

HIGH TIME FOR REFLECTION: 15 YEARS OF LITHUANIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

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The normalisation of interstate relations between former colonies and metropolitan centres is always a long and painful process. A lot of time has to pass until the economies, politics, cultures and societies finally accustom and adjust to the “separation”. Fifteen years have passed since the “separation” of Lithuania and Russia, but it would be unreasonable to claim that relations between the states have become absolutely normal. This is already a matter of concern. Even more alarming is that today, as never before, it is unclear in which direction relations will develop further – there may be a movement towards normalisation or, conversely, we may have a chance to observe a reverse process.

In such ambiguous situations people usually try to fall back on historical experience and interpret current events or predict the future on its basis. If we look at relations between Lithuania and Russia from a long-term perspective and try generalising the experiences of several hundred years, unfortunately, we will not find anything reassuring here either. This has already been described once by one of the most prominent Lithuanian historians Teodor Narbutt (1784-1864), who noticed that since the twelfth century there has been a pattern of balancing in relations between Russia and Lithuania. When Russia grows weak, Lithuania has a chance to regain strength. And vice versa – when Russia recovers, Lithuania goes down again [1].

Narbutt formulated his “theory of scales” in 1835. However, it is easy to observe that, subsequently, relations between Lithuania and Russia also devel-

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1. See T. Narbutas, *Lietuvių tautos istorija. Trečias tomas* [*History of Lithuanian Nation. The Third Volume*] (Translated from Polish by Ona Slavėnaitė, Vilnius: Mintis, 1994), p. 243.

oped according to the scenario suggested by Narbutt's theory. This theory easily explains what happened in 1940 and 1990. It also explains the current obvious deterioration in relations between Lithuania and Russia. No one doubts any longer that today's Russia is "regaining strength" again. The mere fact that, as a result of a favourable global energy market, Russia succeeded in overcoming its economic crisis and bounced back from being hopelessly immersed in debts in 1998 to becoming one of the largest exporters of energy sources should not be a cause for concern. Unfortunately, however, these positive processes are accompanied by fatal changes in its policies.

Internally, the state power has become and continues to grow increasingly authoritarian. Although some of the democratic freedoms that the Russians enjoyed after the collapse of the USSR have been retained, the authoritative *Freedom House* is already unreservedly assessing Russia as not free country today. Furthermore, there have been clear changes in its foreign policies as well, especially in its relations with neighbouring countries. Russia has openly declared the CIS countries to be the sphere of its strategic interests and unscrupulously uses their energy dependence for political ends. The Baltic States, particularly Lithuania are already experiencing both open energy pressure and antagonistic ideological disagreement over the interpretation of the events of the recent (as well as the distant) past and even intervention into their political processes during election campaigns. There is probably no need to continue. This interpretation of current events leads to one unambiguous prediction. If these tendencies continue to increase, sooner or later and in one way or another, Russia will succeed in gaining control over Lithuania and this will "reclaim" its "lost" territories. Naturally, this would only be possible if it continues to build its power successfully and its economic boom is accompanied by stronghanded domestic and foreign policies of authoritarian rule.

Thus, there is little consolation in the most general finding and prognosis that could be formulated on the basis of Narbutt's "theory of scales", which, rather than being some concoction, is grounded in the historical analysis of relations between Lithuania and Russia throughout the centuries. On the other hand, this finding may sound too fatalistic for an examination of the current history to be accepted without reservations and additional arguments that are more relevant to contemporary political processes. Indeed, if we temporar

ily distanced ourselves from the long-lived experience of relations between Lithuania and Russia and “leave it to the historians” and if we focused exclusively on the last 15 years of relations, we would easily notice that the picture is not so hopelessly gloomy. Historical analysis of recent events indicates that, although relations between Lithuania and Russia have not been too good, they have not always been bad either. The current situation, which is similar to the Cold War, has not been a permanent feature in the relations. Tensions eased on several occasions – a kind of local *détente*, and there were even moments that corresponded to our image of normal relations. When Boris Yeltsin was the president of Russia and its new foreign policy strategy was not fully developed, Lithuania was not always an object of political pressure. In the context of Latvia and Estonia, which had serious problems with non-citizen Russian minorities, Lithuania’s relations with Russia were sometimes even called exemplary. This could perhaps also explain why Lithuania managed to achieve an agreement regarding the withdrawal of the Russian troops before Latvia and Estonia, why agreements on military and civil transit to Kaliningrad were reached and function successfully, and why the Treaty on State Border was signed and at once ratified.

