

Lithuania 2008: A Success Story*

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We revisited Lithuania this summer, 15 years after our first visit. We met leaders in both the public and private sectors and toured the entire country. From communications to living standards, the change has been remarkable. Lithuania in 2008 is a success story.

In 1993, we went to Lithuania under the sponsorship of the International Executive Service Corps (IESC), a nongovernmental organization that promotes private enterprise development around the world. Ambassador Melady advised the Rector of Kaunas University of Technology on the modernization of the senior educational administration of the university. Dr. Margaret Melady conducted a seminar on educational and community affairs for aspiring teachers. During our month's stay in Kaunas, we observed a population that was just beginning to emerge from its Soviet-dominated past. The city was drab and dreary with few restaurants and cafés, most of which offered only a few selections. Buildings were in need of repair. Kaunas University of Technology was the exception. University leaders and department chairs were thinking of the future, eager to introduce reforms that would benefit students in their newly-independent country.

Walking through Kaunas in 2008, we admired the restored buildings, the bustling shops and the new international hotels. The dynamism generated by Kaunas University of Technology has spread to a number of other institutions, including a new private university. Transformation was evident throughout Lithuania.

In this opinion piece, we wish to emphasize the importance of culture on the contemporary situation of the Lithuanian people as we look at the impact of history, geopolitical issues and other matters and offer a forecast for the future.

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History: A European Giant

The Lithuanian state traces its roots to the early 13th century unifications of King Mindaugas. Subsequent rulers extended their domain to include most of what is today Belarus and Ukraine. By the end of the 14th century, Lithuania was the largest state in Europe. In 1386, Lithuania and neighboring Poland were united under a common ruler. The Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth grew into the leading power of central Europe in the 15th century.

Over time, Lithuania's neighbors expanded in size and overtook it. In 1795, the last of several partitions ended independent Poland-Lithuania. Lithuania's territory was divided between Russia and Prussia, and Lithuanians became the latest European population to be subsumed by a larger neighbor. With the sweep of armies across Eurasia through the centuries, countless peoples have disappeared from record. Lithuanians could have shared that fate; the 19th century could have turned them into Russians or Prussians. However, Lithuania proved more resilient. The people retained their culture and language and remained attached to their Catholic tradition. This shared heritage secured the nation as an indivisible entity despite a century of shifting borders.

The end of World War I brought a second period of independence for Lithuania. However, Lithuania did not wait to be granted its freedom; representatives met as the Council of Lithuania to declare the nation sovereign once more. Independence was neither easy nor long lasting. The interwar years were marked by privation, strife and a heated dispute over possession of the city of Vilnius. In 1940, the armed forces of the Soviet Union invaded Lithuania in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Formal annexation followed, and within a year, deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia began. Between 1941 and 1953, approximately 200,000 Lithuanians were deported.

The Holocaust

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Within several days of the invasion, Lithuanians revolted against Soviet rule, and the German army occupied Vilnius, Kaunas and other Lithuanian cities. Many Lithuanians expected their country to be spared as the Germans confronted their mutual foe, the Soviet Union. Instead, the German occupation of Lithuania resulted in the slaughter of around 200,000 Jews. The Holocaust in Lithuania was one of the most brutal in all of the areas occupied by the Nazis.

As World War II was ending, Lithuanians prayed for liberation by the approaching American army to the west. It was a crushing disappointment, mentioned to this day, when the Soviet army returned to re-establish control over Lithuania in the summer of 1944.

For many years after that first annexation of 1940, the diplomatic missions of Lithuania in Washington, DC, the Vatican and a few other states remained open.¹ They

¹ Those embassies and their diplomats remained active to the end of the Cold War. For more on the story of these diplomats in exile, see "Lithuanian Diplomatic Service in Exile from 1940-1991," by Laurynas Jonušauskas in Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review, No. 13-14, 2004, pp. 71-77.

never recognized the Soviet takeover and were a beacon of hope for millions behind the Iron Curtain.

The Partisan War: 1945-1953

Lithuanians did not give back their country quietly. Thousands participated in the partisan war against the Soviets. The partisan guerrillas—assisted in various ways by the overwhelming majority of Lithuanians—fought for nine years, with 23,000 killed. The eight-year struggle ended only when the patriots of Lithuania were directly confronted by the battle-hardened Soviet army.

