

QUESTIONS AND RELATIONS – FROM THE BALTIC TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

THE ATTITUDE OF LATVIA TOWARDS THE VILNIUS QUESTION IN THE TWENTIES AND THIRTIES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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The problem of the state affiliation of Vilnius and Vilnius region during the period between the World War I and World War II was the main reason causing discordance between Lithuania and Poland and not allowing either of the neighboring states to develop normal relations. This problem resulted not only in poor relations between the above mentioned states, but became one of the primary reasons for not creating any defensive alliance of the Baltic countries (as well as Finland and Poland) which could radically change the development of consecutive events in this region at the end of the 30s and in 1940.

In comparison with other possible members of the Alliance of the Baltic States, Latvia's attitude expressed towards the conflict between Poland and Lithuania differed to a great extent. To a certain extent it could be explained by the fact that Latvia bordered both with Lithuania and Poland. Latvia had to develop normal relations with both of the countries. It was a highly complicated task, taking into account that maintaining good-neighborly relations with Lithuania and Poland was one of the main objectives set by the Latvian diplomacy.

Already in 1919 the problem of the state affiliation of Vilnius became one of the leading issues in the relations between Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, as both the politicians of Lithuania and Poland tried to gain the benevolent attitude of Latvia and other Baltic states in trying to affect their position regarding this matter. The Latvian party was aware of it and the Vilnius issue depending on the whole range of secondary socio-political conditions (territorial discord with Lithuania and dissent with Poland in the matter of the Latvian Polish minority or due to the exaggerated Poland's foreign-policy ambitions) became a certain index giving proof of the relations of Latvia with Poland and Lithuania in a certain period of time.

When in early October 1919 the Polish party invited representatives of Latvia to take part in the opening of the Vilnius University, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Z. Meierovics took it in with a certain degree of perplexity as in the course of the conference of the Baltic states that took place the previous month in Terbata, Latvia had denied its support to Lithuania in claiming annexation of Grodno, Suvalki, and Bialystok, at the same time expressing its support for Lithuania's claims as regards Vilnius. That is why it was impossible to send to Vilnius an

official delegation. Still the Latvian delegation that had arrived to Vilnius to take part in negotiations with the leaders of the Polish state and the army was informally present at the opening ceremony of the university. In the autumn of 1919 Latvia took a rather firm stand towards the possibility of entering a military alliance with Poland. Z. Meierovics agreed to entering such an alliance only if Lithuania became a member as well¹. But as Latvian-Lithuanian negotiations regarding entering an alliance failed, the attitude of Latvia changed with a pronounced tendency to become closer to Poland. The main reason was of course territorial discordance between Latvia and Lithuania as well as the views expressed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania A. Voldemaras. According to him Lithuania's allies in its fight for Vilnius were Germany and Soviet Russia, whereas Latvia would sooner or later be destroyed and annihilated (such views he did not keep secret, even from Latvian representatives). As a characteristic utterance A. Voldemaras' answer to Z. Meierovics could be mentioned when on 30 December 1919 he expressed the view that Daugavpils did not belong to Latvia but to Lithuania, as it was the "key" to its capital Vilnius². Officially the stand taken by Latvia as to the Vilnius question remained totally neutral (Z. Meierovics specially stressed it in the interview given to the Polish national democratic press on 18 February 1920)³. As a result of this attitude the Latvian and Estonian representatives consistently refused to support the claims of Lithuania as regards the Vilnius question. It happened both at the meeting of the representatives of the General Headquarters of the Baltic states in Valka in January 1920⁴, as well as at the Bulduri conference in August and September 1920⁵.

In September 1920 representatives of Latvian diplomatic service left Kaunas for Vilnius which had been newly regained by Lithuania, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia at this time did not value highly the falling of Vilnius into Lithuanian hands due to the low number of Lithuanians in the population of Vilnius. This number the ministry considered to be "the reef, which the Lithuanian ship has to be on the guard for"⁶. In general, the Latvian government had worked out a relatively determined foreign-policy strategy concerning the relations with Lithuania and Poland. Taking into consideration the peculiar situation in the region, it was next to impossible to avoid a certain diplomatic maneuvering between these states.

