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Lithuanian-Polish Strategic Partnership: Genesis and Prospects

The intention to discuss the content and development of the Lithuanian-Polish inter-state relations has been sparked off, at least formally, not only by the date of 5 September (on this date ten years ago, as we know, the two countries restored their diplomatic relations), but likewise by another date of not lesser importance – the middle of 2002, when it is planned to announce at the NATO Summit the second round of the Alliance's expansion. We believe that these two dates could also serve as a good background in assessing the present state of the relationship of these two states which is usually defined as "strategic partnership". (As we know, the first to use this term was the Lithuanian Minister for Foreign Affairs Algirdas Saudargas, and later – in the autumn of the same 1997 – the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs Geremek applied the same phrase to define the Polish-Lithuanian relations.)

If a succinct definition of the meaning of these two words (which, undoubtedly, sound somehow unusual for most ordinary Lithuanians and Poles) could be found, it would be possible to state that they express inter-state relationship at several levels: firstly, very good and friendly relations at the top political level, which usually are institutionalized in one or another form; secondly, intensive cooperation in the spheres of the highest strategic importance for both countries, first of all, in the political-military (and security) area; and finally, the third level, where good and friendly political relations are "transferred" to a lower – "public" level, which means dynamic and mutually beneficial economic relations, intensive cultural exchange, cooperation at the level of various NGO's as well as individuals. Such a definition of "strategic partnership" relationship, however formal it may be, shows that the development of this relation, and its intensity (at the various levels mentioned above), neither is nor can be uniform, that it depends (in the broadest sense) on the countries' resources and, it might indeed be more important to emphasize – on the influence of the international environment. In this article, there will be no contemplation on the achievements of the partnership (there has been written a lot on this subject by the politicians of both countries), we will rather analyze two other problems: first, what factors have influenced the formation of the strategic partnership relation, and, second, what are the challenges to threaten this relationship.

It is obvious that since 1997, the Lithuanian-Polish relationship has acquired a new, particular dynamics, and political scientists as well as politicians find more than a few facts to confirm this¹. True, it would also be necessary to note here that the second “upsurge” in the bilateral relations (the first, certainly, ought to be considered the Treaty on Friendly Relations and Good Neighborly Cooperation, signed in April 1994) did not appear in an empty place. In the eve of the above-mentioned period, there occurred significant changes in the Polish-Lithuanian relationship. One of the most important events was the State Border Treaty and the Joint Declaration on the Consolidation of Bilateral Relations, signed in the spring of 1996 during the visit of the Polish President to Lithuania. There likewise were various joint statements made by the Heads of both countries, which also testified about the beginning of a new stage in the bilateral relationship. Thus, for example, in the autumn of 1996, the Presidents of Poland and Lithuania issued a statement which demonstrated an attitude of great meaningfulness for the security of both countries: that without a secure Poland there cannot be a secure Lithuania, likewise without a secure Lithuania there cannot be a secure Poland.

A significant and new feature of the already strategic partnership was the literal “institutional building of relations”. In other words, there started a vigorous and qualitatively new institutionalization of bilateral relations, which also acquired new forms of cooperation. Without going into much detail, I would like to mention that in the year of 1997, the Presidential Consultative Committee was established, the legislative powers set up the Lithuanian and Polish Parliamentary Assembly, while the executive ones – the Government Cooperation Council. The parties started to increasingly coordinate their actions in respect to various regional initiatives. The cooperation developed in other important spheres as well: firstly, in the military and energy areas, likewise in the regional and trans-border cooperation, at the level of local administrations and many others.

