

OPINION

10 years of Lithuanian-Polish Reconciliation

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Speaking in historic terms, 10 years is not a long period of time. Notwithstanding this rule, last ten years in Lithuanian-Polish relations are tantamount to the entire era.

Understanding of the present is impossible unless we pay proper attention to history. History of Lithuanian-Polish relations counts close to 600 years. Approximately two hundred years before Columbus discovered the American continent, King of Poland Kazimieras the Great married the daughter of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Gediminas, Aldona. It took about two hundred years for two states to be joined together in a Union. Since 1569 two states had a united state of their own exist. It lasted until XVIII century.

The state was brought to an end through partitions carried out by aggressive neighbors. Aiming to save the Joint State, on May 3, 1791 Polish-Lithuanian Seimas passed the Constitution, second Constitution in the history of the world (the first being the US). It had far surpassed its own epoch - it implemented such ideas as the national sovereignty and civil rights in practice. I am proud of the fact that Lithuanian-Polish elite was the forefather of the ideas of universal liberties and democracy.

Breakdown of the state brought no end to cooperation and joint fight for freedom. This fight lasted until the 1863-1864 rebellion.

Cooperation between Lithuanian and Polish nations ended in the second half of the XIX century, when the epoch of nationalism spread all over Europe. These nations chose different paths of establishing the national statehood.

Despite the fact that later on the period of animosity started (it lasted for twenty Interwar years), this period was characterized by numerous episodes of mutual understanding and common power.

For that sake we may remind the fact that Stanislav Narutovič was one of the signatories of Lithuania's Act of Independence, - the brother of Gabriel Narutovič, future President of Poland.

Juzef Pilsudski – one of the Polish heroes and one of the founders of the state of Poland was, to tell the truth, born in Vilnius region. He sought to implement the idea of federation between Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. However, the nationalism, exceptionally strong at that time, acted as an impediment for those wishing to establish such a confederation in Central Europe.

In 1938 everyone could witness the recovery of the relations. On the other hand they were crushed by the war.

Since 1945, 45 years had to pass until Lithuania and Poland regained freedom and could formulate their international relations according to their vision and to their interests. As far as one can tell, Poland was semi-sovereign, communist-ruled; Lithuania, on the other hand, was a Soviet Republic, with no sovereignty available.

In 1989 whole Lithuania observed first elections in Poland, elections where “Solidarity” took part. This year “Solidarity” and “Sąjūdis” – Lithuania’s independence movement – entered into relations amongst themselves. Once Lithuania declared its independence, Poland backed Lithuania’s efforts to consolidate its position while fighting for true independence. Two weeks after the declaration of the Act of Independence first delegation that came to Lithuania and visited the Supreme Council of Lithuania-Lithuania’s Seimas was a Polish one. It was headed by Bronisław Geremek, then chairman of the most numerous “Solidarity” parliamentary guild. On this occasion the two sides signed first joint document. It reflected the commitment to ensure future cooperation and the will to acknowledge that meantime borders are unchangeable. I am pleased that I had the honor to participate in a yet unofficial international meeting.

In April 1990, at a time when the Soviet Union using all available means tried to threaten Lithuania, I attended the famous Convention of II “Solidarity”, an event, which took part in Gdansk, Poland. There I presented the delegates words of welcome from Vytautas Landsbergis – leader of “Sąjūdis” and Chairman of the Parliament of Lithuania. This Convention passed the resolution which voiced support for Lithuania’s aspirations to become independent state, demanded the cessation of economic blockade and “demonstration of Soviet power” on the Lithuanian territory.

In January 1991 Lithuania’s independence confronted most dangerous threats. One has to remember Soviet military intervention in Vilnius, and in that respect a visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Algirdas Saudargas to Poland, where, on the basis of secret proposal Polish counterparts conferred him the right by the to establish Government of Lithuania in exile, if necessary. My capacity was to accompany Minister Saudargas, and I was the first representative of the foreign country to speak in front of the forum of the Polish Senate. I appealed to the Polish people on behalf of Lithuania. I appealed through the media to the entire world. I appealed in order to gain support for Lithuanian independence and to ensure that the Soviet aggression is condemned. Indeed, Lithuania secured such a moral support of the Poles.

This support took several forms. One of these – a group of the members of the Polish Seimas embarked on activities to remain in the parliamentary building. One or the other Member of Parliament stayed in this building, which was threatened by Soviet pacification, overnight. This action lasted for three months. Members of Seimas participating in this action expressed their solidarity and readiness to fight for the independence of Lithuania. The official Poland, however, extended no recognition of Lithuania as a sovereign state – the position many Lithuanians condemned so much.