¹ Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), Akta L. Wasilewskiego, t. 41, k. 19, 23; Latvijas Sargs. 1919. 31. okt.

² Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs (LVVA), 2575. f., 11. apr., 8. l., 9. lp.; AAN, Attachaty, t. A-II/81/1.

³ "Gazeta Warszawska", 1920, 4 marzec.

⁴ Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybinis archivas, f. 384, ap. 3, b. 14, l. 11–15; AAN, Sztab Główny, t. 616/5, k. 58.

⁵ K. Počs, *Sanitārā kordona valgos*, Rīga, 1971, pp. 104, 106.

⁶ LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 71. l., 233. lp.

The above mentioned foreign policy pronouncedly manifested itself in October and November 1920, when Vilnius was occupied by the army of the Polish general Żeligowski. In general, there was no better evidence to the position taken by Latvia as regards Lithuanian-Polish relations, as its stand taken in the Vilnius conflict⁷. The first active steps taken by Latvia in the beginning of the Żeligowski military action was capturing the disputed territory in the Ilukste region that had been previously occupied by the Lithuanian army. The Lithuanians were driven off the vicinity of the Eglaine railway station under the pretext of the endangerment from Żeligowski⁸. The development of events in Lithuania caused deep anxiety in the public opinion of Latvia as well as strengthened sympathies towards Lithuania. The Polish side had to make efforts in order to try to reassure the Latvians and convince them that Żeligowski had no malicious intents towards Latvia. Information supplied by the military intelligence as to Żeligowski's eventual intentions to abolish the independence of Lithuania and capture the Latvian territory was also a constant cause of concern⁹. It is worth mentioning that the Latvian government from the very beginning had a fairly good understanding as to the true role of Poland in the Vilnius events. The survey issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 25 October states that "Żeligowski acted in accordance with Piłsudski's personal consent and support." Further on, a firm conviction is expressed that while "this issue is under the control of Piłsudski, it cannot present any threat to our security. But in case Piłsudski loses his influence, the situation can change."¹⁰

Latvia even sent to Vilnius the assistant of the military attaché in Poland Captain A. Lēvings with the aim of assessing the situation. On 7 November, as a result of the friendly talks with Żeligowski and other prominent persons of Central Lithuania, A. Lēvings got the impression that Vilnius's Poles were friendly disposed towards Latvia¹¹. Lēvings left Vilnius on 10 November, but from 15-21 November an unofficial visit of the first secretary of the diplomatic mission of Latvia in Warsaw P. Oliņš followed. P. Oliņš' impressions did not differ from those of Lēvings¹². During this period, both Poland and Lithuania tried to win Latvia's favor. In November, delegations from Central Lithuania and Lithuania were visiting Riga at the same time. After several days of lingering and informal friendly talks at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the former was expelled from the

⁷ Ē. Jēkabsons, *Viļņas jautājums un Latvija 1920. gada rudenī*, in *Latvija-Polija. Starptautiskās zinātniskās konferences materiāli*, Rīga, 1995, pp. 63-88.

⁸ LVVA, 2575. f., 15. apr., 2. l., 26. lp.

⁹ LVVA, 6033. f., 1. apr., 6126. l., 4. lp.

¹⁰ LVVA, 2575. f., 15. apr., 2. l., 26. lp.

¹¹ Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe, II oddział Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, t. 194; „Kurjer Poranny”. 1920. 9 list.

