

Poland-Lithuania. The conclusions of the debate of the Centre for Strategic Analysis and Centre for International Relations

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In November, Centre for Strategic Analysis, together with the Centre for International Relations inaugurated a cycle of debates “Debates beyond boundaries.” The main idea and the reason why we decided to organise the debate, retaining the independence of both organisations, is a belief that we decided to organize our debates is the conviction that the lack of debate can become a threat to Poland, especially when we talk about the key issues like foreign or security policy. In our opinion, the lack of willingness to listen increases the risk of making wrong decisions and makes it impossible to find a consensus between the proposed solutions. In our opinion, given the increasing threats, a compromise between the main political forces and ideological camps is a must.



The first debate, which took place on November 14th was entitled “Poland-Lithuania: how to end the cold war of the allies”. Two basic facts defining the relationship between Warsaw and Vilnius are highlighted in the title. On the one hand, we wanted to stress out the fact that the relationship resembles a cold war and on the other hand, we were trying to remind people that both countries are the members of the European Union and NATO. Company PZU was the main sponsor of the debate and the conference was organized with their support.

A detailed report from the debate, along with recommendations was sent to Poland.

“Chatham House Rule” was preserved during the discussion – in the following report we do not attribute any of the statements to any of the participants.

The participants of the debate had both right-wing and left-wing political views, different political sympathies (from PiS to KOD), different histories in the communist period, people with the opinions close to the ideas of Jerzy Giedroyc or ones who accentuate Polish minority issues in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Among the panelists, we could also find a representative of the management of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania.

All participants of the debate underlined that they are tired and even irritated by the actions of subsequent Lithuanian authorities, because they do nothing to solve the issues of the Polish minority. It was emphasized that Vilnius shows no respect not only to the customs, but also the Polish-Lithuanian Treaty and EU law. In the opinion of the participants of the conference the Lithuanian government’s actions are a systematic violation of the rights of the Polish minority. These include, inter alia, the issue of re-privatization, names’ spelling, street names, education. Also Polish investments in Lithuania were sabotaged, including those where the geopolitical interests of Warsaw and Vilnius were actually identical.

The efforts of the Presidents Aleksander Kwasniewski and Lech Kaczynski were also emphasized and it was also noted that despite the special commitment of both of them, their actions have not given the expected results, and the Lithuanian authorities have only misled or even cheated on our presidents. The talks concerned also the actions of

President Bronislaw Komorowski, but it was noted that, at the same time, the Polish government ran a different, sharper (but also ineffective) policy towards Vilnius. The participants agreed that the dislike between the two states and nations is a result of this situation. Unfortunately, the Polish-Lithuanian conflict was also noticed by our allies in the EU and NATO.

It was accentuated that, regarding to the question of safety, Lithuania needs Poland, but it shows the signs of the lack of good will. It was also said that Poland had the possibility of linking the issue of NATO enlargement to the issue of the Polish minority, but the government decided not to and – regardless of the critical evaluation of the Lithuanian side – it was a legitimate move.

Speakers stressed that the poor relations of Warsaw and Vilnius are in conflict with the active regional policy declared by Warsaw. The crisis in relations with Lithuania weakens Poland also within NATO. Thus, it is also in Polish interest to improve these relations.

In respect of the Polish minority, it was said that the actions of Polish leaders should not be good for the minority leaders, but to the minority itself. A series of far-reaching remarks and criticisms concerning the leaders of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania was expressed. Among others: too close relations with the Russian minority, lack of understanding for the Lithuanian sensitivity and actions that may be perceived as an expression of a lack of loyalty towards Lithuania. The attitude of some leaders of the Polish minority in the years 1989-1990 was mentioned. As for the leaders of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, they were judged to have two extreme types of attitude: the first, almost unconditionally promoting the Electoral Action leadership and the second, which completely rejects the current leaders. The majority of the members does not share any of the extreme attitudes. The first one can lead to a situation where Poland would become a hostage to a group of politicians, the second one is a symptom of wishful thinking and a lack of realism and it ignores the fact that the leaders have the genuine support of the Polish minority in Lithuania. The compromise solution would be to continue to support the leaders, but still expressing some conditions of that support.

A lot of participants stated that Poland in relations with Lithuania allowed itself to express some unfortunate, and quite arrogant comments, which complicated the situation. It was underlined that such events can annoy Lithuanian nationalists and thus they can be harmful to the country.

It was noted that Lithuanian politicians in private conversations say that the crisis in relations between Poland and Lithuania had gone too far and that it is necessary to start a dialogue. However, no real action was taken by politicians in order to improve relations.

