

LITHUANIAN PUBLIC OPINION AND THE EU MEMBERSHIP

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Abstract:

During the early 1990s, following the restoration of independence, Lithuania reoriented in terms of foreign policy towards West. One of the state's main foreign policy goals became the accession to the EU and NATO. Acknowledging that the 'opinion of the people' is a crucial factor in today's democracy as it is important and necessary for politicians to know and take into consideration the 'public opinion', that is the opinion of the people they represent, this paper brings into attention the public support for the political pro-West project. The paper is structured in two main parts. The first one presents in short the politicians' discourse regarding Lithuania's accession to the EU and its general 'returning to Europe', in the general context of the state's new foreign policy, while the second part presents the results of different public opinion surveys regarding the same issue. Comparing these two sides, in the end, the paper provides the answer that the Lithuanian people backed the political elites in their European projects. Although, the paper does not represent a breakthrough for the scientific community, its findings could be of interest for those less familiarized with the Lithuanian post-Cold War history, and especially for the Romanian public to whom this journal mainly addresses.

Rezumat:

În anii 1990, după restaurarea independenței de stat, politica externă a Lituaniei s-a reorientat spre Vest, unul dintre principalele obiective ale statului devenind aderarea la Uniunea Europeană și la NATO. Pornind de la recunoașterea faptului că „opinia publică” este un element crucial în democrația de astăzi, căci este esențial și necesar ca politicienii să cunoască „opinia publică” – adică opinia oamenilor pe care îi reprezintă – și să acționeze în funcție de ea, acest studiu aduce în atenție sprijinul pe care l-au acordat lituanienii proiectului politic pro-occidental. Articolul este structurat în două părți. Cea dintâi prezintă succinct discursul politic cu privire la aderarea Lituaniei la Uniunea Europeană și la așa-numita „revenire a Lituaniei la Europa”, în contextul general oferit de noua politică externă a statului, iar cea de-a doua parte prezintă rezultatele diferitelor sondaje de opinie pe același subiect. Comparând aceste două elemente, articolul

arată că lituanienii au susținut proiectul politic pro-occidental. Deși lucrarea nu aduce elemente de noutate în discuția academică, rezultatele sale pot fi de interes pentru publicul nespecialist sau pentru cel mai puțin familiarizat cu istoria recentă a Lituaniei.

Keywords: Lithuania, EU accession, public opinion, survey

Following the restoration of independence, Lithuania developed an independent foreign policy, defining three main foreign policy priorities: membership in the EU, membership in NATO and good relations with its neighbours.¹ Laurynas Jonavičius notices also the role that the discourse of the 'natural return' to the West and of Russia as the greatest risk and threat to Lithuania had in the process of defining and carrying out in action this new foreign policy of the state.² The political Lithuanian elites were in general great supporters of the pro-West foreign policy. Acknowledging that the 'opinion of the people' is a crucial factor in today's democracy as it is important and necessary for politicians to take into consideration the 'public opinion', that is the opinion of the people they represent, this paper brings into attention the public support for the political pro-West project.

Regarding the relation between the politicians' projects and the public support, in January 2005, Olli Rehn, the enlargement commissioner, in an article published in the *Financial Times*, wrote: in order to join the EU, 'first, a country must have a European vocation, as measured by the will of its own people to join. The Turkish people seem to have this vocation while the Norwegians seem to lack it, even though Norway could meet most of the other criteria today. Accession requires a concerted effort over many years, so political leaders must ensure their population broadly backs the enterprise. Joining the EU changes a country. It becomes part of a larger community, which affects its domestic laws and institutions. Elites alone cannot ensure the legitimacy of this decision; it must be backed by the citizens.'³

Although the relevance of the public opinion for the political act is generally accepted, the subject is complicated by questions such as: what does 'public opinion' mean or how could the political elites or researchers know what people think and want? Generally, the scientific literature acknowledges the lack of a clear and common definition of the 'public

¹ Evaldas Nekrašas, 'Lithuanian Foreign Policy: Concepts, Achievements and Predicaments', in *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 13-14/2004, 28-29

² Laurynas Jonavičius, 'Geopolitical Projections of New Lithuanian Foreign Policy', in *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 17/2006, 17

³ Olli Rehn, 'Values define Europe, not borders', in *Financial Times*, 4 January 2005

opinion' concept, but also the importance of this concept for various scientific disciplines such as history, sociology, political science or social psychology.⁴

Defining 'public opinion' as the views of citizenry on one particular issue – Lithuania's EU membership, this paper presents in short the leading lines of the Lithuanian public opinion regarding Lithuania's relation with Europe in general, and with the European Union, in particular. The main question in this regard is how one could know the opinion of the 'public'. As John Gray Geer noted, in general, 'the public opinion poll data are offered as the voice of the people'⁵, despite some criticism⁶ regarding the public opinion survey research.

