is to develop cooperation between various cities and regions.

We welcome Polish investments in Lithuania even if they are not that huge (50 million USD), for instance – "Warta" and the Panevėžys' glass factory, POLSAT and the Baltic TV station, insurance sector, computer production and trade, agriculture. Although each of these joint enterprises is highly important and valuable, I must pay special attention to the activities of "Kredyt Bank" in Lithuania. This bank was the first foreign bank, which came to Lithuanian market. It took six years of successful activities that the Bank expanded its activities into the largest cities of Lithuania. I tell you – you need not be afraid to use "Kredyt Bank" bank machines even in Poland – You will be welcomed with scriptures in Polish, English, and in Lithuanian language.

Unfortunately there is still a number of issues unresolved, which hamper the business development. One is a strange view of the rivers of truck congested at Budzisko-Kalvarija border passage station. Queues, which extend 10 to 15 kilometers, gather tens, hundreds of Polish, Lithuanian, Dutch, Latvian, Estonian and Russian trucks. They waste hours, sometimes even days, waiting at the border. And time is the money. One of the solutions to the problem – An Agreement between Lithuania and Poland on joint implementation of border procedures. Today, frontier-guards and customers replay each others' functions. Examples of border practices on Lithuanian-Latvian, Latvian-Estonian borders prove what is evident - one inspection would be enough. The Polish Parliament has not ratified exactly such kind of a Treaty, signed in 1997. We hope this Agreement, equally important to both states, will be implemented in the nearest future.

In the end I would like to share my vision of the future: prosperous Lithuania and Poland are united by a common European trade area with no frontiers, no customs, with modern international motorway trucks from all over trucks would use for control-free transportation of commodities. Businessmen, given that they want to leave Warsaw for Vilnius for negotiations, choose between traveling by plane and using super fast railway. In the latter case it would take three hours to reach Vilnius. There is no doubt businessmen pick traveling by train. I hope that this is not only a vision. I hope it turns out as a reality.