¹² LVVA, 2575. f., 15. apr., 12. l., 11. 13., 16. lpp; 2574. f., 3. apr., 90. l., 244. lp.

country. The Lithuanians who had arrived with the aim of entering the alliance with Latvia against Central Lithuania did not succeed as well. The Latvian party, under the pretext of not willing to be drawn into the conflict with Poland, denied the alliance¹³. Reproductions of the talks of the Latvian statesmen with the diplomatic representatives of Poland serve as a testimonial to the situation. After these talks, on 19 November 1920, one of the representatives W. Kamieniecki reported that as long as the military actions of Želigowski were confined to the Vilnius region, Latvia would remain neutral. On 17 November, the Minister of Defense E. Laimiņš, during the talks with the military attaché of Poland A. Myszkowski, pointed out that the Latvian government, taking in view Poland's resignation of Želigowski, considers him to be "a dangerous, incalculable reactionary". But now, after being informed by the Polish representatives that "Poland can exert its influence upon Želigowski", there are no reasons for intervening into the conflict. The next day, the Commander in Chief of the Latvian Army J. Balodis assured Myszkowski that Latvia would remain neutral in the matter of the Vilnius conflict, yet it "is interested in the existence of Lithuania"¹⁴. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Z. Meierovics declared in the press in Geneva that "the Latvian government has no reason to think that Želigowski wants to cross the Latvian border and occupy Daugavpils. There is no military agreement between Lithuania and Latvia, and Latvia remains neutral"¹⁵.

Yet the development of the events in Lithuania (armed conflicts on 17-21 November) forced the Latvian government to act more resolutely, as with good reason they were looked upon as dangerous for the independence of Lithuania. The Latvian government called a special meeting where it was agreed that defending Lithuania was indispensable, as the existence of Lithuania was looked upon as a guarantee of the security of Latvia¹⁶. As a result, on 20 November, Z. Meierovics handed in a confidential note to the Ambassador of Poland, which was to the effect that the development of events in Vilnius had given rise to anxiety in Latvia. It contained the following words: "As to the state affiliation of Vilnius, Latvia declares its lack of interest regarding this issue, and wishes Poland good results. However, if General Zeligowski's troops start the military campaign against Kaunas, Latvia will be forced to side with Lithuania." As we can judge for ourselves, the note was highly temperate and even contained wishes of good luck to Poland.

The events of 1920 showed first of all the strategy of the Latvian foreign policy directed southward, the attempts to maintain equilibrium between Lithuania and Poland. Under the circumstances in which there were remarkable territorial

¹³ LVVA, 2575. f., 15. apr., 2. l., 6. lp.; LCVA, F. 384, Ap. 3, B. 15, L. 42, 46.

¹⁴ AAN, Kolekcja odpisów dokumentów, t. 2, k. 321, 315.

¹⁵ P. Łossowski, *Stosunki polsko-litewskie 1918-1920*, Warszawa, 1966, p. 329.

¹⁶ F. Cielēns, *Laikmetu maiņā*, 2. sēj, Lidingo, 1963, p. 159.

disagreements with Lithuania, Poland being supposed to act in the support of *de iure* recognition of Latvia, the equilibrium tended to turn in favor of Poland. In general, this attitude remained unrevised till World War Two. Secondly, the attitude of Latvia towards the Vilnius question, which was the corner-stone of the conflicts between Lithuania and Poland, manifested itself. This attitude was indeterminate, with pretensions to neutrality, but in fact double-faced in the attempts to show sympathy to both parties, due to the above mentioned conditions with the slight preference of Poland in 1920 (on condition that it did not totally annihilate Lithuania).

In the course of the following years Latvia formally observed neutrality as regards the Vilnius question, actually indirectly recognizing its incorporation in Poland. Starting with the beginning of the 1930's, delegations of sportsmen, local municipalities and others visited Vilnius¹⁷, the Polish diplomacy considering it to be a success. E.g. in 1934 the commandant of the Polish Union of Riflemen of the Grodno region, W. Szymura, who was in charge of the Vilnius subdivision of the Union was included into the Union's delegation visiting Latvia and Estonia. It was done hoping for the return visits to Vilnius of the Latvian *aizsargi* and Estonian *kaitseliit* that had not been done before. The military attaché of Poland in Latvia, A. Libih, specially pointed out in his report of August 1934 that the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had succeeded in not permitting the national anthems to be played before the international football match between the Riga and Vilnius teams¹⁸. The Consulate of Latvia worked in Vilnius. At the same time, the Latvian party put much effort into observing formal neutrality. The public organization "Unity of Latvians and Lithuanians" was of special concern (the organization of the same character existed in Lithuania as well), expressing its support to the Lithuanian claims regarding Vilnius in a rather radical way¹⁹. The congress of the organization held in Riga in July 1924 adopted an extremely sharp resolution devoted to this issue, stating that the Latvians will take an active part in a possible armed conflict on the Lithuanian side (the situation was made more difficult by the fact that several ministers had been guests of the congress). It was followed by as sharp a protest note from Poland and explanation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia. The minister L. Sēja expressed his regret for the sharp tone of the resolution regarding the issue that had already been settled on an international level, and declared that it had been a surprise for the Ministry. The editorial board of the military semi-official newspaper *Latvijas Kareivis* voiced rather characteristic opinions in this matter. The newspaper held to the view that the problem is too "delicate" for Latvia to be able to afford to take a resolute stand in