1. Politicians' pro-Europe discourse

After 1990, the political elites in Lithuania developed a consistent Euro-positive discourse, although some Euro-sceptic voices were also heard from time to time. Considering Lithuania's historical past experiences, the political discourse on the European integration was strongly connected with the state's security needs and security policy. In fact, as Kęstutis Paulauskas noted, all the Baltic authorities saw membership in the EU and NATO as the only possible long-term solution to all their security concerns.⁷

For almost 50 years Lithuania was under Soviet rule (1940-1990, with a short interruption in 1941-1944, when it was under German occupation). After its separation from the Soviet dying giant, Lithuania orientated towards Western Europe in terms of tradition, history, security, identity, culture, economy. After 1991, Lithuania continued to perceive Russia as the other, still a threat to the state's security. In this sense, it is important to notice that most of the politicians decided to support the state's EU and NATO membership after the Russian Duma elections in December 1993, when Vladimir Zhirinovskij, having repeatedly insisted that the Vilnius and Klaipeda regions were not part of Lithuania, received a quarter of the votes. As Povilas Gylys observed, 'added to the influence of

⁴ Wolfgang Donsbach, Michael W. Traugott, *Sage handbook of public opinion research*, London: Sage, 2007, 1-4

⁵ John Gray Geer, *Public opinion and polling around the world*, Volume 1, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004, 35

⁶ See for instance Justin Lewis, *Constructing public opinion: how political elites do what they like and why we seem to go along with it*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001 and Irving Crespi, *The Public Opinion Process, How the People Speak*, Routledge: 1997, 156-160

⁷ Kęstutis Paulauskas, 'The Baltic States: Picking Regions, Shedding Myths, Decoding Acronyms', in *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 15-16/2005, 51

the Russian communist block, which persistently stuck to the idea of the Soviet Union, the picture of future co-operation with this country looked predictable. Therefore, considering the context, the most logical solution for Lithuania was the integration into the democratic Western structures.⁸

Once the decision was made, the politicians presented the public the necessity of the state's return to Europe both in security terms and in cultural and values terms. As Inga Pavlovaite notes, Lithuania's European integration was largely presented as a return to the country's 'natural' place of belonging, namely the family of the European states. This discourse had two main objectives, Pavlovaite argues, to assert the Europeanness of Lithuania and to distance the country from Russia and its own recent communist past. 'Drawing on historical experiences, Russia and anything East of the Lithuanian border' was 'presented in the public debate as dangerous and threatening'. The state fundamental law included a clause that explicitly prohibited the Lithuanian state from entering into any alliances with countries in the post-Soviet space. The 'East' meant an immediate threat to the Lithuanian nation and the sovereign state. Regarding the vicinity of Russia, the Lithuanian politicians spoke of Lithuania being situated on a volcano'.

In June 2000, Vladimir Putin declared that the 1940 Soviet takeover of Lithuania had not represented an occupation. The Lithuanian politicians in shock declared that the old Russia is back, while the press wrote that 'the spirit of militaristic and ideological communist revenge is alive in Russia, destabilizing Russian-Lithuanian relations and the whole world'. Thus, perceiving Russia as an imminent threat to the state, EU and NATO meant for Lithuania 'an escape from its volcano neighbourhood'. However, despite this anti-Russian discourse, Lithuania did not want tensed relations with Russia or the Commonwealth of the Independent States. Thus, one of the most important foreign policy objectives of Lithuania regarded the state's good relations with its neighbours, including good relations with Russia.⁹

After the state's EU accession, on May 1, 2004, the state leadership concentrated on this goal even more than before. On July 7, 2004 on the occasion of the meeting of the heads of the diplomatic missions of the Republic of Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus, Lithuania's president, declared in

⁸ Povilas Gylys, 'Lithuanian Foreign Policy Challenges and Background, 1992-1996', in *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 13-14/2004, 100

