

# Project Europe and Lithuania

**Jonas Mažeika.** Head of Policy Analysis Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
of the Republic of Lithuania

By far the most appropriate summary<sup>1</sup> of the discussions of politicians, historians, and intellectuals on what Europe and the West are to Lithuania and how Lithuanians understand them, as well as what kind of European identity Lithuania has, is provided by Lithuanian historian Gintaras Beresnevičius,<sup>2</sup> who states that “Lithuania is a periphery of Europe and at the same time the centre of Europe. This is a great gift.”

In 1989, the French National Institute of Geography performed calculations according to which a line from the altitude of 180 km perpendicular to the European continent gives us the location of the centre of Europe at 25 km north of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Lithuania appeared on today’s political and world map only a year after the collapse of the 50-year Soviet occupation of Lithuania. It seems clear, at least geographically, where Europe starts and ends and where Lithuania is located. However, this is only geography. Today, the search for Europe in terms of civilisation and culture and even, or perhaps only, the political search is much more complicated. And it is so not only for Lithuanians, but for the British, French, Germans and Russians as well.

## Are Lithuanians Europeans?

No wonder that even today we will easily find people among common citizens of Western Europe who consider Lithuania an exotic country or a country they have never heard of. The name Lithuania, difficult to pronounce for an English speaker, raises concern even to local political relations experts. Perhaps because of this Lithuania’s statehood has not been smooth – the history of statehood continues along a discontinuous line where interruptions are longer than sections of solid line. Yet, Lithuania cannot be separated from European civilisation.

Mentioned for the first time in 1009 in the *Annales Quedlinburgenses* books, Lithuania built its state – the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – in the middle of the 13th century and matched the largest states of Europe in size until the end of the 18th century. Lithuania thrived culturally and politically during this time. The state not only accumulated the most advanced European ideas, but was even at the forefront of those ideas.

The night of Saint Barthelemy in Paris (1572) became a symbol of religious hatred, whereas in Lithuania the rights of all Christian confessions became equal (1563 and 1568).

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1. The opinion expressed herein is that of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official position of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania.

2. Gintaras Beresnevičius (1961-2006), Lithuanian historian and essayist.

Other non-Christian communities had been tolerated here before. Vilnius and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were centres of attraction for several civilisations. As a result, Catholics, Russian Orthodox congregations, Uniates, Old Believers, Reformed Evangelicals, Evangelicals (Lutherans), Jews, Karaites, Muslims, and many other congregations lived here side by side.

Lithuania should be proud of the first total democracy experiment in Europe. The Parliament of the joint Lithuanian-Polish state, established in 1569 and officially called the Republic of Both Nations, widely practised the veto right in the 16th-17th centuries. Even though the consequences of the experiment were long lasting and painful to Lithuanian statehood, Lithuania learned its lesson in history well. Today we know that the veto right contains more than the aspect of prohibition. No matter how many interests there may be, or how many opinions these interests may represent, it is necessary to find a solution acceptable to all – to reach a consensus.

If we accept those European ideas that, apart from Western Europe, European civilisation includes Central Europe, countries of Byzantine traditions, and in particular Russia, then Lithuania is “*sur les confins de deux mondes*”, that is, on the border of both civilisations. It is sufficient to walk through Catholic gothic and baroque Vilnius, with its gothic and baroque Russian Orthodox churches – a symbol of the interplay of two European civilisations.

These are just a few examples showing that as far as history, historical memory, generation of ideas, and physical and spiritual manifestations are concerned, Lithuania has always felt and will feel a part of Europe and in Europe. In the 21st century, Lithuania, along with other countries of Central and Eastern Eu-

rope, returned not to Europe – because they had never left it – but to European structures created while we were absent from the political world map.

## In Search of Identities

The last expansion of the European Union raised many questions: what is the modern “European” identity? What will the political definition of Europe be? What vision of Europe should be chosen? Should the EU continue its in-depth development or further expansion or perhaps seek to combine both depth and expansion? To put it simply: what are the elements without which Europe would not be considered Europe? The answers are many and varied.