¹⁷ "Latvijas Kareivis", 1931. 30. jūn.

¹⁸ AAN, Sztab Główny, t. 616/151, k. 472, 481.

¹⁹ "Latvijas Kareivis", 1923. 4. maijs.

the Vilnius issue. The complicated situation in the East made Latvia maintain good relations with Poland, so as not to find itself in political isolation. Besides “there are other circumstances compelling us to adhere to a realistic policy, and not the policy of sentiments. Our interference can only be in favor of the Lithuanian, and not the Latvian people. And even the Lithuanian people will probably not gain anything”²⁰.

The Latvian government was aware that its independence could be guaranteed by both the existence and friendliness of Poland, as the most influential state of the region, as well as the existence of Lithuania, the country being in a similar geographical and historical position. The independent state of Lithuania in the south was one of the main objectives of the Latvian foreign policy in relations with Poland. But the Vilnius issue, viewed upon with sympathy by most of the Latvian society, supporting the Lithuanian side, the Latvian government considered with great caution and in a “realistic” manner, viewing the claims of the Lithuanian party as regards Vilnius as “stubbornness”, thus causing the main obstacle in the process of the mutual rapprochement of the Baltic states. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia Z. Meierovics adhered to such views, as his attempts to form the alliance of the Baltic states ran against the conflict of Lithuania with Poland on account of Vilnius. In 1922, he predicted that a “sentimentally historical motive – Vilnius will drive Lithuania to misfortune”²¹. Latvia laid great efforts acting as a negotiator reconciling Lithuania and Poland. In the beginning of 1921, the above mentioned P. Oliņš arrived to Kaunas from Warsaw, and tried to ascertain the willingness of Lithuania to settle the conflict with Poland. After the Lithuanian representatives had announced their claims as to Vilnius and demanded a plebiscite in the Grodno and Lida regions, but the Polish representatives in Warsaw resolutely indicated that they were not going to consent to it, P. Oliņš concluded that it was next to impossible to solve the problem of the Lithuanian-Polish relations”²². At the same time, in 1921 Latvia expressed firm support to Lithuania when it rejected Hyman’s project according to which the conflict between Poland and Lithuania could be solved in a way that did not correspond to the interests of Latvia: the formation of the “cantonic” Lithuania which would be closely bound to Poland would not only diminish the independence of Lithuania, but also present a direct threat to Latvia (due to the coveting by Poland of some territories of Latvia,

²⁰ AAN, Attachaty, t. A - II/ 70/ 1, k. 326 - 327; *Latvju-lietuvju kongresa atskaņas*, in “Latvijas Kareivis”, 1924. 2. aug.

²¹ I. Feldmanis, A. Stranga, M. Virsis, *Latvijas ārpolitika un starptautiskais stāvoklis*, Rīga, 1993, p. 129.

²² LVVA, 2574. f., 3. apr., 88. l., 135. lp.

treating a precedent for the limiting of the independence of a country, as well as no economic interest)²³.