⁹ Inga Pavlovaite, 'Paradise regained: The Conceptualization of Europe in the Lithuanian Debate', in Marko Lehti, David J. Smith (editors), *Post-Cold War Identity Politics. Northern and Baltic Experiences*, London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003, 199-205

this regard: 'Lithuania has joined European Union with a vision of becoming an active member of the European family of nations, acting in solidarity with all of them. Today we have a possibility to work, create, trade and travel within a united Europe free of internal borders. [...] Now, when Lithuania has become part of the mainstream of European affairs, it will be able to develop with greater vigour neighbourly relations and co-operation within the region, and take part in the formation and implementation of the European Union's neighbourhood policy. Lithuania's accession to the European Union and NATO has transformed into a new quality our country's engagement in regional and international political affairs.'¹⁰

On the same occasion, on July 7, 2004, the Lithuanian Foreign Minister, Antanas Valionis, expressed the long-term goals of Lithuania in terms of foreign policy: First - to create Europe in Lithuania, to raise the level of welfare, and to entrench European values in both domestic and foreign policies; Second - to expand the boundaries of Europe and surround Lithuania with free, democratic, European states on all sides; Third - to strengthen the international authority of Lithuania and increase its economic, political and cultural influence.¹¹ The way Lithuania understood to build its foreign policy, its discourse concerning its place in Europe's international policy, is also a way of returning to Europe. Returning to Europe means also acting as a European, freely, and feeling equal with other European states. Lithuania always showed initiative and made proposals for organizing or orientating the international relations in its region, and not only in its region. Lithuania did not seem to suffer from small post-communist states' complex of inferiority, like Romania, for instance.

In the speech delivered by Artūras Paulauskas, the President of the Republic of Lithuania, at Vilnius University on May 24, 2004, one could find the lines of Lithuania's new policy towards Russia in the context of its new EU membership. One could also find old fears in terms of common Lithuanian-Russian history. 'The EU-Russia partnership is marked with special dynamism. Today the EU and Russia are engaged in a dialogue on energy issues, tomorrow they may discuss common trade area and then the time may come for a visa free regime. This is a natural development. We

¹⁰ Address by H. E. Mr. Valdas Adamkus, President of the Republic of Lithuania, during the meeting the heads of foreign diplomatic missions in Lithuania, 14.07.2004, at <http://www.president.lt/en/news.full/5126>, accessed at 5.02.2008

¹¹ Antanas Valionis, 'Lithuania, a Meeting Place of Europe', *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 13-14/2004, 22

[Lithuania] should be at the forefront of these processes in order to defend our national interests and to avoid a situation where we are made an item of trade or other states pursue their interests at our expense. Internal dynamics of the European Union makes us review our relations with traditional partners and evaluate the established forms of co-operation. We would like to preserve many of them. Some of them, including our relations with the United States, we would like to reinforce. However, while working in these directions we should not undermine the interests of the European Union or shatter the unity of its member states’.

Thus, one of the major Lithuania’s foreign policy objectives after the state’s EU integration was ‘the active engagement in the EU-Russia political and economic co-operation, promoting at the same time our national interests and reducing exposure of our economy and society as well as avoiding undesired influences and advancing carefully with pragmatic neighbourly policy’.¹² Moreover, ‘Lithuania is committed to take an active part’ not only ‘in the EU-Russia dialogue’, but also in the ‘NATO-Russia dialogue’, declared Valdas Adamkus, the President of the Republic of Lithuania, during the meeting of the heads of foreign diplomatic missions in Lithuania on July 14, 2004.¹³

One can see that the political discourse concerning the East in general, and Russia in particular, was not a homogeneous one, ranging from the Russian threat to the good neighbourly relations with the CIS. However, in my opinion, these two apparent opposing Lithuanian discourses regarding Russia only represent two sides of the same coin. The first side of the coin acknowledges the Russian perceived threat towards the Lithuanian state and its interests. This perception has two main reasons: the recent past historical experience and the new Russian declarations and actions regarding Lithuania. Once this persistent threat identified, Vilnius developed two main defending strategies that constitute the other side of the coin: membership in the Western security structures and good, friendly relations with its Eastern superpower. Thus, the EU and NATO membership seemed in Vilnius as a not enough security guarantee.

