

# Talking about Lithuania's security and perspectives

Rokas TRACEVSKIS

Ignas Stankovicus, 71, is the head of the Parliamentary Information Unit of the Martynas Mazvydas National Library of Lithuania. His unit supplies the Lithuanian Parliament, the Government of Lithuania, the Office of President of Lithuania and other main Lithuanian state institutions with information on all the politically interesting content of the Lithuanian and foreign media as well as analyses on EU-wide political development and prognoses on foreign affairs-related matters.

Stankovicus, who trained as a physicist, was one of the creators of the Lithuanian military system that were established after the democratically elected Parliament of Lithuania proclaimed the re-establishment of the country's independence on March 11, 1990 and was one of those in charge of defending the Lithuanian Parliament building in January 1991 when Soviet troops occupied the TV and Radio Centre as well as the Television Tower in Vilnius, an event that led to the deaths of 14 and injured over 700 unarmed civilians who stood in their way. Later, in 1993, Stankovicus studied at the Defence Resources Management Institute in Monterey, California. In 1995, he worked in the NATO headquarters in Brussels. Later, Colonel Stankovicus took part in NATO missions in various countries, including Iraqi Kurdistan.

**In January 2018, Vytautas Landsbergis, the head of state of Lithuania back in 1990–1993, speaking at the commemoration of victims of the failed Soviet military coup of January 1991, said that, since 1991 Lithuania's independence has never been so much in danger as it is now due to the current aggressive policy of Russia. On the very next day, the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius said that Lithuania, due to the NATO cooperation, never has been so secure as it is now. Who's right?**

I think Linkevicius is right if you look at the current situation. However, Landsbergis is also right if you look at the tendency of Russian policy. The Russian military doctrine includes hybrid warfare. An information war is one of the essential elements of a hybrid war. Russia already fights an information war and has tried to influence the presidential elections in the United States and France, according to the Western secret services. Russia made huge progress developing its capabilities to influence public opinion in other countries. The main job of an information war, by spreading propaganda and disinformation via social media and other media, is to destroy the

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opponents' will to defend their countries and their values. The West has only just woken up to this. Russia has its well-established coordination centres of information warfare, whilst the EU and NATO have no coordination and no sufficient capacity to respond to such kind of Russian attacks.

The Russian narrative for Lithuania is the following: there is no future in your hopeless country. The Lithuanian media is infected with such a narrative. One of the tasks of the Russian large-scale military exercises codenamed Zapad 2017 was to scare Lithuania and provoke doubts about the country's defence capabilities. The Lithuanian mass media, by spreading a certain amount of panic, helped to achieve this task.

**At the beginning of this interview, I mentioned the failed Soviet military coup of January 1991. What did you do on January 13, 1991?**

Back then, myself and Vytautas Jonas Zukas, who now is the chief of Lithuania's armed forces, were responsible for informing the state leadership about the movements of Soviet troops in Vilnius. Our workplace was the Lithuanian Parliament during this period. On January 13, 1991, we both drove to the Television Tower area where thousands of unarmed people held vigils nearby. We got impression that the Soviet troops will perhaps just try to scare the people assembled there and so we drove back to the parliament building and then the Lithuanian radio began broadcasting reports about the Soviet army's attack on the tower. We stayed inside the Lithuanian Parliament whilst thousands of Lithuanian civilians surrounded it, forming a live human shield against a possible Soviet tank attack.

**I stood near the parliament building too.**

Yes, we listened to the radio conversations between the Soviet officers who said that there are too many people near the parliament and there'll be too many civilian casualties in case of attack. The Soviet leadership didn't have the courage to order tanks to drive over crowds of civilians. We also hear radio conversations between Soviet officers and tank crews and other army units about the amount of ammunition used during the

storming of the Television Tower and the TV and Radio Centre.

**What are the main threats to Lithuania now?**

The main threat is the loss of desire to defend ourselves and the loss of faith in our ability to defend ourselves.

**Can readiness to fight a guerrilla war scare Russia away from thinking about invading the Baltics?**

Firstly, there should be a will to fight, which Russia via its informational war tries to minimise. Now, unfortunately, the heads of Lithuania's youth are full of thoughts about emigration.

