

Article by prof. Kari Petteri Alenius (University of Oulu, Finland)

100 Years of Diplomatic Relations between Finland and Lithuania

Finland and Lithuania have interacted for thousands of years. Research in archaeology, linguistics, ethnology and genetics has made it possible to prove that the ancestors of Finns and Lithuanians were in fairly close contact, and influences have shifted in both directions. In historical times, ties weakened as the Lithuanian state gradually became more and more oriented towards Poland, and the Finns were correspondingly integrated into the Kingdom of Sweden. When both Finland and Lithuania became part of the Russian Empire at the turn of the nineteenth century, it to some extent opened up new opportunities for building connections. In particular, a few Finnish philologists and literary scholars became interested in Lithuanian folklore and therefore made contacts in Lithuania. During the First World War, interaction intensified as Lithuanians serving in the Russian army arrived in Finland. In addition, Lithuanian civilians came to Finland as war refugees. Their numbers grew, so in 1916 the Finnish Lithuanian Association was founded in Helsinki to take care of their interests.

Relations between the newly independent countries

Relations between Finland and Lithuania rose to a whole new level with the independence of both countries. Russia suffered a defeat in the war against Germany and its allies, which also paved the way for the disintegration of the empire and the secession of non-Russian territories from Russia. Finland was the first to declare independence in December 1917, and Lithuania soon followed in February 1918. However, both countries first had to fight for independence and ensure both internal and external security before Finland and Lithuania could begin building official relations between the two independent democratic republics.

Finland succeeded in gaining widespread recognition of its independence as early as 1918, but the situation in Lithuania was worse. The country was liberated from German occupation in November 1918, after which the first diplomatic contacts were established between Finland and Lithuania. Lithuania appointed its first representative to Finland in February 1919 and through him inquired about the possibility of Finland's official recognition of Lithuanian independence (*de jure*). However, Finland hesitated because the Russian Civil War was still underway, and the Western powers had not recognized Lithuania or the other Baltic countries.

In addition to safeguarding its relations with the victorious states of the First World War, Finland avoided annoying Poland. Finland and Poland had established diplomatic relations in early 1919, and Poland was a regional power with which Finland had a common enemy: Bolshevik Russia. Finland considered an alliance with Poland possible, in which case Finland preferred to be neutral in the dispute between Poland and Lithuania (concerning the Vilnius region). When Lithuania asked Finland for the second time in November 1919 to recognize Lithuania's independence, the answer was again negative. The main reason was precisely that Lithuania also wanted Finland to recognize that the Vilnius region belonged to Lithuania.

Finland was accepted as a member of the League of Nations in 1920, and after that Finland was able to influence (slightly) the position of Lithuania and the other Baltic states in the international community. At the General Assembly of the League of Nations, Finland voted in favour of accepting Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as members of the League of Nations. Their membership took effect in September 1921, and several countries recognized the independence of the Baltic States de jure in the following weeks. Among them was Finland, which officially recognized Lithuania's independence on October 14, 1921.

The Lithuanian legation in Helsinki continued to work directly on the basis that had begun in the spring of 1919, now with official status. In November 1921, Finnish Foreign Minister Rudolf Holsti told the new Lithuanian envoy that relations between Finland and Lithuania should become as strong and cordial as possible. The beginning was promising: the following month, a delegation from the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) visited Finland. The visit received a lot of attention in the press of both countries, and during it contacts were made between the political elites of both countries.

As early as the spring of 1922, however, there was a turn in an unfavourable direction. Discussions on a possible political and military alliance had already taken place between Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland for a couple of years. However, the dispute between Lithuania and Poland over the Vilnius region prevented an agreement on cooperation between these countries. In that situation, Lithuania's northern neighbours preferred to cooperate with Poland, as Poland's military and other resources were many times larger than Lithuania's. In March 1922, the four states drafted an agreement, which was also signed by the Finnish Foreign Minister. However, the Finnish Parliament did not ratify the agreement because it considered it too risky. After Finland's withdrawal, the entire agreement collapsed.

Although discussions on possible cooperation continued after 1922, the focus of Finland's foreign policy actually began to shift towards Scandinavia. Finland's political or military alliance with Lithuania, either alone or as part of a wider alliance, became virtually impossible as a result of this strategic reassessment. Although Finland still felt sympathy for Lithuania, especially over the Vilnius issue, no very close relations were established between the two countries at the official

level. Lithuania was also aware of this. The new Lithuanian envoy to Helsinki, who began his work at the beginning of 1924, focused primarily on strengthening cultural relations.