According to Artūras Paulauskas, Lithuania’s president, a small state, despite its belonging to the EU, could find itself at some point in the situation of becoming ‘an item of trade’ between the EU and Russia, or in the situation when ‘the others’ would try to ‘pursue their interests at our

¹² Artūras Paulauskas, ‘Lithuania’s new foreign policy’, in *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 13-14/2004, 7-16

¹³ Valdas Adamkus, ‘Lithuania as a Centre of Regional Cooperation’, in *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 13-14/2004, 17-20

[Lithuania's] expense'. Thus, developing a policy of good relations with the CIS and Russia, and assuming the role of a mediator between the EU and Russia, Lithuania was on the one hand avoiding the possibility of becoming 'an item of trade' between the two, and on the other hand was developing an active offensive strategy. In other words, Lithuania was not only reacting and defending itself from the others' policies, but it was at the origin of new policies and actions meant to deter more or less explicitly the others' possible anti-Lithuanian policies. In this discourse I identify the small state's complex of inferiority in its relations to big states. The EU gradually took the place of some traditional Western European superpower, while Russia replaced the Soviet Cold War superpower. This interesting overlapping is explained, I argue, by a Lithuanian 20th century perception, namely that the state's faith had been too many times decided from outside, by some superpowers, against the interests of the Lithuanian people.

The other level of the state's returning to Europe discourse encompassed the cultural, European values-related dimension. However, this view did not belong to the political elites only, becoming predominant in the public discourse in general. In 2003, the social scientist Ramūnas Vilpišauskas saw the European integration also as a unique opportunity for Lithuania to return to its natural place of belonging, from which it was removed by the Soviet empire against its will. Thus, Vilpišauskas wrote that 'the enlargement of the EU and the continuous expansion to NATO symbolized the most important step in the unification of Europe which for half a century was divided by force'.¹⁴ At state level, Lithuania was also identifying itself as part of the European civilization, on the bases of its shared cultural heritage, values and identity. The Law on the Basics of National Security included among its guiding principles the statement that 'the Lithuanian state, established many centuries ago and resting on the Christian cultural foundation unifying Europe, is an integral part of the community of European nations'.¹⁵ Valdas Adamkus, the President of the Republic of Lithuania, during the meeting of the heads of foreign diplomatic missions in Lithuania on July 17, 2004, declared: 'Our integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures takes root in our centuries-long aspiration to anchor our country in Europe and establish European

¹⁴ Ramūnas Vilpišauskas, 'The dilemmas of transatlantic relations after EU enlargement and the implications for Lithuania', in *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 11-12/2003, unpaginated

¹⁵ Inga Pavlovaite, 202

values in our internal and external policy'.¹⁶ This discourse is meant for both Europe and Lithuanians: to Europe, expressing Lithuania's right to be accepted and recognized as European, to Lithuanians to construct a pro-European public opinion.

Joining the European process of integration, Lithuania faced the so-called 'integration dilemma'. According to this dilemma, becoming part of the EU would have meant the abandonment of certain aspects of state's sovereignty. In essence, it was about loyalty to Europe versus loyalty to the nation and/or state. Being until recently part of the USSR, Lithuania was first interested in preserving its sovereignty and only after its European integration. Although between 1991 and 1996 the Membership in NATO and the EU represented the main goals of Lithuania's foreign and security policy, *The Basics of National Security of Lithuania*, adopted by the Seimas in December 1996 defined the next goals of the national security policy: 'to develop and strengthen democracy, ensure safe existence of the Nation and the State, deter any potential aggressor and defend the sovereignty, the territorial integrity and the constitutional order of the state'. The document included also 'Means of ensuring national security': 'National security shall be ensured by the state, by the citizens'. The document also noted the 'unconditional defence and total civil resistance in the event of aggression, as well as integration with the EU and joining NATO as means of providing security for the state and nation. The latter presumably meant that the main motive for the integration with the West was the protection of Lithuania's sovereignty'.¹⁷

Some Euro-sceptic voices feared that the EU integration was to negatively affect the Lithuanian national state. Rimantas Smetona, member of the parliament, one of the most prominent Euro-sceptics, warned that 'the EU is moving towards the direction of a super-state'. Lithuania does not have to return anywhere, since it has always been part of Europe. In the rhetoric of the Euro-sceptics National Democrats, 'the Lithuanian state was, is and will be in Europe, in the middle of Europe'. For these alternative voices, located mostly on the right and far-right of the political spectrum, 'Europe' represented a threat to the nation-state in economic and cultural terms. Some argued that open borders and the abolition of state subsidies

¹⁶ Address by H. E. Mr. Valdas Adamkus, President of the Republic of Lithuania, during the meeting the heads of foreign diplomatic missions in Lithuania, 14.07.2004, at <http://www.president.lt/en/news.full/5126>, accessed at 5.02.2008

¹⁷ Grazina Miniotaite, *The Security Policy of Lithuania and the 'Integration dilemma'*, Lithuanian Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Vilnius, 1999, 1-37

in the process of integration would lead to the destruction of valuable traditional sectors of the Lithuanian economy such as agriculture.