True, all these steps towards normalisation were difficult and took a long time. Therefore, we were fairly self-critical about that as well. When no immediate agreement could be reached, we would not rush to accuse Russia each time, but we would first try to come to an understanding internally and question ourselves whether the Lithuanian diplomacy itself had not made some critical tactical mistakes and thereby damaged something. There were plenty of occasions for internal public debates in Lithuania regarding the country’s tactical and even strategic policies towards Russia. During the relatively short period of relations with Russia, the Lithuanian government seems to have tested different tactical approaches – the categorical (that of Landsbergis), the moderate (Brazauskas), and the “solid” (Adamkus). As could have been expected, each of these tactics had its own advantages and shortcomings, its benefits and cost.

The tougher and more declarative tactic proposed by the right-wing forces was doubtlessly useful because it enabled stating the strategic goals in a principled way and sending a clear message to the negotiation partner about the principled position that would be subject to negotiation. Usually, this is really

important for small states that do not have much opportunity for manoeuvring. Doubtlessly, however, there was also a constant danger of provoking Russia to upset normal economic relations and pragmatic co-operation. Finally, as we know, the hard stance that the Lithuanian government took with regard to Russia did not always have sufficient political backing in Lithuania itself.

On the other hand, the advantage of Lithuania's more adaptive and pragmatic tactic traditionally supported by the left-wing and centre forces was that it was easier to solve a number of practical issues in a less charged political atmosphere, avoiding excessive emphasis on the remaining principled political differences. Perhaps this was also the reason why Lithuania managed to conclude a larger number of pragmatic interstate agreements with Russia than the other two Baltic States. However, the adaptive and moderate tactic also had a price. First, the leftist government had to withstand harsh and ruthless criticisms by the opposing political forces and was under almost constant suspicion of betraying the national interests. Yet, the worst of it was that moderation would also inspire certain hopes or illusions to Moscow that it could succeed in altering the overall course of Lithuania's foreign and security policy, thereby encouraging it to further increase pressure.

Thus, today we may already claim that neither of the two aforementioned tactics proved to be entirely efficacious. From time to time, bilateral relations would still be stranded and occasional battles of words and declarations would flare up among the politicians (usually members of parliaments) and in the media of both countries. Despite everything, Russia continued increasing its economic leverage methodically and consistently and used it both for meddling in domestic political life and for economic and energy blackmailing. At every opportunity and even on the highest level, Russia denied and refused to acknowledge that the Soviet Union had occupied the Baltic States in 1940 and that today Russia carries moral and material responsibility for it as the continuator of the Soviet Union's rights and duties. Moreover, occasional propaganda campaigns would be "randomly" carried out in the Russian media, targeting Lithuania and other Baltic States and accusing them of collaboration with Nazis during the Second World War or support for Chechen terrorists, etc. In other words, Lithuanian efforts to find agreement with Russia – either peacefully or forcefully – did not yield the expected results and normalisation of

relations remained a remote possibility, which could only come about in the distant and indefinite future.

Thus, neither the right or the left-wing, nor, finally, the centre forces, which have been steering the course of foreign policy for the last few years, managed to achieve a major breakthrough in normalisation of the relations with Russia. On the whole, this permits the conclusion that these self-critical debates on the best tactic in bilateral relations between Lithuania and Russia should be viewed as a political show dictated by the needs of internal political struggles, rather than variables that essentially determine the quality of relations. The accumulated practical experience of relations reveals that both in its relations with Lithuania and other Baltic States, not to mention the CIS countries, Yeltsin's and, even more so, Putin's Russia always tried to condescend and was reluctant to acknowledge that these countries can also have legitimate national interests that do not necessarily coincide with the Russian preferences. And, as we can observe today, Russia's stance has not changed a bit. Therefore, an explanation for why Lithuania, which, like everyone else, has not succeeded in achieving final normalisation of bilateral relations, nevertheless managed to sign and ratify important agreements with Russia has to be sought in a wider international context by going beyond the sphere of bilateral relations and the analysis of negotiation tactics applied by the countries.