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Some intellectuals, such as Frank Furedi,<sup>3</sup> openly say that the elitist and technocratic project of the EU does not gain the admiration of citizens of European states. The mission and vision that would determine politicians’ decisions are absent. Many European politicians cannot even provide an answer to the question of what it means to be a European. This is revealed by referendums in France and the Netherlands regarding the EU Constitution.

Others, such as Paul Johnson,<sup>4</sup> suggest using “the West” instead of “Europe”. Europe in the world is a fading power that has performed the most successful project of society started in the 15th century, because there were people generating ideas and there was enough dynamism

3. Frank Furedi (b. 1948), sociologist, professor at the University of Kent.

4. Paul Johnson (b.1928), British historian and writer.



St. Johns' Church in Vilnius, Lithuania (Carlos M. González Manjarrez).

to implement those ideas. Today, the number of inhabitants in Europe is declining, there are fewer ideas, and the dynamism of implementation is decreasing.

The West means, after all, states with such underpinning ideas as capitalism, representative democracy, free trade, and freedom of speech embedded in their foundation. Such states also include Australia, located thousands of kilometres away from Europe, and the Republic of South Africa.

Questions on European identity show disappearing confidence in the history of Europe, the history of its culture and the power of its political aims. European identity is sought in the link between cultural ideals and political aims. There is condemnation of the war, yet the ability to resist evil is gradually declining; there

is discussion of values, yet desiring that they be politically correct. We may ask provocatively which today is more “European” or “Western” – Morocco or Russia? Which is more valuable to the European project: the Family Code – not fully evaluated by the West – adopted in 2004 in Morocco without any external pressure, whereby women’s and men’s rights were made equal, or passive observation of where Russia’s attempts to prove that Winston Churchill was wrong in saying that “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” will lead to?

Having made considerable political progress, politicised Europe is hiding its uncertainties as to whether this road is as yet the right road and whether there will be clear directions on which

way to act, think and create. By drawing its red EU (non-) expansion lines, is not Europe losing its cultural and historical identity without attaining its clear political identity?

## Different, Similar, the Same

The history of internal wars in Europe that for a period of 120 years broke the line of Lithuanian statehood and, later, 50 years of experience under the communist regime, inevitably formed a certain psychological foundation for the lack of self-confidence. However, this does not mean that we are “other”, not “those” Europeans. Each European nation has had a different way of development, faced different conflicts, and has different interests and neighbours.

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Surely, a standard traveller visiting Central and Eastern Europe will easily notice that what he or she sees in this region differs from what he or she is likely to experience in other European countries – from the condition of the roads to the bureaucracy that wears patience thin.

However, this is not the reason to accept the advice of the European elite to keep silent.<sup>5</sup>

The post-communist reality of Central and Eastern Europe is not the reason to keep silent and to be unheard when the political, cultural and social life of the region that has centuries of history is in focus. If all social and political problems are to be understood as depending on the level of economic, financial, and social development and efficient bureaucracy, there will be almost nothing important to be said or done so that Europe would become meaningful to any European nation and each European.

Besides the vision of Europe and the European Union as an exclusive club which, due to political correctness and good manners, calls smaller or economically and politically weaker countries friendly countries and traditional allies, another possibility exists for the future Europe. This is a Europe where small countries and nations would have the last say on basic European issues. This is a Europe where the Danes, Flemings, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, and Icelanders would not play a lesser role than the French, Germans or British.

Europe must remember alchemy and its three key aims: to create a panacea or elixir of immortality, unlimitedly extend life, and a human being. Is it Utopia? Yes, but today there are more chemists in Europe than alchemists. If we assess identity – irrespective of whether it is European, Lithuanian, or French – only on the basis of efficiency, it will readily fade away.

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5. “It is better to keep silent when you don’t know what’s going on” was the phrase said in 2003 by Jacques Chirac, the President of France at the time, when the Vilnius Group (Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) supported the United States’ aim to change the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq by military means.