On the other hand 'Europe' was understood as threat to the national identity and culture, fact that undermined the sovereignty of the Lithuanian state. In his state-of-the-nation address from 2000, president Adamkus quoted a letter that he had received from a concerned citizen: 'what has the EU brought to us? Pornography, drug addiction, mafia, egoism, the destruction of our national culture'. The fact that the president decided to quote this in a crucial public statement shows that the nationalistic resistance to the EU integration was growing. Despite that, a 2000 opinion poll showed that the support for EU membership was growing with only 14.5% of respondents saying that Lithuania should never join the EU.¹⁸

But Lithuania oriented itself to West not only for security or cultural reasons. It also had strong economic reasons. 'Our return to Europe was not and cannot be a goal in itself. On the contrary, preparation for the membership in the EU had an overall highly positive effect on Lithuania. It helped us reform numerous public policies. Rapid accession negotiations contributed to the implementation of advanced internal reforms in taxation, finance and market regulation. Today we can reap the benefits of our miraculous economic achievements', stated President Valdas Adamkus on September 9, 2004.¹⁹ In fact there were pragmatic considerations that dominated the reasoning for joining the EU.

Vygandas Ušackas, Deputy Minister of foreign affairs, in 2000 considered that Lithuania's aspirations to join the EU were also motivated by the growing understanding that in these times of rapid globalization the best way to express and ensure Lithuania's national interests is through the collective decision making and solidarity of the EU. 'Lithuania's integration into the EU is, however, not a blind endeavor. There is open, democratic debate between Lithuanian politicians and the public at large and an orderly, regular process of analysis, planning, and the implementation of assorted weekly decisions taken by the Government and its agencies. And these methods of integration help identify the costs and benefits of membership in the EU and determine how Lithuania will contribute to its future destiny. The evolving foreign and security policies of the EU offer

¹⁸ Inga Pavlovaite, 210-212

¹⁹ Address by H.E. Mr. Valdas Adamkus, President of the Republic of Lithuania, at the opening session of the Krynica Economic Forum "Economic Stability and Competitiveness", Krynica, Poland, 9 September 2004, at <http://www.president.lt/en/news.full/5239>, accessed at 5.02.2008

new perspectives for the Baltic States. Membership in a united and globally influential union of more than two dozen states will guarantee that Lithuania's interests, which, in general and in many details, correspond to the common interests of the EU, can be raised and heard more effectively. Lithuania's membership in the EU is also a safeguard of security, stability, and prosperity'.²⁰

As a conclusion, despite some Euro-scepticism, the Lithuanian Pro-Europe political discourse was generally positive. From Europe, Lithuania's political elites expected security guarantees, economic development, stability and a more active role on the international arena.

2. Public opinion and the EU integration

After the fall of communism in the early 1990s, the multi-party system was re-established and the citizens of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia took part in parliamentary, municipal and presidential elections. In 2004, in Lithuania there were 37 registered political parties, in Latvia - 48 and in Estonia - 17.

Until approximately 1992, politics dominated the agenda of goals and expectations of the residents in these countries, the majority of Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians supporting their countries' struggles for sovereignty, independence, and international recognition. All three countries, early in their re-gained independence, expressed the political will to join such organizations as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In 2004, all three countries became members of both EU and NATO. After 1992, when countries became internationally recognized, the main emphasis shifted from international politics and political goals towards domestic social issues. Social differentiation increased, ideological differences became obvious, and the societies experienced growing internal stress.

According to the 2001 Baltic Survey, the opinion about the EU membership of Lithuania went through several stages. In 1990-1995 the public attitudes were based mostly on the emotional assessments. EU seemed to be perceived as a political and security safeguard against perceived Russian threat as well as the promise for the economic and social security. At this stage, the public strongly supported the country's membership in the EU but were unable to define the rational arguments. The prevailing argument was the political affiliation to the West. Although the public image of Europe in Lithuania was positive during that period,

²⁰ Vygaudas Ušackas, *The European Union from a Lithuanian perspective*, <http://www.lfpr.lt/uploads/File/2000-5/Usackas.pdf>, accessed at 8.02.2008

the percentage suffered transformations in time. Between 1991 and 1995, 51% of the Lithuanians had a positive image of Europe in 1991 (45% in Latvia and 38% in Estonia), while the percentage decreased to 23% in 1995 (35% in Latvia and 30% in Estonia). Thus, the support for the European integration was dropping.