For example, Russia commenced serious negotiations with the Baltic States over the withdrawal of its army and, subsequently, withdrew it only after experiencing pressure from the G7, the OSCE and the UN while it was still attempting to preserve its reputation as a state that respects international agreements. In contrast, the negotiations between Lithuania and Russia over Kaliningrad transit in 1994 came to a dead end as soon as Lithuania and Russia found themselves *tête-à-tête*. Lithuania did not have any effective leverage to influence Russia and push it towards a compromise, while Russia immediately tied the solution of the transit problem to the enactment of the treaty on the most favourable trading regime, which was important to Lithuania. In this way, Russia did not find it difficult to achieve that military transit across Lithuania's territory is subject to bilateral agreement, rather than Lithuanian rules. And when the time came to resolve the issue of the civil transit of Russian citizens to and from the Kaliningrad Region, Lithuania did not even attempt to "put up

a fight". Thus, as is well known, during the introduction of the visa regime between Russia and Lithuania in 1995, the governments of the countries reached an agreement that visa requirements will not apply to Lithuanian citizens travelling to the Kaliningrad Region and the inhabitants of Kaliningrad travelling to Lithuania, as well as those inhabitants of Russia who transit to Kaliningrad across Lithuania.

The episode of the enactment of the Treaty on the State Border with Russia is yet another story that ended in a similar manner. The treaty was signed in 1997 during the period of certain *détente* in relations between Lithuania and Russia, when the latter hoped to influence Lithuania and the other Baltic States to forego the NATO membership that they were persistently seeking. The treaty was negotiated and signed; however, when Russia understood that this would not change Lithuania's policy direction, its ratification was suspended and procrastinated until 2003, i.e. until Russia met the European Union's pressure to change the procedure of movement of its citizens across Lithuania to and from Kaliningrad without visas. Only at that time did Russia have to renegotiate the visa-free regime with the European Union and make a commitment to ratify the state border treaty with Lithuania.

Finally, we should not forget the issue of the Baltic States' NATO membership. In 1997, when NATO made the decision to limit the first wave of enlargement to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, Russia made a lot of diplomatic and propaganda efforts to prevent the second enlargement of the bloc and, if it could not be prevented, to exclude the Baltic States from it. And now we can conclude that Russia was very close to its goal, as there were quite a few in Western Europe and even in the United States who were very sceptical about the Baltic States' prospects of membership and put forward various projects for formation of a separate sub-regional security regime, disregarding that Russia could hardly fit into it because of its geopolitical ambitions, the size of its military force, and the problems related to the Kaliningrad enclave. This time, however, the strong position of the US government determined that the outcome of the long process was favourable to the Baltic States. The decision was made to enlarge NATO in spite of Russia's objections.

Thus, if we make a careful analysis of these episodes in relations between Lithuania and Russia and their results, we should not hasten to explain the

decisions and agreements favourable to Lithuania by the successful activities of Lithuanian diplomacy or its special ability to find a “common language” with Russia. It seems that it was actually the opposite because, paradoxically, Lithuanian diplomacy found itself and remained in an oddly “comfortable” position in relations with Russia during this whole time. Although Russia was difficult and complex as a partner of relations and negotiations, it was impossible to make a mistake in its regard. Irrespective of the choice of diplomatic negotiation tactic, the negative result was clear in advance: there would be no agreement. More than one observer has noted that, although Russia is a powerful state, it is also very insecure and perceives every concession to a smaller state and, especially, to a former colony as defeat and humiliation, rather than as an unavoidable outcome of negotiations. Only an equal or a greater power can force Russia into real negotiations, rather than their imitation seeking to impose its will. A more attentive observer making a thorough review of the negotiations that have taken place between Lithuania and Russia during the last 15 years, as well as their results, would easily notice one very significant pattern: Lithuania has achieved favourable outcomes of negotiations only in those cases when it has managed to successfully mobilise international opinion or secure solid political backing and sufficient international pressure towards Russia through international organisations or from Western democratic states.