That was in 1953, the beginning of 40 years of winter for Lithuania. As before, the Lithuanian people had to take strength from their cultural heritage and memories of national greatness. Their rich tradition of high-quality education also supported them. During the partisan war, lawyers and politicians were killed or exiled. Thereafter, aspiring youths pursued “safe” disciplines: physics, medicine and mathematics. As the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev began in the mid-1980s, Lithuanians sensed with the rest of the world the advent of profound change. Only the Lithuanians, however, would be led into that change by civil engineers and graphic designers.

The Hill of Crosses

The Hill of Crosses (see photo at right) shows the importance of religion in Lithuanian culture. This hill, located outside of Šiauliai, was first planted with wooden crosses in 1931. Over time, the handful of crosses turned into dozens and then hundreds. Soviet officials did not approve of the site’s religious or cultural appeal and ordered its destruction by bulldozers and bonfire. The crosses reappeared. The Soviets tried again and still the crosses remained.



Photo Credit: iStockphoto.com/SimonPodgorsek

We visited the site during our 1993 trip, several months after Pope John Paul II’s pilgrimage to the Hill of Crosses. The Lithuanian people had a friend in this Pope, who was a tireless advocate for the Lithuanian cause. During our 2008 visit, we observed that the site had dramatically expanded, now home to over 100,000 crosses.

During the preparations for Pope John Paul II’s visit, we were in Rome where Thomas Melady was serving as the US Ambassador to the Holy See (1989-1993).² In early 1990, Ambassador Melady learned through State Department reports that Mikhail Gorbachev was feeling the pressure from Lithuanians for independence and even admitted it to the US ambassador. Many officials in the West thought that the loss of even one

² For more information on this period in our lives, see [The Ambassador’s Story: The United States and the Vatican in World Affairs](#), by Thomas Patrick Melady. New York: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994, pp. 26, 57, 63-66, 136, 198.

Soviet republic would cripple Gorbachev. The consensus was that we should work with Gorbachev and that losing him would be contrary to the interests of the United States. Lithuanian leaders at the time disagreed. They felt that the United States did not strongly push Gorbachev for withdrawal in 1990.

The Lithuanian leadership could not wait. On March 11, 1990, the democratically-elected Supreme Council of Lithuania declared the restoration of Lithuanian independence. Soviet forces did not budge, and months of rising tension ended with the deaths of 14 civilians in January 1991. Widespread criticism led to a plebiscite the following month. More than 90 percent of voters demanded an independent and democratic Lithuania. On February 11, 1991, Iceland, a NATO member, became the first state to recognize independent Lithuania. Over 80 countries followed within a few brief moments. On September 17, 1991, Lithuania and the other Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia, joined the United Nations.

Regained Independence

What has occurred in the 17 years since the world recognized independent Lithuania? The facts speak for themselves. Today, the Republic of Lithuania is a democratic state and a member of the European Union and NATO.

The political parties of modern Lithuania evolved from the independence movement known as “Sąjūdis.” Founded in 1988, Sąjūdis (Reform Movement of Lithuania) emerged from small gatherings held throughout the years of Soviet control. A few friends—close enough to trust that no one was a Soviet agent—met around a kitchen table and discussed their country’s problems. As they debated a desire for independence against the threat of retaliation, they were all conscious of their connection to the aforementioned Council of 1918. That Council finds its roots several centuries earlier when the Lithuanian Statutes appeared in May 1791, the earliest written constitution in Europe. Those statutes were written by graduates of Vilnius University. We visited this institution both in 1993 and 2008 and met with the student body that has provided leadership to Lithuania since 1579.

Vilnius University, itself, represents the institutionalization of something much older. The distinct Lithuanian identity has been a source of internal strength from the time of Mindaugas. It allowed the people to survive the years of Nazi occupation followed by decades of Soviet annexation. Today, Mindaugas is a symbol of long-sought and hard-won independence.

The remainder of the Soviet Union recognized Lithuanian independence in September 1991, but Soviet forces did not completely withdraw until 1993. On May 19, 2000, Lithuania, together with eight of its oft-dominated neighbors, signed the Vilnius Declaration, which articulated a strong commitment to a united and free Europe.³ These

³ Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia signed the Vilnius Declaration.

fast-moving events culminated in Lithuania becoming a full member of the European Union and NATO in 2004.