During the second stage, the dropping of public support for EU membership continued, the number of 'undecided' citizens and 'anti-membership' attitudes grew. This stage is also characterized by the prevailing emotional judgments: the public in the Baltic countries realized that the EU membership was not the 'tomorrow's' reality, but that the accession period could be long and demanding. Each time the Baltic countries were not invited to join with the first wave of the applicants for the EU, the public support for the membership was going down, but when the news from Brussels were more positive about the future prospects for Lithuania's accession, the number of membership supporters was growing (drawing supporters from the pool of undecided). Better-informed attitudes, weighting pros and cons of the membership are the characteristics of the third stage starting with 2001. During this final stage, the differences between the public of the three Baltic States became more evident: Lithuanians became the leaders of the pro-EU moods while Latvians and especially Estonians remained more reserved.

The surveys conducted among the general public of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia indicate several important factors, influencing the public attitude towards the EU membership. In general, the EU membership is perceived by the general public as the 'Government and political elite project'. Thus, the evaluation of the government policies in general, domestic social and economic policies successes or failures, all influence the public expectations from the EU membership. The better the economic situation, the more people feel the real positive changes in their personal life, the more positive attitudes they tend to express about the EU membership.²¹

After regaining independence, for nearly 10 years Lithuanians were considered to be one of the most pessimistic and sceptic European nation. The situation changed over the last three years prior to the EU accession: Lithuanians becoming not only the most optimistic among the three Baltic States, but also one of the most optimistic nations in Europe. Progress in economy, diminished threats for the East and hopes for the better future stimulate not only the positive future outlook, but personal responsibility

²¹ Rasa Alisauskiene, *Public Opinion about the EU in the Baltic States*, Baltic Surveys, The Gallup Organization, Lithuania, Vilnius, 2001, 1-5

as well. The results of the February-March 2004 Eurobarometer confirmed the optimism of Lithuanians regarding the state's joining to the EU. But a lot of the expectations and opinions in the country were still based on emotions rather than on rational arguments.²²

Although Lithuanians' attitude towards EU integration was growing in the early 2000s, the population continued to perceive itself rather as Lithuanians than as Europeans. While in autumn 2003, only Hungary had a higher proportion of those who would consider themselves to be Hungarian versus European to some extent in the near future, in spring 2004 there were four countries where more citizens would consider themselves to be their nationality rather than European to some extent: Hungary, Turkey, Lithuania and Czech Republic.²³ Still Lithuanians considered that the EU membership was a 'good thing' (52% in spring 2004). But this percentage was dropping: it had been 65 % in spring 2003 and 55% in the autumn of 2003.²⁴ The studies conducted in the three Baltic countries in spring 2003 indicate that the public of the three Baltic countries were most of all concerned by the same old three issues: unemployment, crime and general economic situation. These three most urgent topics were dominating the list of major concerns in all three Baltic countries. When talking about the possible benefits and troubles of the EU membership, the public in the Baltic countries were hopeful about the prospects of new jobs and the development of the economics.²⁵ This expectation maintains and in February-March 2006, 45% of the Lithuanians considered that the further enlargement of the European Union was to increase the problems on their own country's job market.²⁶

Lithuanians, more often than their neighbours, considered Lithuania's membership in the EU to be 'a good thing'. The ratio between the people who considered the outcomes of the membership to be positive and the sceptics was 3:1 and the negativists 1:6. Latvians were more sceptical: the number of optimists (membership is "a good thing") is equal to the number of sceptics ("neither good nor a bad thing"). Estonians were most sceptical of all three: the number of sceptics ("neither good nor a bad thing") outnumbers the number of optimists (1.4:1).