This situation however, means that the Lithuanian diplomacy had nothing to do at all and was practically useless. On the contrary, the difficult task of mobilising international support fell on its shoulders and, admittedly, was tackled quite successfully. In its own time, the strong “Landsbergis” stance taken by Lithuania on the issue of the Russian army’s withdrawal helped attract the international community’s attention and facilitated rallying public opinion and gathering the support of international organisations. Meanwhile, in the case of NATO expansion, a more moderate tactic proved successful, especially Adamkus’ “solid” version, when attempts were made to emphasise that good relations with Russia and Lithuania’s NATO membership are compatible. This tactic had positive correspondence with the particularly cautious or even favourable attitude of some of the Western European states towards Russia and their unwillingness to damage relations with it, especially over the small Baltic States.

Needless to say, this experience also naturally determines the further strategy towards normalisation of relations between Lithuania and Russia. Metaphorically speaking, even now that Lithuania has gained NATO and EU membership, the key to solving the problem of normalisation of Lithuanian-Russian relations remains where it was before – in the West, rather than in Moscow. If during the last 15 years positive solutions in bilateral relations were achieved only when Lithuania had managed to secure solid international support and avoid dangerous isolation, so far there has been little reason to believe that there will be some essential changes in this regard. Therefore, unfortunately and regrettably, it has to be concluded that the analysis of the recent relations between Lithuania and Russia show that there is no sufficient ground to dismiss Narbutt's "theory of scales". Normalisation of relations between Lithuania and Russia remains unattainable and, as long as it is unattainable, we can merely engage in balancing. Perhaps the only significant difference in the situation of contemporary Lithuania compared to previous times is that now there is a realistic opportunity to place something on our side of the scales. Correspondingly, the main task of Lithuanian diplomacy remains securing international support for our goals and avoiding staying one-to-one with a partner that doesn't hear any arguments and doesn't accept any compromises.

We have already had a chance to realise that this was not an easy task until Lithuania became a member of both NATO and the EU; however, this will not be any easier now. The international environment and its main actors are undergoing constant changes – their governments, structures, priorities, political parties and personalities change, and, therefore, we may not always apply known algorithms to the solution of current issues, but must often search through tests and trials for an innovation compatible with the partners' interests. It is easily noticeable that, although the issue of normalisation of relations is particularly important only for the countries that are closest to us in our region, Russia is important to many other countries in the world as well. However, Russia is just one of the problems and, usually, not the main one for the more distant countries, as well as on the level of the region or the international system. In other words, if we wanted, we could reduce the foreign policy of Lithuania and other countries with similar pasts to striving towards normalisation of relations with Russia at best or seeking to balance it at worst. In contrast, this is obviously

not true for the European Union as a whole or the United States, which often maintains an indefinite and ambiguous position towards Russia.

For example, the European Union, which now includes Lithuania as well, has plenty of internal concerns and problems apart from Russia. In addition to the slowing rates of economic development at the core of the bloc and the stalled constitutional reform, it is experiencing difficulties in defining its role and place in the international arena. The unique international role that the EU could have had due to its attractiveness and ability to expand by simultaneously spreading the area of democracy and economic prosperity is also clearly losing the political support of voters and becoming hardly attainable. In turn, Russia successfully uses the insufficient integrity of the EU and fairly easily establishes close relations with the leaders of the largest EU states, as well as skilfully exploits its position as an energy exporter. Nevertheless, the situation is neither so hopeless, nor predetermined to remain such. European integration has encountered problems in the past as well, but it has always managed to find solutions in time. Furthermore, now that Lithuania has become a member of the EU, it also has many more opportunities to seek greater consolidation of the EU policies in the East, the development of the common EU energy policy and infrastructural investments, as well as many other projects, the implementation of which would perhaps indirectly but nevertheless significantly contribute to normalisation of relations with Russia. However, achieving this requires hard and consistent work, searching for allies, persuading the sceptics, and thereby defeating the opponents.

