Toward New Quality after the “Prague Autumn”

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Inspired by the Lithuanian Atlantic Treaty Association, pro-NATO youth organizations arranged a bus trip from the capitals of the Baltic states to Prague. The name of the action was “Next stop – NATO.” This motto reflects very clearly the direction of the foreign policies of three states that some decades ago were denied their natural aspiration to be part of west European society.

The Prague Summit had an extremely complex agenda. On top of this, NATO welcomed seven new members: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia – the biggest enlargement in the history of the Alliance. For many in Central Europe the decision was symbolically made in Prague. In 1968 the “Prague spring” failed to bring democracy to the eastern side of the Iron Curtain; in 2002 the “Prague autumn” succeeded in bringing a large portion of Central Europe to the North Atlantic Alliance.

We – Lithuanians – are finally in, feeling like first-year students. Lithuania has been preparing for NATO membership since independence from the Soviet Union in 1990. According to opinion polls almost two-thirds of Lithuania’s population says “yes” to the Alliance. "Neutrality is so unrealistic, it is not even brought up in serious discussions," says Vytautas Landsbergis, who led Lithuania’s freedom movement more than one decade ago.

The question of why NATO is necessary is rather simple. NATO is one of the means that allows Lithuania to be secure in its own house after decades or even ages of denied or limited security. It may sound strange for foreigners to hear, that someone can be unsafe in his/her own house, but for Lithuanians the feeling of eternal uncertainty and unpredictability is very well known. As Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus mentioned in Prague, Lithuania was occupied and lost one-third of its population... Today Lithuania has no enemies, but you never know what will happen in the future.

Almost one decade ago, the (then) Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt called the destiny of the Baltic states the litmus test for the West. With that test it would be possible to measure the amount of political will in the West that is necessary to accept the nations that were some time ago annexed by the powerful Soviet Union and still claimed to be in the “area of Russian interests.” The integration of the Baltic states into the Euro-Atlantic sphere had to show that the West could forget the dark pages of twentieth-century history and welcome these Western societies to their integrated clubs. “Prague” was the litmus test for NATO, as Saulius Giriūnas, the political observer of Radio Free Europe noted. NATO had to stress that there are no taboo territories in Europe, and it did. Vytautas Landsbergis added: “If they do not name Lithuania in Prague, it would be totally unexpected and be felt as the greatest betrayal.” Although the official NATO statements do not reflect all the history of the Lithuanian efforts, it is known that the road preceding the formal invitation was not easy.

The visit to Lithuania of US President George W. Bush was the successful follow-up of the Prague Summit. For Lithuanians it was another significant symbol. The phrase “the enemies of Lithuania now are the enemies of the United States” from the lips of the American President sounds more impressive than many mythic security guarantees.

"Today we have closed the page of misery, occupations and isolation in our history," President Valdas Adamkus told a news conference. The joint news conference, given with Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga and Estonian President Arnold Ruutel, was held immediately after the end of Bush's visit to Vilnius. "In our talks with the US President, I expressed Lithuania's full support for US foreign policy and assured him that Lithuania will...
stand shoulder to shoulder with the US in the fight for our common human values," Adamkus said, also underlining Lithuanian commitments to the Prague agenda.

There are and will be threats in the world. Some of them are traditional and very well known. They come from aggressive and unpredictable countries with territorial and historical claims to neighboring states. NATO’s Article 5 was and still is the means against these threats. The result is clear: no NATO member state has ever been attacked. In the years of the Cold War the source of threats was precisely known: the Soviet Union and its satellites. NATO has traditionally operated as a defensive body – a necessity in an age when the Soviet Union held a large advantage in ground forces. Are we sure that threats from the former communist neighborhood are gone? There are no eternal guarantees, thus the insurance by participating in a reliable alliance is less painful than suffering in the future.

President Adamkus hopes that the Baltic states' relations with Moscow are not damaged by joining NATO. "The US President assured me that the Russian President, Putin, quietly accepted the enlargement of NATO," Adamkus said. "In its turn, Lithuania's foreign policy is directed toward maintaining good relations with Russia," he added.

A central purpose of NATO is to keep Russia from becoming an enemy again. Behind the scenes, Putin had been trying to delay the expansion by requiring the Baltic states first to join the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, its side agreements now tied in knots by Russian troops in Chechnya. Furthermore, Putin tried to restrict deployment of NATO troops or weapons in the Baltics, which would have made the three states second-class members. George W. Bush had none of that.

The evil of the communist system is probably gone, but, as security specialist say, after killing the dragon we found the forest full of poisonous snakes. These may be less impressive, but not less dangerous. Individual countries can try to fight these new threats – organized crime, ethnic tensions, global terrorism – but reliable alliances always work better.

The Prague Summit paid serious attention to the new threats. NATO will now be required to operate out-of-area to eradicate enemy forces abroad. In fact the organization has been slowly but steadily rebuilding itself for the twenty-first century. Whether NATO now becomes a force for combating terrorists and rogue states and for spreading democracy beyond Europe will depend on whether the political will for a strong transatlantic partnership can be sustained, both in Washington and in Europe. Taking in Lithuania and its neighbors will invigorate NATO and strengthen the Alliance's hand against "global terrorists who hate freedom," as President George W. Bush said before the Prague Summit.

Lithuania has for many years been known as a producer of European security, not as a consumer. NATO non-Article 5 missions are known as a sort of factory of European security, meaning that the small producers such as Lithuania are also of great importance. The Baltic states are generally examples of successful regional development. Many predicted political instability, economic chaos and ethnic clashes in the region, but they never happened. Baltic states became the leaders in implementing west European acquis communautaire. The example of the Baltic states can be followed by areas such as the Balkans, Transcaucasia, Central Asia and others.

Today many say that NATO is not only the producer of military security but of “soft” security as well. NATO membership thus stimulates economic growth, attracts foreign investment and promotes the country in European and transatlantic markets. The influence of NATO membership to the economies of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary is already significant. Lithuania cannot say that it currently lacks foreign investments, but the amount will nevertheless have to increase.
Each country needs some political stability and reliability – a guarantee that there will be no dramatic changes in policies and values. These guarantees are necessary for NATO membership and Lithuania can ensure NATO that the guarantees are in place.

The most important consequence of NATO enlargement is that Lithuania is making a final evaluation of its geography and history. Lithuanian citizens have had to explain and explain again that they are real Europeans, that they have European history, geography and culture. Because of Lithuania's sad history many even today are surprised about our European heritage and about our difficult existence in different eastern blocs. There will no longer be a need to explain – Lithuania is now a member of NATO and it is clear that we are Europeans with a west European orientation. This time we are on our own side, as Czech President Vaclav Havel used to say. Let us hope that it lasts forever.

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