The speakers stressed that although Warsaw has never had any territorial claims, Poland was unable to convince Lithuanians that Polish revisionism is not true. The figure of the general Żeligowski left a lasting impression in the historical memory of Lithuanian nation. The big problem is that there exist, possibly inspired by the Russian special services, extreme environments that make political provocations suggesting that Poland indeed has territorial claims for example via Internet.

Several ways to solve issues dividing Warsaw and Vilnius were proposed. The first method is to wait for further aggressive moves of Russia, assuming that it will force the Vilnius to make concessions. It was judged as unlikely but possible. Regardless of that fact, the participants stressed that Poland and Lithuania should place greater emphasis on the issue of common threats, so that the cooperation in the fight against the Russia was more likely. However, this may support only the actions referred to in the following paragraphs.

The second solution would be to turn to the international courts. These steps should be planned informally (so that Lithuanian concessions do not seem as taken under pressure) and communicate to Vilnius, that if there is no change in the relationship, Warsaw is willing to take this route.

The third – harmful even in the opinion of the speaker – solution would be to turn away from Vilnius and the

indifference towards our neighbor. Such a policy would not solve the problem at all.

The fourth solution would be the intensification of the social dialogue, hoping that this time it will provoke some changes. This option was supported, but even the supporters stressed that it is a method that could have an effect only in the distant future. It was emphasized that the nationalist forces both in Lithuania and in Poland – being also inspired by Russia – will have time to organize a provocation that will lead to the derailment of dialogue. Although, it has been proposed to try to intensify the cooperation of societies of both countries, youth, non-governmental organizations while taking other actions. Such cooperation would represent a kind of by-pass that would avoid sensitive matters and would help the relationship in the future. However, it will not solve the conflict in the short term. We should also consider bringing Polish companies to this enterprise, including the companies present on the Lithuanian market.

The fifth method would be to organize a political summit to try and break the deadlock and not by using the policy of small steps, but through a multiple solution to the problems. One speaker suggested to apply this scenario, with the remark that such a dialogue would have to be led by the most important politicians of both countries: from the Polish side, the head of PiS (Law and Justice) Jarosław Kaczyński, and from Lithuania, today's most important politician, the President of Lithuanian Peasant and Greens Union Ramūnas Karbauskis. What is important, none of the participants assumed that the dialogue could lead to a compromise.

The discussion showed that even people originally oriented favourably towards Lithuania and showing a great understanding for the Lithuanian point of view, had lost illusions that the discussion will resolve the issues of Polish minority. The problem is that right now the goodwill for supporting Lithuania is only a result of a geopolitical calculation and our Lithuanian allies managed to squander the capital of sympathy, which undoubtedly they had for years. The speakers underlined that Poland must have a pragmatic attitude to Lithuania. Lithuanian elites have to become conscious of the growing disillusionment of the policy of Vilnius, because it is the only reason that may give them pause and make them think.

It may seem that one of the reasons for the lack of concessions on the part of Lithuania is the conviction that the Polish elite are not able to compromise and they will fail to keep that course of politics towards Vilnius for a longer period of time. In such a scenario, Lithuania will play for time, waiting for a change of government in Warsaw. Although, the extremely favourable voices towards Lithuania are not heard often and they do not seem to correspond with the social moods or the dominant opinion of the main Polish political forces. The reluctance of Vilnius against any of the concessions towards Warsaw can therefore be explained by the disbelief of Vilnius in the permanence of the paradigm shift in Warsaw or the belief that policy of no concessions does not entail any consequences. It seems that the remedy for the above state of affairs should consist of three elements. Firstly, the Lithuanian party should receive a clear signal that the main political forces in Poland, despite the very sharp dispute about the policy towards Lithuania, are able to work out a compromise. Secondly, Poland should plan real actions aimed against Vilnius, if within a certain time there will be no breakthrough in the relations. At the same time, Poland should strive to develop proposals that would allow Vilnius to make concessions, but while saving face. In exchange for the concessions, Poland could perform certain favourable gestures towards Lithuania. The attempt to force Vilnius to bend the knee will definitely be a fiasco. If main Polish politicians stood out from the extremely anti-Lithuanian voices.

The discussion showed that the participants agree more than it would at first appear and despite the fact that they represented different views and conflicting political camps. It proves that debates about the key issues are gaining substantive qualities when conducted in the Chatham House formula.

The Centre for Strategic Analysis and Centre for International Relations will organize another "Debates Beyond Boundaries". Special thanks to our sponsor – the company PZU – for their support.

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Tłumaczenie by Joanna Jastrzębska w ramach praktyk w Europejskiej Fundacji Praw Człowieka, www.efhr.eu.
Translated by Joanna Jastrzębska within the framework of a traineeship programme of the European Foundation of Human Rights, www.efhr.eu.