Nowadays we understand that Poland was unable to do this first of all because of the international situation (Western countries had not granted *de jure* recognition to independent Lithuania). Second factor was the status quo of bilateral relations with

the Soviet Union (at the time Poland sat at the table of negotiations over the removal of Soviet army from its territory).

It was the Polish society that expressed its growing support for the case of Lithuania's independence. This support took the shape of manifestations in front of Soviet diplomatic and consular missions.

Situation underwent an essential change after the Moscow putsch failed. On August 26, 1991 Prime Minister of Poland Jan Krysstof Bielicki informed the Prime Minister of Lithuania, Gediminas Vagnorius of the following: "today the Government of Poland has made the decision by which it expresses readiness to enter into normal international relations with the Republic of Lithuania. Motivating this decision, Prime Minister recalled that the Polish Government in exile never recognized the occupation of the State of Lithuania, Soviet Union carried out in 1940, condemning it. This act of condemnation manifested the understanding of the Polish nations.

This Moscow putsch forced the collapse of the Soviet Union. It laid favorable grounds for normal relations between Poland and Lithuania to be reestablished. At the same time it brought about a serious crisis Lithuania and Poland faced later.

Putsch unveiled the lack of loyalty Councils of Vilnius and Šalčininkai districts (Polish party and kolkhozes nomenclature monopolized control there) shared with regard to the independent state of Lithuania. Parliament of Lithuania, in response to such a position of theirs, dismissed the Councils. By way of doing this, the Parliament forced out the opinion as if it devalued the positions of these Councils. Polish community was deprived of the means to be represented on the municipal level.

This woke up the reaction of the Polish society, and the Polish Government had to react. Lech Wałęsa and Vytautas Landsbergis reciprocated by writing 'spiked' letters to each other. The former blamed the Lithuania for exercising group responsibility, the latter emphasised that the act is aimed at post-communists, not Poles. All in all, the relations suffered a blow.

As mentioned above previous disloyal position of the leaders of the Polish society vis-à-vis Lithuania was the main reason behind the dismissal of the Councils.

In view of the Vilnius conflict with Moscow they backed Moscow and made no secret of their sympathies for the Soviet Union. This fact is not a fact our nation should be proud of. It is not worth respect. We, the Poles, were always proud of the fighters' for freedom slogan "For the sake of freedom of ours and yours". To tell the truth, these slogans were realized by Tadeusz Kosciuska – a Pole, born in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

An idea of creation of the East Polish Soviet Republic, Vilnius region, western Belarus, and Ukraine including, was bestowed as one of the possible alternatives to Lithuania's drive for independence. A well-known Polish activist Jan Ciechanovic disseminated this idea. In the second part of the last decade this person referred to Bosnian Serbs as an example Poles in Lithuania should follow (Newspaper of the Polish Union in Lithuania).

On March 11, 1990 an event bearing historical significance was held in Lithuania. That day deputies of the Supreme Council of Lithuania cast their votes over the Act of Independence. Even the Russians supported the act. Only six deputies withheld from voting. They were Poles.

I am proud of the fact that I am among the group of three Poles – signatories of the Act of Independence. I feel anguish over the position of those deputies who did not vote for the independence of Lithuania. Referendum on the maintenance of the Soviet Union, boycotted by Lithuanians, received the Polish minority support. Moreover they boycotted the referendum on the removal of Russian Army.

On the other hand, today we may acknowledge that Lithuania, dealing with disloyal leaders of the Polish community and yet unable to detect true intentions of the Polish Government, also made substantial mistakes.

First of all, commissars were appointed to replace the dismissed district Councils. They impaired education of the Poles, abandoned the process of reprivatization. Non-privatized land local Poles had been waiting for, was allocated to Lithuanian nomenclature.

As a result, Lithuanian nationalistic elements that demanded lituanization of Vilnius region rejuvenated. At the time it looked like most of the decision Government of Lithuania passed were contrary to these requirements. There no doubt the latter caused concern amongst the Poles, even those Poles who were loyal to Lithuanian authorities. From time to time, we must not forget, irresponsible behavior of the Polish minority acted as a catalyst of reaction. Nationalism of both Lithuanians and Polish was getting the stronghold.

