

Bimonthly January-February No 1 (XXV)/2017

20 PLN (w tym 5% vat) | 10 EUR | 12 USD | 7 GBP

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New Eastern Europe



THE ART OF REVOLUTION

We were acting as neighbours, as friends of Ukraine

Interview with **Valdas Adamkus**, former president of Lithuania.

Interviewers: Paweł Kowal and Kateryna Pryshchepa.

PAWEŁ KOWAL AND KATERYNA PRYSHCHEPA: In November 2004 when it became clear that the political situation in Kyiv was on the edge of a serious conflict, Ukraine's president at that time, Leonid Kuchma, asked for your help. Why did he decide to phone you, specifically? Can you tell us more about this call?

VALDAS ADAMKUS: After Ukraine declared independence I met with Kuchma a few times and I left a good impression on him. Thus, when he found himself in a difficult situation when Ukrainians began questioning the results of the elections, he decided to ask me and Aleksander Kwaśniewski (Poland's president at that time – editor's note) for support. He must have thought that the two of us would manage the negotiations of the opposing sides and would be received with sympathy by the people on the streets.

I remember this moment very well when Kuchma called. He said to me: "We

have a big problem. People are out on the streets and demanding change. You have influence on the Ukrainian people, we need your intervention to ease the tension." I delayed my reply for a few days, as I first wanted to talk to other European politicians. Among them were Javier Solana and Aleksander Kwaśniewski. However, on the next day, around noon, I received another phone call from Kuchma who then said that he needed an immediate response, before it was too late. He was worried about the spilling of blood as the army had already distributed live ammunition. So I said: "Okay, let me see what I can do".

I called Kwaśniewski, who already knew about the situation, and we decided to go to Kyiv immediately. Kwaśniewski said he could be on the spot in two or three hours and we agreed that whoever arrives first will wait for the other at the airport. I landed earlier and waited for

his arrival. We then went to the Polish embassy, where a crowd of people had already gathered. Among others, there were a United Nations representative, a few of Viktor Yushchenko's supporters, as well as the Polish, American and British ambassadors. We discussed what should be done and what to say to the people on the streets. Yet despite the long debates, we still couldn't come up with a plan. Thus, we went together to Kuchma's private residence. We sat down and listened to his position. Kuchma told us that he might talk to the Kremlin to hear the Russian opinion. In the evening we all met in the presidential palace to negotiate a solution. There were myself, Kwaśniewski, Kuchma, Yushchenko, Viktor Yanukovych and some other international delegations. It did not take us long to see that the two sides were not going to agree. Yushchenko accused Yanukovych of forging the elections. He kept arguing for hours. However, what struck me the most at that time was when Yanukovych asked for a 15-minute break. He got up, left the table and went into the corner – the place where the delegation from Moscow and its chairman were sitting. It was clear to us who was behind him.

We started at seven o'clock in the evening and did not finish until four thirty in the morning. There was no break. We were hungry and there was no coffee left. Some of the people were already sleeping on the couches, but we finally reached an agreement that there will be a second election. We were go-

ing to try to calm down the people on the streets and present them with our proposal. That is how we ended the first crisis in Ukraine.

Did you have any problems negotiating the common position with President Kwaśniewski?

No, we spoke with one voice. We believed that Ukraine should have a new stable government supported by all the people. Naturally, in the eyes of some of Yanukovych's supporters we were not correct, but we stood for western democracy. For the Kremlin, this direction was unacceptable. Thus, those on Yanukovych's side claimed that we were unfairly pushing Ukraine under the western sphere of influence. Maybe they were right... We definitely strongly expressed our position and appealed to Ukrainians to unite. Kwaśniewski and I did not retreat from our position until the very end. I also think that during this meeting Kuchma tried to work out a flexible position. He did not want to separate himself from Moscow, but when he saw that we were not giving up and gaining more support for Yushchenko, he went along with us.

You mentioned that during the meeting Yanukovych was consulting the Russian delegation. When the agreement was reached in the end, do you think it was Yanukovych who accepted the offer or was it the delegation from Moscow who did?

I think the agreement was accepted by the unofficial delegation. Every time the

situation got tense, Yanukovych would ask for 15 minutes or half an hour break to discuss the issue with the Russian team. At one point during such a break, I left the table and went past Yanukovych and the Russians. When they saw that I was coming, they fell silent. Nobody spoke until I passed. It shows who the decision-makers were there.

Would you say that during these negotiations you were acting on behalf of the European Union? Or were you representing Lithuania while Kwaśniewski was representing Poland?

I think that Kwaśniewski and I acted together. We were representing democracy. We even asked the European Union, Javier Solana specifically, if we can act independently. We wanted to avoid a situation which would look as if the European Union was behind us. Our aim was to show Ukrainians that we were acting as neighbours, as friends of Ukraine. We wanted them to know that we were supporting the movement which was very close to our hearts and our understanding of what democracy means. We were acting in that capacity. The EU leadership agreed with us: they said “if you succeed – go ahead”.

What was the United States’ position towards the conflict at the time?

Officially, the US position did not resurface during the negotiation period, but they definitely were watching what was happening. But let me reassure you: at the time of the negotiations there was

absolutely no contact with the embassy members, no discussions with them. This was an absolutely independent action of two countries trying to help the Ukrainian nation.

Do you remember any differences in the positions of Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko at the time?

My first impression was that there was an exceptionally good co-operation between the two. President Kwaśniewski and I went to Yushchenko’s headquarters. Then, for the first time, I saw Yulichka, as I used to call her, enter the room to meet us. My impression was that they were very close and sought solutions to the problems. This relationship continued until the new government was formed after the presidential election. I do not know when the fallout started. Later on I participated in the Holodomor remembrance ceremonies in Kyiv when Yushchenko was president and Tymoshenko was prime minister. Even then, I believe, they were friendly to one another. I did not expect that there would be such a confrontation between them.

