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IS LITHUANIA READY FOR AN UNPREDICTABLE FUTURE?: THE EU AND NATO CASES

Abstract:

Today's world is in transition, and nobody can predict what the future power balance will look like. Transatlantic relations and the EU are in trouble. They may transform significantly, but it seems that many European countries are not ready for fundamental change. The United States of Europe or Europe of Nations – what should be the choice for Lithuania and what can it do in case of NATO disintegration? This article is a speculative futurology, with the goal of preparing for the future

Keywords:

Lithuania, the European Union, the United States of Europe, Europe of Nations, NATO, PESCO

Introduction

Many experts accentuate that today the world is in transition with a high degree of uncertainty at both the regional and global levels. The president of France Emmanuel Macron said: “We are probably in the process of experiencing the end of Western hegemony over the world. (...) And it is also the emergence of new powers whose impact we have probably underestimated for far too long. China first and foremost as well as Russia’s strategy that has, let’s face it, been pursued with greater success over the last few years. (...) The India that is emerging, these new economies that are also becoming not just economic but political powers and which consider themselves, as some have noted, genuine civilization states and which have not just disrupted our international order, assumed a key role in the economic order, but have also

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very forcefully reshaped the political order and the political thinking that goes with it, with a great deal more inspiration than we have”².

A new kind of global power balance is going to appear, but for now nobody knows when it will appear and what it will look like. For Europe this problem is relevant too, because it has to find its place in a new world, but for now it is unclear, what relations with Russia and America it will have and how these will develop internally.

Lithuania is currently a member of the European Union, but is the EU going to exist? Who can guarantee today that Brexit is not the beginning of its disintegration because of many internal and external challenges it faces. Someone can say that it is unreal, but who could have predicted in 1990 that the Soviet Union will collapse after some time and who expected in 2013 that next year the war in Ukraine will start? Is Lithuania ready for unpredictable future? It seems that it is not, anticipating the continuation of the ‘business as usual’ (EU existence and close transatlantic relations, including NATO). So, it is worth analyzing the worst case scenarios of the perspectives of the EU and NATO to know how Lithuania could cope with a new reality.

Core Europe – in or out?

Today it is obvious that the challenges faced by the EU are existential. Therefore, Macron was not far from being right when he said: “And so we have to find ways to shape globalization as well as reshape this international order. I am aware of how ambitious this is and that it will not happen overnight. But I am aware of the need for this way of thinking and this approach both in France and at the European level. Otherwise we will fall”³. Actually, there are several big scenarios for Europe: the United States of Europe (federalization perspective); Europe of Nations (disintegration perspective); Multi-speed (Two-speed) Europe.

As it was said above, living inside today’s reality it is always hard to believe that it may change dramatically. Members of the EU got used to the European institutional order. Other countries want to join the EU. However, different interrelated centrifugal tendencies (refugee crisis and growing nationalism, trade wars and other economic troubles, lack of geopolitical subjectivity and effective decision making, etc.) are strong enough to throw Europe back to the period of sovereign nations. Still, the author of the article believes that because of Germany and/or France the idea of the European integration will not “die” anyway, and in the worst case we will see a ‘Two-speed Europe’.

² *Ambassadors’ conference – Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, 27.08.2019, <<https://lv.ambafrance.org/Ambassadors-conference-Speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron-President-of-the-Republic>> (23.11.2019).*

³ *Ibidem.*

Accordingly, Lithuania will have to choose its way of development, and there are several options for it: sovereignty, some type of regional cooperation and ‘Core Europe’.

When the president of the United States Donald Trump said that “future belongs to patriots, not globalists”⁴, the president of Lithuania Gitanas Nausėda supported this idea⁵ meaning that he is not an enthusiast of the United States of Europe. Lithuanian Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis is also skeptical of deepening European integration⁶. However, it does not mean that in case of the systemic transformation of the EU Lithuania will stay away from ‘Core Europe’ either.

In theory, being neutral can be successful, but for good results constructive relations with neighbors and effective state management (both economic and political) are also needed. Practice shows that these tasks are very heavy for the Lithuanian elite. Lithuania does not have truly nor declarative, friendly relations even with Poland and Latvia, not to mention Russia and Belarus. At the same time the quality of the political process (cohesion) and governmental economic policy in the state is very low. Finally, it depends a lot on the financial support from the EU, and the consequences of its withdrawal would be very painful for Lithuania – especially, keeping in mind its socioeconomic challenges.

So, without the EU it will need some new cooperation framework – at least regional, and there are two options in this case excluding in this paper the idea of an eastern integration scenario, because it is *a priori* unacceptable for Lithuania Nordic states and Poland (perhaps with some other CEE countries). The first – Nordic – option looks attractive, but Lithuania is not Estonia. In other words, there is no durable historic tradition of its cooperation with Scandinavian states. On the other hand, with Poland, Lithuania had a common state for a long time. So, some type of the Lithuanian-Polish union looks logical, but there is one important nuance; the history of Lithuanian-Polish relations – it is not only the history of close cooperation, but also of fierce competition (for example, for the Vilnius region). Furthermore, Poland is a ‘big state’ in comparison to Lithuania, and Lithuanians always want to prove that they are not a ‘younger brother’. Today Lithuania needs Poland more than Poland needs

⁴ Trump: “The future belongs to patriots”, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-49816144/trump-the-future-belongs-to-patriots>> (23.11.2019).

