

## **A ROLE FOR LITHUANIA IN PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL ASIA?**

Egdūnas Račius\*

Lithuania and her sister states Latvia and Estonia are often lauded by Western European and especially North American countries as examples of successful and speedy democratization to be emulated by other ex-Soviet states.<sup>1</sup> Lithuanian (and it might be assumed, Latvian and Estonian) leaders also frequently speak of the need to spread democracy further east, into the territories of the former Soviet Republics.<sup>2</sup> In fact, they have already taken active part in bringing about democratization to the Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova: numerous visits to the South Caucasus and East Europe by Lithuanian officials attest to Lithuania's serious commitments.

Conspicuously, among Lithuanian politicians this talk of spreading democracy to the East very rarely includes Central Asian states. There have been just a handful of instances when Central Asia was mentioned as a possible destination of spreading democracy. For example, the deposed President Rolandas Paksas and his followers have declared promotion of democracy in Central Asia as one of their foreign policy priorities. In the Program of the so-called Rolandas Paksas' Coalition "For Order

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Egdūnas Račius, PhD (University of Helsinki, Islamic and Arabic studies) is an associate professor at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University and a part-time associate ttp

[://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050507-8](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050507-8)

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But few examples are recent speeches by the Lithuanian President. See *Speech of President of the Republic of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus "Discovering Terra Democratica in Eastern Europe and Beyond: Successes, Challenges and the Way Forward"*, Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, Chicago, 19 September 2005, <http://www.president.lt/en/news.full/5982>. See also Adamkus, Valdas. *Black Sea Vision*, *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 2004, 1-2. See also *Address by H.E. Mr. Antanas Valionis, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, at the international conference "The Baltic region and the South Caucasus: strategies for cooperation and patterns of reform"*, 8 February 2005, <http://amb.urm.lt/natoshowitem.php?TopMenuID=983&ItemID=2535&SiteID=66&LangID=2>

and Justice", itself based on Paksas presidential elections' program of 2003, it is stated that if voted to power its members would among other things "promote the spread of democracy in other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the neighboring Belarus, in the Caucasus and Central Asian states".<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, during his brief presidency Paksas did not take any steps in promoting democratic change in Central Asia, though he went on a joint Azerbaijan-Armenia visit, confirming Lithuania's South Caucasus orientation.

The then acting President Artūras Paulauskas in the mid-2004 indirectly urged Lithuanians to pay more and closer attention to the democratization of states to the east of its borders, implying among others Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> The current President Valdas Adamkus (elected in the summer of 2004), however, has not so far directly spoken on the issue, though it might be judged from his activities and other speeches that he would subscribe to the idea of promoting democracy as far as Central Asia. The Lithuanian MFA has also kept silent on the issue.<sup>5</sup> In fact, key documents on Lithuania's foreign policy do not mention Central Asia at all.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Program of Rolandas Paksas' Coalition "For Order and Justice"*, dated 6 July 2004, <http://www.ldp.lt/list.php?strid=1266&id=2047>. Paksas' supporters make an opposition group of 9 (out of the total 141) MPs in the current Lithuanian Parliament.

<sup>4</sup> *Speech by H. E. Mr. Artūras Paulauskas, Acting President of the Republic of Lithuania, at Vilnius University, on Lithuania's New Foreign Policy*, 24 May 2004, [http://www.urm.lt/popup2.php?item\\_id=8496](http://www.urm.lt/popup2.php?item_id=8496).

<sup>5</sup> It is, however, generally argued that Lithuania's involvement in Afghanistan, where it heads a PRT, is an expression of spreading of democracy (and thus sharing its own democratization experiences) into Central Asia.