In this atmosphere, the “Declaration on Friendly Relations and Neighborly Cooperation”, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the two countries, Saudargas and Skubiszewski signed in January 1992, challenged by nationalists of both countries, was a proof of foresightedness politicians shared. This event marked the improvement of adverse relations that had become such as a result of the dismissal of the district councils.

In 1992, in the light of these developments, first Ambassador of Poland, Professor Jan Widacki arrived in Lithuania. In his opinion¹, Lithuanian-Polish relations have entered the period of normalization. Preliminary terms, rights international norms and standards corroborate, aside, and save Lithuanians back activities of the Polish minority that cherish national self-consciousness, develop education, culture, societal and cultural life, this could be the beginning of the Treatise “On Bilateral Relations and Good Neighborly cooperation” between the two states. In his activities the Ambassador aimed at creating the legal infrastructure of the Treaty (interstate, intergovernmental, interdepartmental agreements) before the Treaty was signed. It would mitigate difficulties of mutual cooperation, set privileges for citizens of both countries, and, besides, would encourage all-embracing economic, scientific and cultural cooperation. For these plans to be implemented an atmosphere of mutual trust

¹ *Annual Polish Foreign policy report*, 1997, p. 152-153.

had to be created. Having the events of 1991-1992 in mind this was hard to accomplish.

The mission of the ambassador I could observe in close proximity was a very difficult and dangerous one.

Since the every beginning a number of Lithuanian nationalistic elements held the belief that Ambassador insidiously tried to polonize Vilnius region, thus, wanted him to be declared *persona non grata*.

Later on radical leaders of the Polish minority required the same. These leaders could not live up with the fact that the Ambassador refrained from supporting their demands, which were very remote from European standards. Forestalling the events, one should remind that when the Ambassador Widacki completed his mission in 1996, history of Lithuanian-Poland relations never saw better relations between two countries develop. Serious politicians – be they Lithuanians, be they Poles – had no doubts that this new status of relations between the neighboring countries is the result of his efforts. By the way, the new Ambassador, H.E. Professor Mrs. Eufemia Teichmann, carried through the undertakings of Mr. Widacki in the direction of Lithuanian-Polish reconciliation. Her activities were marked by success.

On April 26, 1994, as a result of two years of negotiations, Lithuania and Poland signed a Treaty to regulate neighborly relations. The Polish side was represented by President Lech Wałęsa, Lithuanian – by President Algirdas Brazauskas.

The signing of the Treaty was preceded by a number of events: highest level personal visits, signing of numerous detailed bilateral agreements, erection of the border passage stations, transfer of arms and equipment to Lithuanian army.

Once the Treaty was signed and ratified, Lithuania and Poland entered into entirely new phase of their relations. They became friendly, indeed, and based on mutual trust.

On his visit in Warsaw (February 1995), President Algirdas Brazauskas, speaking in front of the Polish Seimas, proposed, among other things, the creation of a joint military battalion for UN peacekeeping purposes and joint air surveillance control system. In his speech Algirdas Brazauskas cited Juzef Pilsudski. He knew that at that time Lithuanian historians considered Pilsudski the foe of Lithuania.

In two years, Vytautas Landsbergis, then Chairman of Lithuanian Seimas, spoke to the Polish Seimas. On the occasion of commemorating joint fight during the January events, chanted the first stanza of the Polish anthem. This fact serves as an illustration that bilateral relations got rid of tension, they have become sincere and natural.

On the initiative of Algirdas Brazauskas two countries established joint battalion. Called LITPOLBAT, the battalion now serves the peacekeeping mission in Kosovo. One must emphasize that the United States, Canada and other states contributed a lot to the creation of this battalion.

Military cooperation has become highly successful. As mentioned above, it was the first time that military equipment was handed over before the Treaty was signed. Poland offered Lithuania armored transporters, cars, helicopters, guns, and other equipment. Both countries were implementing the “Program for Peace” program at the time.

Once Poland became NATO member, it embarked on supporting Lithuania’s efforts to join the aforementioned Alliance.

Due to mention, former Ambassador of Lithuania to Poland, Antanas Valionis now has taken over the post of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania. This appointment recognizes the significance of his efforts as regards the creation of Lithuanian-Polish relations and the importance of relations for Lithuania.

Very often do the high-standing officials from either Lithuania, or Poland open their agenda of foreign visits from the capitals of the neighboring states. This bears highly symbolic meaning. After Aleksandr Kwasniewski became President of Poland (in March 1996) Vilnius was the first capital he visited on an official trip. The same applied to Bronislaw Geremek, since 1997 – Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland.