The same can also be said about the ongoing processes on the international system level and the special role of the US in the world. Today, no one is surprised by the opinion that the unambiguous Lithuanian foreign policy orientation towards the US dominating the international system is no longer promising and even erroneous. However, this conclusion is too hasty and indicates a lack of understanding of the realities of US foreign policy formation, as well as their inability or unwillingness to place the current events in the wider historical context of US foreign policy traditions and its logical developments.

A more thorough examination reveals that, paradoxically, precisely because of its special position in the world, the US is forced to reconcile itself to

the fact that its foreign policy is least protected against mistakes and wrong decisions.

One of the reasons for that is that, being at the centre of the international system and acting as a sort of global point of political reference, the US helps other states to orient and identify their place in the world politics. This poses the question of how the US orients itself. What relations should it seek with other states in planning its foreign policy? Where do its national interests end and the affairs of the global order begin? It is much more difficult to find correct answers to all these questions for its government than for the government of any other state. Therefore, mistakes and failures are unavoidable. On the other hand, surprising as it may be, the US ascended against all odds and became the most powerful state in the world, and it seems that it has no intention to abandon this position in the nearest future. American scholar Walter Russell Mead gave one of the most convincing explanations of this phenomenon in his *Special Providence* (2001), where he argues that, in contrast to Europe, in the US, foreign policy has never been a sphere free from great debates or lasting disagreements. On the contrary, the democratic nature of America itself determines that foreign policy priorities are subject to open and wide debates by interested parties and groups. Suffice it to mention here the current debates over the so-called "empire" and the role of the state military force in the contemporary world engrossing the American academia. Consequently, the decisions made by the government are also subject to public and merciless criticisms by opponents. Therefore, it is not surprising at all that the foreign policy of the current president George W. Bush has nowhere been criticised as harshly as in the US. It is precisely this aptitude of the American society that is the source of the success of its foreign policy: mistakes are made, but there is a mechanism for their identification and ruthless elimination.

Today, the priorities of US foreign and security policy are far from our region for entirely understandable reasons. Americans are more concerned about the Middle East, which generates radical Muslim terrorism, or China, which is building its economic muscles, than the problems of the Kaliningrad transit or Russia's political, economic and propaganda penetration into its former colonies. However, this does not mean that there are no opportunities to attract the attention of the US government to these problems or seek its political backing if necessary. The democratic, open and pluralistic nature of the US society and

the government's dependence on public opinion provide exceptional opportunities for Lithuanian diplomacy, like those of any other country. However, as in the case of the EU, hard and consistent work, seeking allies, persuading the sceptics and attempts to defeat opponents are required as well. Perhaps this could be the true path to the solution of one of Lithuania's main foreign policy problems: normalisation of relations between Lithuania and Russia.

Naturally, the solution to this problem cannot be reached in one step or in one expressive gesture. It can only be reached by means of hard and unremitting work, which was described in the following way by the German sociologist Max Weber in his famous 1918 lecture *Politik als Beruf*: "die Politik bedeutet ein starkes langsames Bohren von harten Brettern mit Leidenschaft und Augenmass zugleich" [2]. It would be naive to hope that ingenious and patient actions of Lithuanian diplomacy would make the EU or the US ensure that relations with Russia are finally normalised. This could not take place without essential changes within Russia itself. However, even if we are forced to live under conditions when we can only dream about normalisation, we should not be naive and believe that the problem has disappeared altogether and that we don't need to work on it anymore.

2. "Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective." Cited from M. Weber, "Politika kaip pašaukimas" [Politik als Beruf] (Translated from German by Tamara Grinkevičienė and Zenonas Norkus), *Politologija* 2 (1991), p. 60.