<sup>6</sup> *Resolution on Directions in Foreign Policy of the Republic of Lithuania following Lithuania's accession to NATO and the European Union*, adopted by the Seimas of Lithuania on 1 May 2004, [http://www.urm.lt/popup2.php?nr=1&item\\_id=8500&\\_m\\_e\\_id=4&\\_menu\\_i\\_id=162;240&no\\_cache=1](http://www.urm.lt/popup2.php?nr=1&item_id=8500&_m_e_id=4&_menu_i_id=162;240&no_cache=1). The other one, *Agreement between Political Parties of the Republic of Lithuania on the Main Foreign Policy Goals and Objectives for 2004-2008*, although explicitly states that Lithuania will seek "to support democratic processes in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the countries of the South Caucasus and the Russian Federation, in particular the Kaliningrad region" gives no word on Central Asia. 5 October 2004, [http://www.urm.lt/popup2.php?item\\_id=255](http://www.urm.lt/popup2.php?item_id=255). Same can be observed in the case of *Programme of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania for 2004 - 2008* (Foreign Policy Chapter), where it is stated that the Lithuanian government will continue "to support democratic reforms in Ukraine, Russia and Transcaucasian states, to encourage the determination of these countries to join the area of Euro-Atlantic cooperation. To support the efforts of Belarus to strengthen its independence, democracy and civil society", but does not mention its position on Central Asia. [http://www.urm.lt/popup2.php?item\\_id=256](http://www.urm.lt/popup2.php?item_id=256).

Though, as it appears, not urgent at the moment, the question of relevance of the Lithuanian democratization experiences to the situation that has been developing in the countries of the former Soviet Central Asia is nonetheless worth considering. Can one plausibly hope that the Lithuanian (and in general Baltic states') democratization experiences can be (if appropriately amended) successfully applied in the Central Asian states? And more importantly, can the Baltic states facilitate the democratic change in the countries of that remote region? Do they have know-how, do they possess means, do they have support from the partners (the EU and the USA)? And is this the right moment?

### **The "Shared history" argument**

What do the two regions share, and how much difference is there despite the common experience of having been a long-time fellow "inmates" in the "prison" called the USSR? Lithuanian politicians and political analysts routinely dwell on the perceived "shared history" of Baltic and other ex-Soviet Republics.<sup>7</sup> In their depiction, having been "inmates" in the "prison" Soviet Union for over four decades the captive nations supposedly grew to know each other rather intimately.

Several aspects of this "shared history" are characteristically advanced. First of all, it is argued that all Soviet Republics were administered in principle in a more or less uniform fashion through local Central Committees of the Communist Party. Therefore, purportedly, knowing how the system worked in one practically means knowing how it worked in all of the Soviet Republics. Secondly, however, the USSR was a centralized state, with Moscow being the ultimate decision-making center in matters political, defense and economic. This meant that governments of the Republics had little if at all say not only in matters related to foreign and defense policies but also internal affairs. Since the economy of the entire state was planned in Moscow, the Republics had to simply follow the indicated course.

Thirdly, on the social level, there supposedly was ample mingling among people from the Republics (for example, while serving in the Red Army, in which

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Address of the President of the Republic of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus to the Members of Georgia's Parliament*, 11 November 2005, <http://www.president.lt/en/news.full/6167>.

most of the males did serve, usually far away from one's motherland, or during the study years either by studying together in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev or elsewhere with mates from different regions of the country or on study trips to various corners of the state, or during one's career years — pan-Soviet conferences, symposia, training, festivals, etc). Presumably, these encounters with people from remote Republics laid ground for "cultural awareness" or even "cultural literacy"<sup>8</sup> of each other, something that now has become an indispensable asset and advantage in comparison with either Western Europeans or Americans, who lack it. Finally, *lingua franca* in the USSR was Russian, the language still widely understood by the elder generation in practically all parts of the former USSR.

Though outwardly (especially to the outside world) the argument of this "shared history" might seem convincing enough, its application in real terms is questionable. First of all, because the "shared history" argument either implies some sort of a unified Soviet culture, which societies in the former Republics supposedly share even now, or it ignores cultural differences as non-significant and thus easy to overstep. However, the USSR was not (or rather failed to produce) a monolithic unified culture it claimed to be - its constituent cultures survived the unification policies of the Soviet machinery even if in adulterated forms. One can actually speak of two-layer history (or parallel histories) only one part of which can be called "shared". The "shared history" refers to the pan-Soviet level of history comprising either inter-Republic relations in which Moscow inevitably was a constituent third party or Republic-Moscow relations. The "shared history" relates to this reality (artificial pan-Soviet relations among Republics) that is hardly relevant to or useful in a post-Soviet reality. Most of accumulated knowledge and skills became obsolete as soon as the conditions that facilitated them melted away.