Do you think that your personal activities, such as being a negotiator in the Ukrainian conflict, but also those of the Lithuanian diplomacy, have influenced Lithuanian-Russian relations?

Definitely. I have to admit that even though there was no confrontation with Russia, there was a neighbourly disagreement. Russia knew that we did not love them because of the 50 years of occupa-



Photo courtesy of Valdas Adamkus

tion, but diplomatically we continued our relationship and until that crisis moment in Kyiv there were no tensions. Ukraine changed the situation completely, and since 2004 our relations have not gone back to what they had been. I felt this during European Union meetings in Brussels. Whenever Vladimir Putin was present, he openly ignored me.

There was one EU meeting outside of Helsinki. All EU presidents were already there and the president of Finland went

to the airport to meet Putin because he was invited as a guest to the dinner. I was standing with a group, I remember very well; there was [Jacques] Chirac from France, [Lech] Kaczyński and, I believe, Sweden's prime minister and some other people. The president of Finland walked with Putin to each group for introductions and handshakes. In the end, he came to our group. I was told later that whenever he meets someone he never looks into their eyes. He came up and

greeted everyone, he came up to me and extended his hand, but he did not look at me. So I said in Russian “*Zdravstvuyte gospodin president*” (“Hello Mr. President”), he lifted his eyes and pulled his hands out from mine. He never finished greeting the others and walked away to greet another group. I remember my friend, the French President Jacques Chirac, smiled at me and said “he really loves you.”

What was your assessment of the reforms in Ukraine after the Orange Revolution? Do you think the Orange team was successful?

I would say that Ukraine started very well and it was accepted by the European community as a partner. But then the disagreements in Ukraine started and it failed to meet the criteria necessary for a country to become a member. Both Poland and Lithuania had worked to implement the reforms when they had been aspiring to join the EU, but this was not happening in Ukraine. I believe this was the beginning of all the problems, even though Ukraine wanted to become part of the West, it failed to implement the reforms. Let me be very frank: corruption in Ukraine was preventing all of the reforms, so even with the help of western countries, it was far away from the democratic path.

Did you discuss the problems after the revolution with Yushchenko or Tymoshenko?

I did not meet Tymoshenko after the revolution. I met Yushchenko a few times and he was very pleasant, helpful and

very grateful for what we were doing for Ukraine. But he admitted that they had internal political and economic problems and that the majority in parliament did not support him. He mentioned that Tymoshenko was creating her own political party and had ambitions to become president, all of which created difficulties for him to implement the necessary reforms required by the West.

How would you assess the West's support for Ukraine after the Orange Revolution? Did the mood change because of the lack of reforms?

I remember the NATO meeting in Bucharest, where US President George W. Bush and Putin were present and where the membership of Ukraine in NATO was discussed. There was a disagreement between the member states. Some of them said that if Ukraine fails to meet the criteria, we should leave it. I was on the opposite side. I said that we have to find the way to give them more initiative and show that it is in our interest to have Ukraine in NATO. At that meeting we had to issue a resolution declaring when Ukraine should complete all the requirements to join the Alliance. I did not know that the night before the big players, the US, France, Germany and some others, had already drafted a resolution. It was very strict. There were even dates and criteria set for the timing of the vote on Ukraine's membership.

Right before the vote, Angela Merkel stood up holding a piece of paper and said “here is the resolution we agreed

on". We were not aware that such a discussion had taken place. So she read the resolution, which was simply a rejection of Ukraine's NATO membership until some future date. I stood up, I came up to her, I took that piece of paper from her hands and walked up to Bush, showed him the resolution and said "Mr President, is that true? What is in it?" And Bush said: "Val, this is the best I could do." So I looked at him and I said "Mr. President, this is not good enough for me." And I began to walk away. He turned to the secretary of state and said "Sindi, go with the president."

When I was passing by I tapped [Poland's president] Lech Kaczyński's shoulder and those of the other friendly presidents' and suggested that we discuss it. Of course the chairman of the meeting tried to keep order, but it was already too late. Everybody stood up out of their chairs. We found a corner in the room – and even Angela Merkel joined us. We began discussing the resolution. The president chairing the meeting announced a one-hour break.

During this break we agreed on a new resolution and that until the end of November 2008, when foreign ministers of NATO countries were meeting, Ukraine would have to address all the NATO criteria it had not met. Then the foreign ministers would be able to formally, without waiting for the approval of the entire NATO, propose an agreement to accept Ukraine into NATO.

I remember that I was thinking "my God, I had such a good working relationship with Angela Merkel, how is it going to look now?" But she said "that is the way we should come to conclusions". We continued our good relationship afterwards and the new resolution proposed at the meeting was unanimously accepted.

What was Germany's position on the situation in Ukraine at the time?

Germany was probably a little bit undecided. They felt that we can wait with Ukraine's membership. It did not mean that they were against it, but they found it unnecessary to push the issue. They wanted to wait for one or two or three more years for the situation in the country to change completely.

One of the results of the Bucharest NATO summit was Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008...

I was very much involved at the time, I went to Georgia and formally expressed our support for them. After I saw the Russians shooting rockets at the buildings, I openly called the Kremlin an aggressor who was trying to occupy neighbouring independent countries. I called it a new imperialism. So from the very beginning I was very vocal and I visited Georgia many times. This is my position. I voiced what the rest of the international community believed; that this was aggression. 