The decline in Lithuania's official interest in Finland is indicated by the fact that the Lithuanian legation in Helsinki closed in the summer of 1927. From then on, relations with Finland were handled by the Lithuanian legation in Latvia, although a consulate remained in Helsinki. The closure of the legation could also be partly a reaction to the fact that Finland had not set up a legation in Lithuania. The Finnish legation in Estonia had taken care of official contacts with Lithuania since 1921, and from 1926 the task was transferred to the Finnish legation in Latvia. However, in the 1920s and 1930s, Finland also had a consulate in Kaunas, as Lithuania had in Helsinki. One of the highlights of official relations was the visit of the Lithuanian Foreign Minister to Finland in December 1934 and the visit of the Finnish Foreign Minister to Lithuania in May 1936. Relations between the two countries were unproblematic, but no new openings were made for concrete political cooperation.

On the other hand, lively and warm cultural relations developed, especially from the mid-1920s onwards. Both Lithuanian and Finnish representatives of various walks of life were eager to get to know the 'almost neighbouring country' and make visits, often agreeing on regular contact. In short, such cooperation covered virtually all areas of business, science, the arts, and leisure activities. In the late 1920s and the 1930s, at least a dozen or more group trips were made from Finland to Lithuania and vice versa, with hundreds of people participating. The numbers were quite large at a time when the mass tourism of many decades hence was not possible. Trips were organized by schoolteachers, scouts, sports clubs, the National Defence Guards, choirs and journalists, to name a few of the most active groups.

Friendship societies played a significant role in the development of cultural relations. The Lithuanian-Finnish Society was founded in Kaunas in 1927 (in 1936 the name was changed to the Lithuanian-Finnish Friendship Society). Correspondingly, the Finnish-Lithuanian Association was founded in 1931 in Helsinki. Both societies were led by significant figures in science, art and other areas of social life. In Lithuania, the first chairman of the society was General V. Nagys-Nagevičius, who had also founded the first Lithuanian Association of Finland in 1916. In Finland, the first chairman of the friendship society was Professor A. R. Niemi. The significance of his work is shown by the fact that when A. R. Niemi passed away, the Lithuanian-Finnish Society erected a monument to his grave. Another person who made a very significant contribution to the promotion of Finnish-Lithuanian relations was R. Öller, who also served as the Consul General and Honorary Consul of Lithuania in Finland.

Both societies brought together a large number of people, mainly highly educated, who were interested in strengthening relations between Finland and Lithuania. At the same time, the societies sought to make the 'almost neighbouring country' familiar to the general public, often in close cooperation with the consulates. Their

work included presentations, exhibitions, radio programmes and writings in newspapers and magazines. They provided a wealth of information about all walks of life in Finland and Lithuania. In school, Finns received only very limited basic information about Lithuania, and the situation in Lithuanian schools was the same regarding Finland. The media work of the friendship societies and consulates thus played a very important complementary role. The Lithuanian-Finnish Friendship Society had to cease its activities when the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania in the summer of 1940. The Finnish-Lithuanian Association was also dissolved at the request of the Soviet Union in the spring of 1945.

Trade between Finland and Lithuania remained relatively modest between the World Wars. An important reason was the similarity of the countries' economic structures; that is, Finland and Lithuania exported roughly similar products to the world market. In the 1920s, exports and imports between the countries were only 1–2 per cent of what they were with major trading partners such as Germany and Great Britain. However, the 1932 trade agreement, which reduced mutual duties, improved the situation. By the end of 1930s, trade had grown nearly tenfold, although it still accounted for less than 1 per cent of total imports and exports. Lithuania exported mainly cattle and grain products to Finland, and Finland's exports to Lithuania consisted mainly of timber and paper.

Challenges posed by the World War II and the Cold War

World War II marked an almost complete break in relations between Finland and Lithuania. Under the conditions of war, it was not possible to continue virtually any of the forms of cooperation that had been part of normal life. The same situation continued long after the end of World War II. Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union until 1991, during which time Lithuania naturally lacked all the functions of an independent state. Even travel between the two countries was not possible until the late 1950s. The Soviet Union kept Lithuania closed to foreigners for as long as the guerrilla war against the occupation continued, and, generally speaking, Stalin did not want witnesses on the scene when Lithuania was forcibly incorporated into the communist dictatorship.

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union allowed interaction between Finland and Lithuania only in limited areas and in a controlled manner. The twin city system was one way in which regular communication was possible. In 1967 Marijampolė (Kapsukas) and Kokkola were allowed to sign a twin city agreement, and Vilnius and Joensuu in 1970. Of these, the latter agreement led to a particularly lively cooperation. In practice, it meant reciprocal visits to schools, for example, and related to various fields of art. At the same time, it was possible to convey information about Finland and Lithuania more generally.