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By 'cultural awareness' it is meant basic acquaintance with history and languages of the societies one is dealing with. It might be maintained that 'cultural awareness' is an essential prerequisite in any transnational relations — whoever is involved in them has to have a minimal baggage of knowledge about the local culture — this would facilitate smoother interaction producing more favorable results. But it might also be argued that 'cultural literacy' would be even more desirable. This includes not only superficial familiarity with basic aspects of indigenous culture(s), but some deeper knowledge of intellectual currents and undercurrents, stratification of society under question, pressure groups, informal authorities, and religion, all this supported by in-depth studying of appropriate local language.

Especially since the Baltic states stayed aloof the newly patched CIS and with introduction of visa regimes travel between the Baltics and more distant former Republics but ceased.

Moreover, under the surface of a more or less unified pan-Soviet life-style and official culture there had always continued alternative (parallel, and usually unobserved) history of respective nations. There has been permanent tension between the artificial official (and wishful) history and culture on the one hand and the persistent indigenous ones on the other hand. However, since unmediated inter-Republic relations, involving any degree of closer cooperation with and interest in each other, were too rare, they did not allow people from one Republic to get to know the indigenous culture of societies of other Republics. Consequently, internal fabric of the Republics, with their cultures and subcultures, remained barely observed by outsiders. And the "cultural awareness" in reality was little more than a collection of stereotypes upheld in jokes.

The geographical proximity has been a major factor allowing for a higher degree of authentic "cultural awareness". This way, in the cases of Belarus and the Ukraine, Lithuanians can claim to possess some intuitive knowledge of these societies (Belarus, after all, used to be part of the same Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Joint Polish-Lithuanian state, before its incorporation into the Russian Empire; so to a certain extent was the Ukraine) which could guide them in their involvements in Belarusian and Ukrainian affairs. Apparently, the perceived affinity has helped Lithuania in its performance as one of the mediators in the Ukrainian case for which there is appreciation both in the Ukraine itself and among Lithuania's partners, especially the USA.

But the further one moves eastward the less of affinity one finds between the Baltics and other parts of the former USSR. The South Caucasus states already prove the point - though Lithuania is more and more involving itself in the democratization of that region (especially Georgia), there is realization that its cultural landscape is extremely complex and unfamiliar enough so that one is to proceed very cautiously. In the case of the Central Asian region, even to an inexperienced eye, it immediately is apparent that the Baltic societies are of a significantly different nature from those found in today's Central Asia. The "shared history" argument then is no more than a formal shell devoid of any real contents.

### **The different paths**

The Baltic states all at the same time took a decisive turn toward rapid two-layer democratization - both citizenry and political elites longed for a democratic make up of their respective countries. The Soviet nomenclature initially was sidelined by progressive nationalist forces, who took first major steps toward a complete revamp of their societies. Ex-Communists, however, soon regrouped to make re-gains, and in some cases, namely Lithuania, they even eventually came back to power. Only now they more or less shared the national vision originally pushed by the nationalists. The set priorities of becoming a competitive liberal economy and open, pluralistic and democratic society while pursuing accession to the EU and NATO (the former served as prerequisites for the latter) have been upheld by all often changing governments, both Left and Right.

The Central Asian Republics, contrary, took equally decisive steps toward rejuvenated authoritarian rule. The initial differences between the Baltics and Central Asia can already be observed at this point - first of all, societies of the Central Asian Republics, unlike those in the Baltics, hardly sought secession from the USSR (though there had been internal unrest since the late 1980s). While the Baltic nations had been actively pushing for their independence for some three years before regaining it, the Central Asian societies gained theirs by virtue of the collapse of the USSR with virtually no effort on their side. In other words, while Baltic people anxiously sought independence, Central Asian inhabitants got it unintentionally. To many of them collapse of the USSR still is a lasting trauma.