It is also important to mention that the strategic partnership gained the momentum namely at the time when the prospects for Poland to become a part of the transatlantic structures were becoming increasingly evident, while it was also more and more obvious that Lithuania will not be included into the first round of NATO’s

¹ Antanas Valionis, Evaldas Ignatavičius, Izolda Bričkoviėnė, “From Solidarity to Partnership: Lithuanian - Polish Relations 1988 – 1998,” *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 1998, 2.

expansion. Thus the anxiety that, with Poland getting increasingly integrated into the transatlantic Western structures, and with the prospects for its becoming a NATO member turning more definite, the relations with Lithuania “might again deteriorate”, turned to have been misplaced.² Furthermore, the “strategic partnership relation” managed to escape any deeper crisis even at the time when in 1999 Poland became a member of the Alliance, while Lithuania was left outside the “closed door” of NATO. (Just on the contrary, co-operation in the military sphere as well acquired a new momentum, which is exemplified by the formation and development of a joint military battalion LITPOLBAT and, especially, by the bilateral Treaty on Defense Cooperation, signed in February 2001.)

The more pessimistic scenarios failed to come true, we believe, due to several reasons. From the point of view of Lithuania, the Polish “shoulder”, or rather speaking less metaphorically but more geopolitically, the territorial contact with Poland (now a NATO member) acquired exceptional importance and started to be viewed as geostrategically significant (i.e. providing a counterbalance to Russia). While from the point of view of Poland (again as a NATO member), the enhancement and invigoration of strategic relations with Lithuania is also considered a matter of significance, as Lithuania, due to its relative political and economic stability and democratic development, forms an important geopolitical link connecting the Eastern Baltic region with the Central Eastern Europe (namely with Belarus and Ukraine), and thus occupies a strategically important position in the shaping of Poland’s eastern policy, which aims at becoming in the future an important factor in the formation of the common NATO’s (as well as the EU’s) eastern policy. Finally, it is also impossible to disregard the fact that the “elevation” of the Lithuanian-Polish cooperation to a higher, strategic partnership level contributes to the generation of security and stability in the Central and Eastern Europe as a whole, thus turning into a certain positive accomplishment, a kind of a token of the cooperation of these countries with their partners in the West.

On the other hand, it is not uncommon among observers to start wondering about the content of the partnership and its effectiveness. Without embarking here on an extensive discussion of the issues related to this problem, we are, nevertheless,

² Raimundas Lopata, Vytautas Žalys, “Lietuvos geopolitinis kodas [Lithuanian Geopolitical Code]”, *Politologija*, 1995, 6.

inclined to note that, in discussing the effectiveness of the strategic relationship and its prospects, the existing asymmetry between the countries could not be ignored. Even though the geopolitical orientation of the partners coincides, there nevertheless still exist considerable differences between them, which might affect the content of the cooperation. There are great differences in the cultural-civilisational, political and, eventually, in the economic potentials of Poland and Lithuania. Even of greater importance still can be the different geopolitical gravitation (i.e. the total of historically and objectively formed political, social and cultural prerequisites which influence the natural development of a state). Where the pro-western gravitation of Poland does not raise any major doubts, Lithuania is rather inclined to perform the function of a neutralizing buffer (between Poland and Russia). Suspiciousness or hostility towards the West could be regarded as one of the expressions of the above (it is best illustrated by the attitude towards foreign investments).

Nevertheless, let us return to the issue of the genesis of strategic partnership. From the historic standpoint, and resorting to the geopolitical terminology, it is possible to state that the aspiration for “strategic partnership” between the countries was determined by their *contest for power*. In other words, a state, in its strive to increase (maximize) its own power and to limit (minimize) that of its rival, was forced to search for *strategic partners*. A concrete expression of such kind of endeavor was the formation of political-military alliances aimed at facilitating the implementation of the above-mentioned effort (or a political strategy). Namely such conception, typical to the realistic interpretation of international relations, prevailed in the Europe of the period between the wars.

It is evident that the “strategic partnership” between Lithuania and Poland took shape under the influence of different ideas and in a completely different context of international relations, which certainly exerted an objective influence on the particular content of the mutual relations between the parties. In a more schematic expression, and on the most general sense, the formation of the new context was affected by the end of the bipolar world order (expressed in the collapse of the soviet political system and, finally, the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself) and the eastward expansion of the Western democratic institutes. In this context, the geopolitical orientation of both Poland and Lithuania coincided: they linked their security with their aim of joining the Euro-Atlantic and European structures. This

aspiration, or geopolitical orientation, “placed” certain “restrictions” on the candidate countries, one of the more important of which became “good relations with the neighbors”, which implied unconditional acceptance of the existing frontiers and strict compliance with the democratic standards (first of all in relation to national minorities). (Besides, the importance of the “outside factor” to the Lithuanian-Polish relations, especially to the process of “reconciliation”, was emphasized by more than a few political scientists. At the same time, authors draw attention to the still persisting atmosphere of distrust in both societies, which obviously has been mostly affected by the historically formed differences in the social-cultural development of both countries³.)