²² European Commission, *Candidate countries Eurobarometer 2004.1, February-March 2004*, National Report, Executive summary, Lithuania, 2-3

²³ European Commission, *Eurobarometer 61 and CC Eurobarometer 2004.1, Public opinion in the European Union*, Full Report, 182

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 186, 190

²⁵ Rasa Alisauskiene, 5-6

²⁶ European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 251, February-March 2006, The future of Europe*, 56

Electorate in the Baltic countries could be grouped into three groups according to their attitudes towards EU membership: euro-supporters (who considered the membership to be beneficial for the country and would vote for the membership), euro-opponents (who considered the membership to be a negative development for the country and would vote against the membership) and euro-sceptics (they were undecided or not very optimistic about the result of the membership, but felt the necessity to choose one or the other and more often were inclined to vote for the membership than against it). The group of euro-sceptics was rather small in all three countries, while the group of opponents was largest in Estonia (one third of electorate), followed by Latvia (one fourth) and Lithuania (one-tenth). The main motives of the opponents were related to the possible loss of national sovereignty and cultural identity, domination of big nations in the EU, impossibility for small countries' businesses to compete with large European corporations and the future of agriculture. The euro-sceptics were not against the EU membership in principal: their main motives were related to the timing of the accession ('too early') and the conditions ('old members will dominate and discriminate new members').

In Lithuania, the majority of the electorate in any demographic group was pro-membership. The largest share of the supporters was among the youngest groups (under 30 years of age), financially best off, urban dwellers. The largest share of euro-opponents was found among the eldest population, rural and small towns dwellers. The share of sceptics was the greatest among people with the lowest incomes, rural dwellers. The electorates of all major Lithuanian parties were supporting EU membership. Regardless of the ideology of the party, the share of euro-supporters among the electorate was above 70%. The largest share of the euro-supporters was enjoyed by centre-right parties (Homeland Union, Liberal Democratic Party and Liberal and Centre Union). Centre-left parties' electorate had larger share of euro-opponents but it was lower than 15%.²⁷

Lithuania's membership in the European Union would have been impossible without the public assent and support. This support was made most explicit during the referendum on the membership in the European Union on May 10-11, 2003, when 91.07% of those participating (the turnout was 63.37%) approved Lithuania's accession to the EU. Contrary to the apprehensions that such a high percentage of supporters meant exaggerated expectations, in 2008, Lithuania still demonstrated high public support for EU membership. According to the results of the Eurobarometer

²⁷ Rasa Alisauskiene, 9-11

survey carried out in September-October 2006, 62% of the country's population supported the Lithuanian membership in the EU (Lithuania ranked sixth among the member states in this respect, well surpassing the EU average, which was 53%). In the spring of 2009, 57% of the Lithuanians considered that the state's EU membership was a good thing, while in the autumn of 2009 only 53% made the same declaration. In the spring of 2009, 71% of the Lithuanians considered that the state benefited from being a member of the European Union, while in the autumn of 2009 the percentage decreased to 66%.²⁸

The attitudes of the Lithuanian citizens towards the EU have been studied since the mid-1990s. Public opinion surveys on the questions related to the EU membership are commissioned by the state and by academic institutions as well as by the media. All the surveys carried out from 1999 until the referendum on the EU membership posed the following question: 'Would you vote "for" or "against" if the referendum on Lithuania's membership in the EU took place tomorrow?' After the referendum, the following question was asked: 'Do you support Lithuania's membership in the European Union?' According to the public opinion survey commissioned by the Office of the Lithuanian Government and carried out in November 2006, the main reason of the Lithuanian support for membership is the opinion that Lithuania will achieve higher living standards sooner as an EU member (25.7% of those supporting Lithuanian membership thought so). The second factor is the opportunity for Lithuania to use EU financial assistance available to member states (24.7%).

Opponents to Lithuania's integration in the EU argued that the EU was governed by big states and that there was the danger of deteriorating the national identity; that they did not approve or did not understand the ways in which EU decisions were taken, expressing their discontent with the fact that the EU restrained Lithuania's sovereignty and fostered bureaucratic growth. Nonetheless, Lithuanians on the whole were remarkably positive towards EU matters. The data of the Autumn 2006 Eurobarometer indicated that Lithuania had the Union-wide highest percentage of those saying that things were going in the right direction in the European Union (57%), while the EU founder states were much more pessimistic. The view was shared only by 31% of the Dutch, 29% of the Italians and Luxembourgers, 28% of the Germans and 22% of the French.

