

Jack Twiss: What can "old Europe" learn from Lithuania?

After visiting friends for a family dinner and, as is customary in Lithuania, taking off my shoes, I noticed sports bags under a hanger. My first thought was simple – they must have just returned from the gym. However, I soon heard an explanation: “Here are the children’s travel bags, and here is my Riflemen’s Union equipment.” This was one of my first experiences in Lithuania when I arrived in Vilnius in 2022 to work as the Ambassador of the Netherlands to Lithuania.

Today, as hybrid attacks intensify across Europe, societal resilience is becoming an increasingly important issue.

Yes, defence requires more equipment – steel, drones, cyber defence. It also requires enough troops. This is the absolute minimum necessary for the security of the Baltic states and NATO as a whole. And all of this was needed yesterday. The courageous Ukrainian resistance has demonstrated this to us since 2014, and particularly since 2022.

Now, as a lecturer and programme Director at the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, I could hardly say anything else. However, at the college we also fully understand that true defence is not limited to military equipment.

True defence requires societal resilience. But what does that actually mean? And what could NATO learn from the Baltic states?

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The case of Lithuania

Before embarking on a career in diplomacy and intelligence, I studied social anthropology. In this field, researchers study smaller communities to compare cultures and, at times, draw conclusions that can be applied to much wider societies.

So, after four years in Lithuania as the Ambassador of the Netherlands, engaging in what the renowned anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski called ‘participant observation’, I would like to look at Lithuania as a case study. What can it tell us about identity and resilience?

What essentially defines Lithuanian identity? What determines the resilience of society and the individual? What lies behind the centuries-long struggle to preserve the language, the people, the religion, and the state? What common foundation, what foundational history, binds all this together?

Today, this is often called the national narrative. Perhaps this term is somewhat hackneyed, but for want of a better one, let us use it.

Societies are not homogeneous, but they nevertheless share certain fundamental values. These seem so self-evident that they do not even need to be discussed – as if they were part of society’s DNA.

A shared history usually shapes this societal DNA. Even if a person has not experienced it first-hand, because those events happened to previous generations, they can still embrace it as their own. History is passed down from generation to generation – through formal and informal education, in the school classroom and around the kitchen table, through songs, stories and folklore.

A common enemy or threat, of course, helps to unite society. However, that alone is not enough.

We need a shared understanding of what is worth defending. And ultimately, a person must know exactly what they themselves can do to contribute to what is worth defending.

Vytis and the Guardian Angel

Let us return to Lithuania. What inspiration can we find here?

As an anthropologist, I enjoy seeking out shared symbols. One of the most obvious in Lithuania is the horseman, Vytis. He is a symbol of resilience and a readiness, over the centuries, to fight for the nation, the language and the land – even when the enemy seems almost invincible.

This is the only way to understand the unequal struggle waged for nearly a decade by the Lithuanian partisans – the ‘forest brothers’ – against the NKVD and other Soviet forces.

Vytis symbolises the need to invest in a strong defence – both individually and as a society.

However, it is often forgotten that Vytis embodies true resilience only alongside another symbol – the Rūpintojėlis.

Christ, depicted as pensive, suffering and yet caring, symbolises the recognition of people’s suffering under oppression, the meaning given to their sacrifices, and the hope of salvation.

This medieval Christian symbol, within the Lithuanian folk Catholic tradition – which is interwoven with ancient pagan motifs – eventually became an image into which people could project their suffering, whilst at the same time drawing hope and strength from it.

Thus, Vytis and Rūpintojėlis become two distinct yet complementary national symbols: one speaks of the resolve to fight, the other of the ability to endure.

What lessons might the Netherlands learn from this?

Of course, Lithuania’s experience cannot simply be applied to the whole of Europe. Or, more specifically, to the Netherlands.

However, it is worth asking: what might we learn?

First and foremost, we need a broad, shared understanding of who we are, where we come from, what we value and wish to preserve, where we want to go, and what threatens us.

This is no small challenge, especially for a country where national sentiment has most often been expressed through the Winter Olympics or the World Cup.

However, this does not absolve us of our duty to invest seriously in education and to create a positive national narrative about who we are, where we come from and what we stand for.

At the same time, we must teach the true history of life behind the Iron Curtain between 1945 and 1990 – a history of occupation, oppression, deportations, the destruction of culture and religion, and drastic restrictions on freedoms.

Also, Western Europe, aided by the Marshall Plan, was rebuilding itself and seemed prepared to turn a blind eye to what was happening in the eastern part of the continent.

We must clearly identify what is under threat and what we wish to preserve. Only in this way can we, in the long run, create a shared national and European narrative. A narrative in which we, as citizens, can enjoy freedom, whilst at the same time understanding what sacrifices preserving it may demand of us all – given the threat posed by Russia, and perhaps other totalitarian actors.

And when I speak of sacrifices, I do not mean merely higher taxes. I mean a genuine personal commitment and a willingness to take risks.

Five lessons for 'Old Europe'

So, what, to use a term once coined by Donald Rumsfeld, could 'Old Europe' learn from all this?

Firstly – the teaching of history. History lessons should be compulsory throughout the school system, in all year groups. More attention needs to be paid to Europe – our continent, its history and long-term threats, particularly from Russia. And it is especially important to teach about the tragedy that unfolded east of the Iron Curtain between 1944 and 1990.

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Secondly, we must understand that whilst there are countless shades of grey in the real world, the concept of absolute evil also exists. When such evil manifests itself, it must be clearly identified and dealt with accordingly. There can be no compromise with absolute evil – unless you are prepared to capitulate and renounce the world as we know it.

Thirdly, we must understand that such changes will not be achieved overnight. However, they are possible. I recently visited the Latvian National History Museum in Riga. In the two decades after the First World War, Latvia strengthened its national identity to the point that it helped the nation survive two occupations that lasted about half a century in total. The Soviets certainly tried hard to destroy that identity.

Fourthly – this process must not be dependent on elections or changes of government. It is far too important to be left solely in the hands of the political majority currently in power.

Fifthly – such a change will not happen without sacrifices from society as a whole. We need to speak openly about this and explain why these sacrifices are necessary. This requires leadership that goes beyond social media.

Without a Ukrainian victory, all this is meaningless

However, one essential prerequisite remains.

The current war of aggression waged by Russia must end with a favourable outcome for Ukraine – a Ukrainian victory and a Russian defeat.

Russian imperialism, whatever banner it may operate under, must suffer a clearly visible defeat. There is no need to create a 'Versailles II', but it is essential to make it clear that threatening and attacking neighbouring states, driven by a misguided sense of cultural superiority, is unacceptable.

Those responsible for initiating and waging this war of aggression must be held to account.

This would demonstrate that Europe takes its professed values seriously. And that it is prepared to defend them, whatever the cost – not only because it possesses the necessary capabilities, but first and foremost because it understands the existential threat posed by Russia and genuinely believes in its values.

This would be noticed elsewhere too – including in China.

I shall conclude with a reference to popular culture.

In the animated film Up, the talking dog Doug can be completely absorbed in thought, but the moment he spots a squirrel, he forgets everything in an instant: 'Squirrel!'

Our politicians and societies today need fewer of these 'squirrel!' moments – less constant distraction – and more focus and perseverance in tackling the most important security challenge of our time.

In short, we must keep our eyes on the ball. Unfortunately, the Dutch national team failed to do so during the last World Cup.

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