**I think there are also some reasons for the current mass emigration which have nothing to do with Russian propaganda.**

Of course.

**What causes mass emigration?**

The answer is simple. Each socio-system should possess leaders who can present certain visions and perspectives. A perspective of Lithuania in this case. No clear perspectives or gloomy perspectives are the cause of emigration. Our leaders, or those who wish to be our leaders, present no bright perspectives to the people.

**Well, for example, the Russian tsar Peter I, whilst staying in the Netherlands, learned much about life there, and, after his return, built the European-style state of Russia. Of course, it had some Russian specifics, but, anyway, since then, until the Bolshevik coup in 1917, Russia was considered by Europe as a part of Western civilisation. So, being a visionary requires some intellectual ability, knowledge and a will to implement changes.**

Yes, of course, ability and will are necessary. There was more initiative and determination among our leaders during the process of re-building the independent state of Lithuania after the First World War. Now there's a lot of nonsense in our Parliament. There's a lack of responsibility there.

**I guess that narrow-minded people create a lot of nonsense due to their obscurantism, illiteracy and lack of global knowledge, i.e. provincialism.**

Yes, due to ignorance. Anyway, I think Lithuania has the potential for progress. Lithuania will move forward, God willing.

**I think one of the reasons for**



Photo by Justina Jasinskaite

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**emigration is a cultural one. There's rather gloomy atmosphere here. We need more smiling everywhere?**

We need a positive attitude. Then we'll be smiling at each other.

**How will Lithuania look in 20 years?**

I don't predict any big changes. Our situation depends a lot on the situation in our neighbourhood. If China's ambition to take the Russia's far eastern lands becomes obvious, Russia would be forced to seek some alliance with the West. Good relations between Russia and the West would be beneficial to Lithuania, which is located on a geopolitical and trade crossroads.

I think the EU's further integration will also be an important factor in Lithuania's future.

It's important to preserve our national identity, which is vital for the nation's survival.

**I don't think that the EU has any intention to dilute our national identity. Let's return to the Russia issue. I guess Vladimir Putin realises that the main threats to Russia, in the further perspective, will come from China and the world of Islam. But he thinks only about the survival of his regime in the nearest perspective?**

Yes, indeed, I don't think Putin is stupid. Anyway, he thinks only about his own survival during his lifetime. Today's Russian elite send their children and treasures to the West, meaning that Russia is just a tool, not a life purpose, for the country's elite.

**How will Lithuania look in 100 years?**

I hope that the Lithuanian nation will still exist in 100 years because the preservation of national diversity is as important as the preservation of all sorts of wildlife. And I hope the Lithuanian nation will not be a global one. The Jewish nation could be a global one due to its religion and specific state of mind. The Lithuanians, due to

their culture specifics, need their land to survive.

**We need to learn from France and other countries how to assimilate people of other backgrounds. And, I guess, cloning could also help Lithuanians in the future. OK, a few more quick questions. Is the number of NATO troops in the Baltics sufficient at the moment?**

At this moment, yes. I emphasise the words 'at this moment'. It's enough to show Russia that NATO has a will to defend the Baltics and send more troops in case of necessity.

**A couple of years ago, in one of my opinion pieces in The Baltic Times, I urged the Obama administration to send lethal weapons to Ukraine to stop provoking Russian military aggression. Finally, they've decided to do this. Do you agree with the decision?**

Yes, I'm positive in this decision. If Russia sends its so-called volunteers, who are equipped with guns, which are not their private ownership, America should supply guns to Ukraine for the sake of counter-balance.

**What do you think about the threat of Islamist terror in Europe?**

It will be a long-term threat. If the terror attacks in Europe increase, people will get used to them. It sounds awful, but people do get used to death in warlike situations. Then terror attacks would become less efficient because they'll be a less emotional public reaction to them.

**Yes, now terrorists provoke a reaction which they expect to provoke. By the way, did you enjoy your work in Brussels: the cultural atmosphere, French-speaking women, etc.?**

I had good conditions to live and work in Brussels. It's a nice city. I got the impression that French women are more free and relaxed and are less conditional than Lithuanian women are. Brussels gave me an opportunity to communicate with colleagues from various cultures.