In Lithuania, the majority has already felt the advantages of the membership. 77% of the Lithuanian population (Eurobarometer Autumn

²⁸ *Standard Eurobarometer 72*, Autumn 2009, Brussels, 2009,30-31

2006) agreed that Lithuania has benefited from the EU membership – this indicator places Lithuanians in the second position after the Irish, biggest euro-optimists (at the time the EU average was 54%). According to the data of the survey commissioned by the European Commission Representation in Lithuania and conducted in November 2006, 36.3% of the people thought that the living standards had risen in Lithuania since the accession to the EU, and 57.7% that the EU membership helped to strengthen democracy in Lithuania. The newly-opened opportunities to work and study in the EU countries were considered as the main advantages of the EU membership by the Lithuanians (EC 2006 – 79.9% and 67% of the Lithuanian population respectively). The common labour market has helped Lithuania to significantly reduce the unemployment rate (56.2%). However, the membership has caused some difficulties, too, according to beliefs expressed in the survey: the prices have gone up (81.8%), the most capable people have been leaving the country (74.7%), and some emigrants have become cheap labour force (66%).²⁹

In 2007, Lithuanians continued to be considerably greater optimists than the average EU citizens in terms of attitudes concerning their life in general, the country's economic situation, their families' financial situation and their personal job situation, attitudes towards Europe, or their trust in institutions. In spring 2007, Lithuanians' trust in the EU was of 65%, larger than Europeans', which was of 57%. As in the previous years, in 2007 equally, more than half of Lithuanians primarily related the EU with the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the European Union; in addition, associations with economic prosperity, cultural diversity, Euro and peace were also frequent. Lithuanians least often associated the EU with unemployment, not enough control at external frontiers, more crime and bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the average European most often associated the EU with the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the European Union, Euro and peace, and the least often with social protection, loss of cultural identity and unemployment. As was the case in autumn 2006, when comparing the associations of Lithuanians and the average EU citizen, a tendency persisted that Lithuanians are inclined to see the EU more positively than the average EU citizen does; Lithuanians considerably less often point to the possible disadvantages of the EU: they considerably less often associate the EU with the waste of money, bureaucracy, more crime, unemployment and not enough control at external frontiers.

²⁹ <http://www.euro.lt/en/lithuanias-membership-in-the-eu/lithuanian-public-opinion>, accessed at 3.02.2008

A majority of Lithuanian and EU residents agree with the statement that every European Union decision is the subject of negotiations in which the opinions of national governments of all the Member states are taken into account. 84 percent of the Lithuanian and 63 percent of the EU polls hold the above opinion. Lithuanian residents, however, tend to believe that all the spheres, except for pensions, taxation, the educational system, transport, fighting unemployment and social welfare, should be decided jointly within the European Union.³⁰ In 2009, Lithuania was still over the European average with 66% of the people considering that the state benefited from being a member of the European Union (compared to 57%, the European average). However, if in the spring 57% considered that the EU membership was a good thing (compared to 53% the European average), in the autumn of 2009 the situation slightly changed and 51% of the Lithuanians considered that the EU membership was a 'good thing' (compared to 53% the European average).³¹

Conclusions

The political elite and the large public's general attitude towards Europe, the European Union, integration, membership seems to be more than positive in Lithuania over the years. Many times Lithuania and Lithuanians proved themselves to be the most confident in the European project and in their role in this project. It is, however, necessary to underline that the positive attitude towards Europe, expressed by the respondents during different surveys on European issues, does not necessarily mean a real public preoccupation for European matters. Quite the contrary, the surveys generally showed that the masses are not very familiar with the European issues and that they are not really informed on the matter. Still they answered positively to the surveys.

The EU membership is perceived by the general public as the 'Government and political elite project'. Thus, the evaluation of the government policies in general, as well as of the domestic social and economic policies successes or failures influence the public expectations from the EU membership. The better the economic situation, the more people feel the real positive changes in their personal life, the more positive attitudes they tend to express about the EU membership. The 2009 spring and autumn Eurobarometers represent a very good example in this regard. As the economic crisis developed, positive appreciation of the EU

³⁰ European Commission, *Eurobarometer 67, Public opinion in the European Union*, National report, Lithuania, Executive Summary, Spring 2007, 1-7

³¹ *Standard Eurobarometer 72, Autumn 2009*, Brussels, 2009,30-31

membership decreased even in Lithuania, one of the most Euro optimistic countries.

Comparing the political discourse and the 'public opinion' of the masses with regard to the state's EU membership, we may conclude that the predominant discourse was a positive one, while the euro-sceptics on both sides represented a minority.

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