In 1998, after becoming the President of Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus decided Poland is the first destination he should visit on a foreign trip.

This trip was later followed by a trip to Vatikan. There the President of Lithuania met the Great Pole, the Pope. In his last-year speech at Krakow’s Jagellonian University President Valdas Adamkus claimed the following: “Our relations are the best Lithuanian-Polish history has ever seen. This s a favorable ground for our future cooperation”.

Lithuanian society is ready to appreciate Polish nations for its goodwill during the first stage of independence. In 1997, on the occasion of the centenary flood Poland suffered Polish-speaking radio station “Znad Wili” took up the victims-relief initiative and collected 250 thousand US dollars for that sake.

Position of President Adamkus, various non-governmental initiatives, cooperation “at the bottom” prove that substantial transformation has taken place during the last several years.

Lithuania views the entry of Poland into NATO as a mutual success. It did not only expand the zone of stability in Europe – Poland now is the strongest advocate of Lithuania joining NATO. On February 16th, 1998 at the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the restoration of Lithuanian Independence in Lithuanian Seimas, President Aleksandr Kwasniewski declared the following: “There is no security of Poland without the security of Lithuania”.

One should pay attention to the status Polonia occupies in Lithuania’s aspirations. Poles outside Poland were more than important when they supported the idea of Poland’s membership in NATO, at the time of “to be, or not be to be” for the Poland. First of all I have in mind Poles in the US. I dare assert that they should the first we

should thank for Poland's entrance into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO. Today Lithuania needs their help and their support. The support that has been declared for us on behalf of the Polish organizations in the US, has laid favorable ground for further activities of extraordinary enterprise, which are aimed to fulfill one cornerstone task – that Lithuania joins NATO.

While touching upon the Poles outside Poland, I had in mind Poles in Lithuania as well. Declaration they adopted in the name of Heads of State and Government and the Parliaments of NATO Member States, the people of Poland and members of the Polish community states that "The membership of Lithuania in NATO meets the interests of not only the citizens of Lithuania, including three hundred thousands of Lithuanian Poles, but also interests of Poland and the people of the entire region supported by all democratic nations. This declaration serves as an example for Lithuania's political elite.

Authorities in Lithuania extended a very positive assessment on this declaration. It is a true reflection of the position Polish organizations disseminate with respect to Lithuania's entrance into NATO. Most of them have roots in Poland and act as good citizens. Furthermore – these are the citizens who make full use of the rights pertaining to them. It seems very important that we hand the solution of some issues, especially those dealing with the national minority, into the hands of national minorities. At the moment in Lithuania the situation is very interesting: Viceminister of education and science, Deputy head of Vilnius region, Deputy director of the Department of national minorities – all of them represent the Polish national minority. Poles are members of Seimas, they dominate in the municipalities of Vilnius and Šalčininkai districts. Therefore, the bridles of managing the affairs of the Polish community lie in their hands.

Oftentimes, in various political fora Lithuanian-Polish cooperation is presented as an example, a standard states should follow in their relations with their neighbors. If we happen to move further than the Council of Europe and European Union establish at the moment, all we will do by this is contribute something new to international organizations. In this case we would bring new solutions to the European Union that are far more favorable for national minorities.

Common history, common language and common foreign policy priorities bind Lithuania and Poland together. Cooperation during important moments reinforced the feeling of strategic partnership.

As for today, the new quality Lithuanian-Polish cooperation has acquired the international standard of its own. We understand that our common voice has its regional dimension. I believe our good-neighborly relationship means more stable, better economically developed Central European region. Lithuania's relations with Poland give a good example of what can be achieved through genuine partnership and cooperation. I am convinced that this symposium will also contribute to the development and strengthening of relations among Poland and other Central and Eastern Europe countries.

I am indebted to my destiny that I had a chance to participate in numerous events that were important to both nations. We have infused lots of enterprise to make relations what they are today. However, there is still lots of work waiting for us if we want to use the opportunity we have now. We hope we make full use of it.

What happened to Lithuanian-Polish relations over the last ten years is in fact a realization of the vision of Jerzy Giedroyc and the entire Paris "Culture". Most prominent representatives of the Polish *émigré* took active part in realization of this vision, including Jan Nowak-Jezioranski, Zbigniew Brzezinski (Lithuanians call him the greatest demolisher of communism, and majority of the Poles of Lithuania - an example of the American citizen who disregarded his Polish roots).

Translated by Mindaugas Žičkus