Secondly, in contrast to the Baltics, the political leadership in the Central Asian Republics did not pass into the hands of anti-Communist/ nationalist forces (which simply did not exist) and was retained by the very same Communist leaders who had been running them on behalf of the Soviet Communist Party. These swiftly moved to neutralize whatever political opposition was forming and soon succeeded in consolidating their debilitating grip on societies.

The different backgrounds and recent history of statehood might in part help explain the different paths societies of the two regions took. It might be recalled that in-between the wars the Baltic countries were internationally recognized independent nation states (members of the League of Nations) with their defined international borders and their title nationalities. All this was messed up in the then already Soviet Central Asia, pacified and brought into subjugation by Bols-

heviks with no independence, artificial though not international borders, multiethnic societies. This meant that while during the Soviet period the Balts had to cope with the loss of independence and struggle to regain it, the Central Asian societies had yet to arrive at identifying themselves as nations.<sup>9</sup>

One can make a preliminary conclusion that while in the Baltics both the societies and politicians were willing and capable of transformation, in the case of the Central Asian states the societies were neither capable nor willing and politicians were definitely non-willing. This, arguably, has continued to today.

### **Prerequisites for democracy exporting**

Having argued that the Baltic and Central Asian societies are so different, what then can if at all be shared? Depending on the partner chosen, there might be two approaches. In one case, it is the current governments; in the other - political opposition and (civil) society (presumed in the form of NGOs).

In the first (evolutionary) approach, institutional and administrative/ legal reforms perhaps are one of the fields where Lithuania could share its experiences with the former Central Asian "inmates". Such reforms should ideally lead to expansion of good governance practices and rule of law, which in its turn would hopefully facilitate democratization of the concerned Central Asian states. This approach, however, appears least feasible - the decisively authoritarian regimes in some of the countries of the region (namely, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) would never change themselves and would not allow for any changes in the states they rule. As in the case of Lithuania's neighbor Belarus, it makes almost no sense talking with the rulers of those countries. Moreover, Lithuania lacks diplomatic capacity in its MFA (only two diplomats work in the whole of the Central Asia and South Caucasus Division) and representation in Central Asia (the only three-diplomat embassy in the region covers Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan while Uzbekistan is covered from the embassy in Turkey) to engage local authorities in a more or less continuous dialogue. Moreover, one might add virtual non-existence of professional interest in history, languages or contemporary issues of the Central Asian societies both through-

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This is very convincingly analyzed in Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia. The Creation of Nations* (New York, 2000), pp. 161-189.

hout the Soviet period and now- there in effect are no 'area specialists' versed in Central Asian affairs.

In the second (revolutionary) approach, the democratic changes would have to be promoted bottom—up — through nurturing and engaging political opposition and elements of the civil society. The revolutionary phase should ultimately lead into the evolutionary one — once the incumbent regime is changed from the beneath, the new leaders would be approached as a kind of disciples to be taught the new (democratic) methods of governing.

But in the case of the revolutionary approach, in—depth knowledge of the local society is even more indispensable than in the evolutionary one. By knowledge here it is meant not mere superficial individual experiences or memories from the Soviet past but comprehensive baggage of studies and analysis of both history and contemporary socio-cultural realities of the societies concerned. In other words, one has to be "culturally aware" or even "literate".

Of course, one cannot expect every single government official or employee in private sector, charged with specific duties related to or on the territory of remote societies, to be well versed in the intricacies of local cultures. Yet, one is to expect (or even to demand) that those, who make decisions, either themselves possess knowledge of cultures their decisions are to affect or have expert-assistants, who do so to advise them. Only 'culturally literate' decisions have propensity to be welcomed by partners. It is also advisable that even lower—level government and private sector employees are exposed to advance 'culture training' — e.g. are given courses on history, language, religion, and society of countries they are to be posted to or work with.