Dissemination of information was really needed, because during the Soviet occupation, everyday contacts were otherwise very limited, and Finland and

Lithuania gradually became increasingly unknown to each other. In Finnish education, Lithuania disappeared completely by the 1970s, and the situation in Lithuania was almost as bad for Finland. In other media, Finland also rarely appeared in Lithuania, and Lithuania even less so in Finland, perhaps with the exception of in twin cities. However, individual works of fiction were translated from Finnish into Lithuanian and in the opposite direction; for example, a new Lithuanian translation of the Kalevala appeared in 1972.

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a new beginning in relations between Finland and Lithuania. The liberalization of conditions in the late 1980s made it possible to increase the flow of information, and Finland experienced a strong 'Baltic boom', through which Lithuania also emerged more strongly than ever in public after the 1930s. Finland's most active friends in Lithuania, and Lithuania's friends in Finland, were pioneers, and this time, too, Lithuanians were slightly faster on the initiative. In January 1990, the Lithuanian-Finnish Society was founded, and in April of the same year, the Finnish-Lithuanian Society followed, officially called the Donelaitis Society. These associations played a key role in the interaction between Finland and Lithuania as a whole, especially until official relations could be established between the two countries at the end of 1991. Since then, these friendship societies have made a very significant contribution to the development of relations between Finland and Lithuania, just as their predecessors did between the World Wars.

As for the establishment of official relations, the situation at the end of the Cold War resembled that at the end of the First World War. Lithuania declared independence in March 1990, but Finland, like almost all countries, did not immediately recognize Lithuania's independence, wanting to wait and see where the process of disintegration of the Russian (Soviet) empire would eventually lead. The failed coup attempt by conservative communists in August 1991 changed the situation. Occupied Estonia and Latvia also declared independence restored, and non-Russian Soviet republics announced their secession from the Soviet Union. Like other European countries, Finland established diplomatic relations with Lithuania and other independent states at the end of August. Finland officially announced that its 1921 recognition of Lithuania was still valid and that it was a matter of restoring relations. With this wording, Finland wanted to emphasize that it had never accepted the occupation and annexation of Lithuania and the other Baltic countries to the Soviet Union.

A new expansion and deepening of relations

Since the restoration of Lithuania's independence, relations between Lithuania and Finland have developed quite rapidly. Finland opened an embassy in Vilnius at the end of 1991, and the Lithuanian embassy opened in Helsinki about two years later. In addition to embassies, there have been one or more honorary consuls in each country on a regular basis. The visits of the highest representatives of the state leadership to Finland and Lithuania have become almost an annual routine. For instance, in 2009–2011, the presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers

of the countries made a total of 10 visits from Lithuania to Finland or vice versa. Frequent visits confirm close and good relationships.

In the 1990s, Finland and Lithuania concluded a number of bilateral agreements coordinating economic, cultural and social security issues. Between 1992 and 1994, agreements on trade and transport promotion came to the fore. In the second half of the decade, agreements on cooperation in the fields of culture, education and science, as well as cooperation in the fight against crime, emerged. Since Lithuania also joined the European Union (2004), the need for formal bilateral agreements has virtually ceased to exist, and relations are largely determined by the EU's general agreements. In terms of economic relations, the latest integrative step was Lithuania's transition to the single currency (€) in 2015.

In security policy, the geopolitical positions and interests of Finland and Lithuania are very similar, but Lithuania is more openly committed than Finland to cooperating with the West. Lithuania joined NATO in 2004, but Finland has contented itself with a looser commitment through the Partnership for Peace Agreement (as has Sweden).

Over the past three decades, Finland has become relatively well-known in Lithuania, and Lithuania in Finland. Once again, the necessary basic information is provided in school, and there is a wealth of information available in the media to all those who are interested. It seems that among the public, perceptions of the partner country are largely positive, although their knowledge may not be very in-depth. On the other hand, personal experiences are increasing all the time, as tourism between Finland and Lithuania has grown rapidly from a few thousand tourists at the beginning to tens of thousands of tourists a year in the early 2020s.

Economic relations have expanded significantly as Lithuania has recovered from the devastation caused by the Soviet occupation. Membership in the European Union since 2004 has continued to open up significant new opportunities and simplified foreign trade issues. The analogy to developments between the World Wars is again noticeable. In the 1920s and 1990s, trade between Finland and Lithuania was about a thousandth of the total volume of foreign trade, but in the 2000s and 2010s – like during the 1930s – the volume has increased tenfold, corresponding to about 1 per cent (on a gross value of about €500 million). Finland's exports to Lithuania mainly consist of refined petroleum products, machinery and paper products. Lithuania exports plastic products, electrical equipment and furniture to Finland, among other things. With regard to financial investments in the partner country, Finland has, for understandable reasons, had better opportunities than Lithuania.

All in all, relations between Finland and Lithuania are warm, unproblematic and based on equality, as we celebrate the centenary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The prospects for further deepening and broadening relations are very good, especially in the cultural and economic fields.

Kari Alenius, Professor, Head of Research Unit at the University of Oulu.