It is therefore possible to maintain that the future development of the Lithuanian and Polish relations will also depend upon the interrelation of both the outside (changes in the international environment) and inside (social, political and economic dynamics of the states and societies) factors. As both elements mentioned above are intricate enough, with equally complicated being also their interrelation, thus it is hardly possible to present their comprehensive analysis within the boundaries of one article. I, therefore, would phrase my question in the following way: what are the main challenges to the strategic partnership of Lithuania and Poland? (Probably the most serious mistake would be to get lulled by the prospects of the “real strategic partnership”, without trying to realize the potential threats to this relationship.)

I will start from the impact of the outside factors or, in other words, from the question of how the Lithuanian-Polish strategic partnership can potentially be affected by the dynamics of the eastward expansion of the Western democratic institutions and the possible developments thereof. It is highly unlikely that, even in the eventuality of the most pessimistic scenario coming true, i.e. that Lithuania is not included into the second round of NATO expansion either, it could in any way directly affect (in the short term) the content of the strategic partnership and cause any significant disturbance in the cooperation of both countries. (It would be far more detrimental if the US decided to reduce its influence and commitments in Europe. This could unleash the contest for power with the resultant direct threat to the stability of the

³ Raimundas Lopata, “Rozwoj stosunkow Polsko - Litewskich po 1990 roku [Development of Lithuanian-Polish Relations since 1990],” *Pozostawione historii. Litwini o Posce i Polakach* (ed. by

Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the European visit of President Bush has demonstrated that Washington, at least rhetorically, is trying to coordinate the interests of its national security (NMDI) with the commitments to take an active part in the European processes, and first of all, in NATO expansion.) It would, however, be wrong to disregard a possibility (in a long term) that slackened processes of Euro-Atlantic and European expansion might cause instability, and first of all it could be said about Lithuania. This would find its expression within the society in the form of “disappointment with the West”, anti-Western attitudes, increase of nationalism, while the political elite, in response to the crisis, might attempt to change the geopolitical orientation (e.g. by turning towards neutrality), which might already directly challenge the strategic partnership.

Another eventual contradiction, which could affect the strategic partnership, is inherent, first of all, in Poland’s eastern policy and, secondly, is related to the situation of the Polish community and its treatment in Lithuania. In the newly adopted (in January 2000) Poland’s Foreign Policy Strategy, Warsaw is balancing between two attitudes: to influence the democratization process of its nearest neighbors and their social-economic development. At the same time, it is noted in the Strategy that the national minorities ought to be viewed as an “important link of good neighborhood”. Thus Poland, for the purpose of the development of cooperation, is trying not to escalate any disagreement with Lithuania about the Polish national minority. Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that there exists another attitude: to promote the Polish issue in Lithuania disregarding any possible consequences either for Lithuania’s internal situation or for bilateral relations. It could, therefore, be possible to presume that, in the eventuality of Lithuania’s Western integration losing momentum, this second tendency in the policy of Poland might intensify. (From the point of view of Poland, Lithuanian integration into the western structures ought to facilitate the democratic resolution of the Polish national minority issue. This is confirmed by the address of Lithuania’s Poles [in March 2000] to the international community with an urge to support the aspiration of Lithuania to become a member of NATO.) In Lithuania any promotion of the issue of national minorities in such a context would most likely be interpreted as a threat to its statehood, which, in its turn, would again complicate the strategic partnership relation.

Katarzyna Korzeniewska, Vladas Sirutavičius), Krakow: Znak, 1999, p. 139.

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