On the other hand, in 1926 the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia K. Ulmanis completely failed when trying to get Lithuania's consent in Kaunas as regards suggestions voiced by Poland to enter into a military alliance and customs union, thus furthering the unity of the Baltic states (the Vilnius region could be governed as a condominium), due to the unchanged attitude of Lithuania as to the Vilnius question – Vilnius and the Vilnius region had to be in Lithuania. Lithuania was the only Baltic state which signed a non-aggression treaty with the Soviet Union on 28 September 1926. The Soviet Union supported Lithuania in the Vilnius question with the objective of wrecking the unity of the Baltic states²⁴. Almost all the Latvian newspapers perceived it like this²⁵. Yet in April 1934, Lithuania put forward prerequisites to Estonia and Latvia which could serve as a base for Lithuania's joining the alliance of the other two Baltic countries. The "specific problems" of Lithuania (Vilnius and Klaipeda) had to be observed. All the three countries were supposed to get engaged in the solving of the above mentioned problems in Lithuania's favor. As Latvia and Estonia were not ready to do that, the final text of the Baltic Entente contained only a remark about the "specific problems" that could delay the formation of a unanimous attitude towards these problems. That is why the divergence of opinions of the participating states was provided for. On 7 July 1934, the General Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, V. Munters, drew the conclusion that Lithuania's actions were mostly determined by emotional motives ("reasons: prestige, aloofness")²⁶.

The attempts of Latvia to act as a negotiator could be observed in the 1930s, when starting with 1934 the General Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs V. Munters, later Minister of Foreign Affairs, tried to achieve a rapprochement of both parties. One has to remark that he made progress, as on 10 September 1934 he succeeded in organizing the meeting of S. Lozoraitis and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland J. Beck in the premises of the Latvian delegation at the League of Nations in Geneva. Still it was not very successful, as the conflict was too profound and the stand taken by Lithuanians as to the Vilnius question too resolute. The Latvian historian A. Stranga considers the Vilnius question in the Lithuania of the 1930s to have ceased to be the object of the rational considerations, it was needed that "A. Smetona regime's internal political interests" the question has become "the matter of the self-preservation of the regime"²⁷. These conclusions have been

²³ Z. Butkus, *Himansa projekts Polijas un Lietuvas attiecību risinājumā 1921. gadā: Latvijas nostāja*, in "Latvijas Vēsture". 1995. Nr. 1. 15. 22. lp.

²⁴ E. Dunsdorfs, *Kārļa Ulmaņa dzīve*, Rīga, 1992, p. 179.

²⁵ "Jaunākās Ziņas", 1926. 29. sept.

²⁶ LVVA, 2630. f., 1. apr., 6. l., 33. lp. (Diary of V. Munters).

²⁷ I. Feldmanis, A. Stranga, M. Virsis, *op. cit.*, 106., 132. lpp.

drawn taking into account the reports of the creators of the Latvian foreign policy of the 1930s, diaries and other sources. One can partly disagree with it, but we cannot deny that the Latvian party had and still has a good reason to discern the negative trends in the foreign-policy concept of Lithuania of the 1920s and 1930s as well. It especially concerns the attitude of Lithuanian statesmen at particular points in time. E.g. The attitude of A. Voldemaras in 1929, when he expressed the opinion that he did not see any need to cooperate with Latvia (while Latvia denied its support to Lithuania in the matter of Vilnius). It is difficult to comprehend the attitude of the President, when together with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, he declared on 29 April 1933 that Lithuania did not want the Baltic Alliance, Poland had occupied Vilnius but Latvia had occupied Ilukste, and it would have been unreasonable to enter into alliance where Latvia would be dominating²⁸. From the point of view of Latvia, “the Vilnius question” was the cause of the extreme inflexibility of Lithuanian foreign policy.

The Vilnius conflict was one of the main reasons hindering the states of the Baltic region from achieving the mutual agreement which could have possibly changed in a radical way the course of events in 1939–1940 in this part of Europe. The attitude of the Baltic states towards the Vilnius question demonstrates lack of unity and national selfishness. Irrefutably, the conflict was deeply rooted in the intricate common history of Poland and Lithuania. Today we have to study its reasons and analyze the possible ways of solving the conflict with the objective to avert the disagreements of a similar nature in future.

²⁸ E. Andersons, *Latvijas vēsture 1920–1940*, Daugava, 1982, pp. 261, 265.