Thus the cultural background and structural make up of societies one is to engage should be studied anew. Reliance on a perceived "shared history" would not help to tackle with such new factors as family and clan-based social, political and economic system or the resurgence of the role of religion (namely Islam, which is virtually unknown in the Baltics) in the Central Asian societies. As there has been much talk of resurgence of Islam in practically all of them (with a notable exception of Kazakhstan)<sup>10</sup>, failing to appreciate this would ultimately

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<sup>10</sup> Mir Zohar Husain, *Global Islamic Politics* (New York, 1995), pp. 250-268; Roy, *The New Central Asia*, pp. 143-16; Odil Ruzaliev, 'Islam in Uzbekistan: Implications of 9/11 and Policy Recommendations for the United States', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 25/1 (2005): 13-29.

leave one handicapped in any (democratizing) endeavor. Permanent threat of terrorism in Central Asia is another feature to be kept in mind at all times. One might add drug trade, arms smuggling and illegal migration to the line of features that make two regions apparently dissimilar and thus require an effort to familiarize with the realities of local societies. So far, however, no expert-level knowledge on these issues has been accumulated in Lithuania.

Finally, Lithuania cannot play it alone. It has to be in a 'team of the willing'. And that team next to will has to possess resources, both human and financial. So far, however, it seems that the mightiest partners, the EU and the USA, have not yet set their eyes on democratization of the region. Although the USA is a player in the region, it has shied away from pushing with real democratic change in either evolutionary or revolutionary approach and rather chooses to play by the rules of the local regimes preferring quite but profitable business now to uncertainty of the future. The EU for apparent lack of urgency is even less engaged. All in all, Central Asia has remained a backwater of Russian regional politics, which it now seems to be re-ascertaining through the fledgling CIS and the emerging Shanghai Cooperation Organization. If Russia (and China) succeed in strengthening their positions in Central Asia, it is likely that the USA and the EU will have to abandon the region altogether and the prospects for democratization, dim as they are now, will further diminish.

### **Conclusion**

Lithuania, having achieved the status of democratic society with functioning liberal economy, has a moral obligation to share its achievements with other less fortunate countries to the east of its borders. Yet, it has to be realistic about where and what it can achieve. So far, Lithuania's political establishment (by deliberate choice or by accident) has mostly abstained from including into its "spreading democracy" rhetoric Central Asia and has rather concentrated (both in rhetoric and practice) on geographically closer former Soviet Republics.

Such posture is justified from several points discussed above. First, the "shared history" argument is hardly valid in the case of Baltic and Central Asian societies and is of little help in real terms. Second, in order to engage someone, one has to possess a minimum baggage of awareness of the partner. Lithuania so far neither

on political nor on academic level is "culturally aware/ literate" to assume a position of expert on Central Asian states. Moreover, one has to realize that there in reality is very little common between the Lithuanian society and those in Central Asia. Thus, avoiding the neo-Orientalist trap, Lithuania should avoid assuming it knows those societies. Third, receptiveness of the Central Asian societies to democratic changes is very low - the regimes resist them while civil society is weak. For any real changes to take place, there should stem some interest from the societies concerned - they have to be willing to change for more democratic ones. So far, this unfortunately, is not observed. Contrary, one witnesses their creeping reislamization. Finally, there seems to be very little interest on the part of Lithuania's major partners, the EU and the USA, in pursuing pro-active policies for democratic changes in the region. Without partners' involving and without concerted efforts (in the form of a 'team of the willing', perhaps) neither Lithuania nor her sister states could ever achieve any feasible results in exporting democracy to Central Asia.

These formidable obstacles would surely prevent Lithuania (and Latvia and Estonia also) from any successful export of democracy to Central Asia. Consequently, though it would be highly advisable that Lithuania takes a deeper interest in the vast and important region of Central Asia, it nevertheless should avoid falling into the trap of illusion that it can influence the processes in the region or become a democracy exporter on its own.