⁵ I. Jačauskas, *Lithuanian President supports Trump’s “future belongs to patriots” statement*, <<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1100689/lithuanian-president-supports-trump-s-future-belongs-to-patriots-statement>> (23.11.2019).

⁶ E. Jakilaitis, *Skvernelis running for president: Karbauskis will not control the president*, <<https://en.delfi.lt/archive/skvernelis-running-for-president-karbauskis-will-not-control-the-president.d?id=80613511>> (23.11.2019).

Lithuania, and in the case of some union Poland will be the number one choices with no doubt. In such context it seems that for Vilnius it will be more acceptable to be the second choice in relation to Berlin and/or Paris in 'Core Europe' even when putting aside the obvious, financial advantages of such choice). So, the prediction is that in case of the big turmoil in Europe Lithuania will prefer to stay in the 'First-speed Europe' because it is simply not ready, nor skillful enough to live on its own and too proud to be a 'younger brother' of Poland. But what about security and NATO?

When saying A means saying B

President Macron speaks not only about the EU, but also about NATO. For example, he said that "we are currently experiencing the brain death of NATO"⁷ because of the actions of the United States. Lithuanian foreign minister Linas Linkevičius answered that "rumors about the death of NATO are strongly exaggerated", insisting that problems can be "overcome"⁸. But there is no guarantee that they can be and that they will be.

Donald Trump requires more money for NATO, and many countries in Europe, including Germany are not ready to pay. As a result of this and other reasons transatlantic relations are getting worse, while France and Germany repeat that Europe must take care of its own security itself. The idea of a European army is not officially on the table, but in November 2019 the European Council adopted an updated list of 13 projects to be undertaken under PESCO, and this decision brings to 47 the number of projects that are currently in place⁹. In other words, the machine of the independent European military structure is going forward. Finally, conflict between America and Turkey because of the deal on the S-400 missile system and Turkish actions in Syria creates even more tension inside the Alliance. At the same time, it is only an episode in a big story of the change of Turkish geopolitical orientation from a western one towards pan-Islamic one. As a result, Ankara may leave NATO one day, which would shake the background of the organization.

In this context it is worth recalling the words of the former Vice President of the United States Joe Biden, who said this about Trump: "If he is re-elected,

⁷ *Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead*, <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>> (23.11.2019).

⁸ *Lithuanian FM: "Rumours about the death of NATO are strongly exaggerated"*, <<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20191116-lithuanian-fm-rumours-about-the-death-of-nato-are-strongly-exaggerated>> (23.11.2019).

⁹ *Defence cooperation: Council launches 13 new PESCO projects*, Council of the European Union, <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/11/12/defence-cooperation-council-launches-13-new-pesco-projects/>> (23.11.2019).

I promise you, there will be no NATO”¹⁰. Keeping in mind all the troubles of contemporary transatlantic unity, they do not look like electoral agitation anymore. Trump called NATO an ‘obsolete’ organization once¹¹. Today he cannot just leave it, but it seems that he does everything to destroy it. And if so, what could Lithuania do in the case of a NATO collapse?

The options are the same: stay alone, join some regional military alliance (if it is in place) or become a part of the European army in the framework of ‘Core Europe’. Again, in theory, Lithuania can be a successful neutral state – it just has to stop creating a ‘Russian threat’ for itself. Of course, there is some logic in the opinion that Russia can use the transatlantic disorder as a possibility to occupy Baltic states, but there should be a very serious pretext to do that. The author of the article may be wrong, but he does not think that such pretext would appear, also because the Baltic states would prefer not to provoke the Kremlin without NATO behind them, and it is much more important for it to put CIS area under its control).

However, it is doubtful that Lithuania will choose the strategy of ‘Finlandization’. Thus, a security alliance (which differs from political-economic union) with Poland or Nordic countries is imaginable, but there is a serious obstacle for any such scenarios – if Lithuania becomes a part of ‘Core Europe’ (and, as it was noted above, it most likely will), the latter will require from its members to take part in its defense project, and Lithuanians will not be able to refuse.

Conclusions

There are several main conclusions of this article; First, the contemporary system of international relations is in transition, and the final result is hardly predictable. So, each state should prepare itself for the worst case scenarios. In the case of Lithuania it is the transformation of the EU and collapse of NATO. Second, in theory, Lithuania could be a successful neutral state outside any union or military alliance, but in practice it is not skillful enough to stay alone without serious socioeconomic problems. Therefore, it is supposed to join ‘Core Europe’ and become a part of its military structure.

However, all these premises are only a speculative futurology, which depends on many variables – for example, the position of the United States (maybe Trump loses the next presidential election and transatlantic unity survives), the positions of Germany and France (maybe they decide not to continue the EU in another form), the position of Russia (maybe it decides to

¹⁰ E. Bradner, *Biden predicts there will be no NATO if is re-elected*, <https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/democratic-debate-october-2019/h_a9ef668ef6aa713f54b6937f129d4390> (23.11.2019).

¹¹ Ashley Parker, *Donald Trump says NATO is “Obsolete”, UN is “Political Game”*, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38635181>> (23.11.2019).

use the European turmoil to grab some territories), the position of Poland (if it does not join ‘Core Europe’, it would be problematic to be the part of the latter for Lithuania), etc. Finally, there is a saying: ‘If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans’. The future is unpredictable, but we must try to be ready.

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