Lithuanian soldiers have fought for international peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Macedonia. Lithuanian observers helped to ensure a free and fair outcome after attempted fraud in the 2004 Ukrainian elections. Lithuania also participated in missions to Afghanistan and Iraq, a sign of its growing bilateral relationship with the United States. “Anyone who would choose Lithuania as an enemy,” said President Bush in Vilnius in 2002, “has also made an enemy of the United States of America.”⁴

New Challenges

Lithuania’s 3.5 million people reside in a country about the size of West Virginia. Lithuania’s two ethnic minority groups—Poles and Russians—are confronting a difficult past with respect to the Lithuanian nation state.⁵

The Polish community (around seven percent of the population) has made progress integrating into Lithuanian society. The history of Polish aggression is now fading in terms of importance to contemporary Lithuania.

The relationship with Russia is more complicated. The distrust of Russia is still noticeable. Russia’s ability to withhold energy supplies is a grave concern, exacerbated by the imminent closure of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant. Although this plant provides 70 percent of the country’s electricity, it is an RBMK model—the same type as the infamous reactor at Chernobyl. The closure was a condition for EU entry. The replacement plant will not be operational before 2015,⁶ and in the interim, Lithuanians warily look east for their energy needs.

The Russian bear still casts a shadow across the region, particularly after its claws lashed out in Georgia. Our Lithuanian friends watched anxiously as Moscow reminded the West (and its eastern allies) of Russian rights in its traditional “sphere of influence.” The President of Lithuania joined the Presidents of Ukraine, Estonia and Poland and the Prime Minister of Latvia on August 12 in a visit to Tbilisi in a show of support for their neighbor.

The remaining Jewish community, with the assistance of international Jewish organizations, is seeking compensation for the communal property that was confiscated during the Nazi and Soviet occupations. While neighboring countries have been able to

⁴ “Alliance of Freedom Being Tested by ‘New and Terrible Dangers,’” Remarks by President George W. Bush to the Citizens of Vilnius, November 23, 2002. Retrieved on August 18, 2008, from the following link: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/11/20021123-5.html>.

⁵ Demographic data are found in the “Lithuania” chapter of The World Factbook as updated on September 4, 2008, published by the Central Intelligence Agency.

⁶ This new power plant will be a joint venture with Poland, Latvia and Estonia. This project will turn Lithuania into an electricity hub, likely exporting energy into Western Europe. For details, see “Interview: Lithuania Targets 2015-18 for New Nuclear Plant,” dated June 5, 2008, on the Reuters UK Web site. Retrieved on August 18, 2008, from <http://uk.reuters.com/article/oilRpt/idUKL0544112420080605?sp=true>.

come to a settlement with their Jewish communities on similar questions of confiscated property, this matter in Lithuania is still in dispute. However, now that the parliamentary elections are taking place, there is an indication that Lithuania is moving towards the goal of resolving this issue.

Lithuania's aging population and very low birth rate spell a troubling future. The growing negative impact on the country's economic growth is clear, but countering this trend is difficult. Emigration helps support the Lithuanian economy. Approximately 300,000 Lithuanians working abroad in 2007 sent over a billion US dollars home (three percent of Lithuanian GDP). Eighty percent of Lithuanian youths pursue higher education, according to figures from the last five years. This dual phenomenon strains the educational system and puts pressure on the economy. These graduates will leave if Lithuania is unable to create more jobs, triggering even further emigration and a downward spiral of population.

The Future

Lithuanians have demonstrated their adherence to democratic principles, changing governments through peaceful elections. Their parliamentary governments are formed through coalitions, sometimes very fragile ones. Nevertheless, the strength of Lithuanian culture has given the state internal stability and confidence abroad. Recognizing their limits against economic and political giants, Lithuanian leaders work with peers to expand their influence. In the European parliament, Lithuanian delegates are not afraid to raise questions, challenging their colleagues to face critical issues. Lithuania has lost territory in the last half millennium, but its current impact on political developments in Central and Eastern Europe is as strong as ever.

Lithuania, immersed in over eight centuries of history and culture, is now a fully respected member of the world's civil society. Given the discouraging developments in other parts of the world, it has been rewarding for us to witness the progress from our first visit in 1993. Today, Lithuania is a success story.**

** For more information on Lithuania's past and present, see Lithuania: A Success Story, commissioned by the Government of Lithuania and published by Hill & Knowlton in 2006.