
Interview: Jonas Birziskis



Small Lithuania has big plans for transport net

Jonas Birziskis, minister of transportation of a free and independent Lithuania, is "old-fashioned" enough that he still believes in the primary importance of building and upgrading the railway system as the backbone of a nation's infrastructure in order to solve today's transportation problems. During an interview in Vilnius, March 13, Birziskis discussed with EIR the main problems his country is facing in the field of transportation. The interview was conducted by Ortrun and Hartmut Cramer.

EIR: What are Lithuania's main problems concerning transportation?

Birziskis: The problems of our transportation sector are identical to those we have in Lithuania overall: It has only been six months since we became independent, and although much has been accomplished in this short period of time in building up functioning institutions of government, still, almost everything is lacking.

Generally in the transportation sector we have to undo the monopolistic system that we have had for the last 50 years and replace it by a democratic one, using the European system as the model.

The difficulty is that we are not prepared to deal with such a situation. For half a century we were not allowed to decide anything ourselves; now we have to decide everything ourselves. The biggest problem is a qualitative one: We have to get used to think differently. Instead of thinking, "I *must* do this," we have to think, "I *should* do this."

Now we are engaged in building up a market-oriented transportation industry, and, since we don't have any experience with that, we made a lot of mistakes initially—but of course we have made a lot of progress.

EIR: Can you highlight some of the most important initiatives?

Birziskis: Lithuania, which was isolated for the last 50 years, has now begun to open up itself to Europe, for example, through Lithuanian Airlines, the airline company which

we have built up and which is already operating. Apart from flying to 35 cities in the former Soviet Union, it connects our capital Vilnius with several big European cities, among them Copenhagen, Warsaw, Berlin and Frankfurt-am-Main.

Another example is the ferry from Klaipeda (Memel) to Mukran on the island of Ruegen. Several years ago, the leaders of the Red Army had installed this route so they could quickly transport Soviet troops to the West; we instead want to use the five high-speed ferries (three of them Lithuanian, two of them German) in order to quickly exchange goods with Europe. Our main problem in this respect is that— notwithstanding the fact that this ferry connection has to be used mainly for transporting Soviet troops back home for some time to come—the exchange of goods with Europe is still much too small. In addition, the traffic infrastructure on the island of Ruegen, and from there to Lübeck is not sufficient for the transportation of goods. Therefore, it would be very important for Lithuania to have a connection to the already-planned German-Polish coastal highway along the Baltic Sea, which will link Lübeck with Szczecin.

We are presently engaged in changing the existing structures such that, with the help of private companies and private capital, the transport of goods can be containerized which would make the traffic much more effective. Eventually the goods can be even brought to the door of the customer.

EIR: What about the conditions of the railways and roads in Lithuania?

Birziskis: In relationship to Europe, the situation of our railway sector is a catastrophe. In 1940 our railway system was quite modern, gauged according to European standards, but since that time, nothing has changed. Only 20 miles of our present railway network, which has a total of 1,267 miles, uses the European gauge, and this track of 20 miles in Lithuania, near the Polish border, is the *only track in the entire former Soviet Union* that was built according to European standards. That tells you everything.

Nevertheless, we believe that the railway has to have top

priority if we are to solve our problems with transportation. In this respect we are thinking very traditionally—"old-fashioned" if you wish. With respect to the railway sector we have big plans. Naturally we need help from Europe in order to realize it; alone we would never be able to do it. We want to connect the Baltic countries with Europe, as well as with the northern part of the former Soviet Union according to European standard. With Poland we have already signed a treaty that we will have a connection to the Gdansk-Szczecin-Hamburg line, in order to quickly connect to the whole of Europe. This line has to be extended to Kaunas and throughout Lithuania, and, of course, beyond that to Latvia and Estonia, up to Tallinn. There exists already a memorandum in this respect which is being gone over right now by all Baltic states. The aid should be organized in such a way, that those technical parts, for instance the locomotives, which we cannot build ourselves, we are getting from Europe, whereas we would build most of the rest, like the tracks, railcars, etc., ourselves, with the help of "joint ventures."

Here in Lithuania we want to make Kaunas, the traditional trade center of our country, into its transport center, since it lies in the middle of the country and is the point of intersection of the East-West axis (Vilnius-Klaipeda) and the North-South axis, which, from St. Petersburg, Tallinn, and Riga, connects our country via Warsaw with Germany and western Europe. These lines have to be brought over to the European standard as quickly as possible.

But, despite upgrading and completely constructing the new Klaipeda-Vilnius line according to the European standard, we nevertheless also have to modernize the old line with the Russian gauge in order to ensure the transport back home of the Soviet troops from eastern Germany and Poland, which go mainly through Kaliningrad and Klaipeda.

EIR: What about the situation of the roads and highways in Lithuania? What projects do you have there?

Birziskis: Like everywhere else in the former Soviet Union, in our country the roads are in very bad condition. Generally speaking, we have to improve all existing roads and build new ones. The most important great project in Lithuanian road-building is certainly our part in the Via Baltica, a highway running along the Baltic coastline which finally will connect Hamburg with Tallinn, St. Petersburg, and Helsinki (see map). With that we can also link Lithuania with Europe by highway.

Even if the completion of this highway still takes some time, we can nevertheless use the existing road now. A treaty envisaging the opening of the border crossing points for May 15, which we are presently negotiating with Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland, is almost ready.

Another great project is the highway along the West-East axis, from Klaipeda via Kaunas to Vilnius and, naturally, further to Minsk, the capital of Belarus. Of course, we can realize these projects only with the help from abroad.

Lithuania's major roads and connections



EIR: Are there other plans, such as the construction or improvement of waterways?

Birziskis: Yes, but these are really dreams for the future. It would be very lovely to open up our capital Vilnius to the harbor of Klaipeda via the river Neris, i.e. also via waterway. But in order to do this, the Neris, which flows into the Nemunas River in Kaunas, has to be improved or supplied by a canal. Additionally via the Nemunas, our biggest river, we could, given certain improvements, gain access to the wide network of waterways in continental Europe. Naturally this would be a great advantage for our economy, but that is such a distant project, that we don't dare to think about it now.

Generally our task is to open our country to Europe, to upgrade the transportation system, especially the railways to the European standard as quickly as possible, and to achieve a rapid and efficient exchange of goods with neighboring countries. The coming years will be very difficult, but I believe that we can make it, especially if we adapt our thinking to the new opportunities.

Even with all the pressure on us to solve the most urgent problems, we simultaneously have to find the strength and courage to think far into the future, like you are doing with your [Productive Triangle] program. First of all, our problems are naturally political ones, and in order to solve them, we count especially on the help and solidarity of Europe, with which we are linked by a very old and good tradition.