

Expect no goodwill from Russia, Lithuanian envoy warns

From Peter Norman, AEJ UK Meetings Secretary and former chief EU correspondent of the Financial Times

Appointed last year, Darius Semaska is Lithuania's Ambassador at Large for Hybrid Threats and Resilience. Speaking via Zoom from his country home in Lithuania, the former chief foreign policy adviser to the Lithuanian president and Ambassador to the Netherlands and Germany told the AEJ meeting that Lithuania is caught up in a "massive information war" in which Russia is seeking to portray his country as unviable with a government that operates against the interests of its own people.

Lithuania and the other Baltic states are on the frontline of multiple "hybrid" threats from Russia aimed at destabilising western democracies and weakening NATO. Political and media subversion, disruption of energy supplies, cyber aggression, and threats and use of military force are all part of the hostile armoury Russia has deployed against its western neighbours. Last month Russia raised the stakes again by giving brazen support to Belarus dictator Alexander Lukashenko after the forced landing in Minsk of a passenger plane bound for Vilnius and the contrived arrest of outspoken dissident and journalist Roman Protasevich.

It was around 2009-10 that Lithuania realised it was under serious siege and had to do something about Russia's threatening and destabilising activities, Mr Semaska said. Russian actions were leading to a loss of trust in the Lithuanian state, its government, its allies and international partners.

As a liberal democracy with freedom of speech and assembly, Lithuania was confronted with a complex situation and difficult challenge. In Russia, it faced an adversary that was not restricted in its means of attack.

Mr Semaska defined hybrid threats as those involving at least two types of malign activity with the same goal. He described how the Kremlin had tried to block Lithuania's efforts to make its economy and infrastructure less dependent on supplies from Russia. The means deployed by Russia included activities of agents of influence, corruption in and of businesses, hostile lobbying and the purchase of media outlets by parties fronting for hostile interests linked to the Kremlin.

Lithuania relied on several strategies to counter these threats.

Its first weapon, he said, was to "attribute", meaning to publicly identify the Russians as the authors of a host of malign or subversive activities. Experience of the past 10-11 years had shown this to be the right approach. In an environment where there is freedom of speech and acceptance of different opinions there needs to be an ongoing discussion to keep the public fully and accurately informed of the problem.

Parallel to this, there was a need to counter "illusions" that there could be a genuine arc of cooperation, embracing Russia, stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Mr Semaska said this entailed persuading a generation that had no direct experience of the Cold War that good will towards countries like Russia and China is not an

appropriate stance because they abuse it. Ending the illusory mindset meant "calling a spade a spade".

The Lithuanian public had to be made aware of malicious practices. Lithuania had a policy of strategic communication and was one of the first countries to order its intelligence agencies to inform the public about a range of covert threats and developments through an annual National Security Review.

Lithuania had boosted cyber security and, according to a report two years ago, was ranked fourth in the world in terms of resilience. It had laws to prevent politicians, including former prime ministers, and civil servants joining commercial companies within a year of leaving office. This was part of a policy of "detering by denial" to restrict the scope of autocratic regimes to subvert the Lithuanian state through channels of influence, notably in business.

Mr Semaska gave several examples of malign Russian activity against Lithuania.

-- Moscow mounted a major lobbying campaign against the building of an LNG terminal on the Baltic coast to lower Lithuania's dependence on Russian gas, in the course of which a deputy speaker of parliament had to resign because of his involvement with Russian energy companies.

-- Russia delayed the building of an electric power link between Lithuania and Sweden by staging naval exercises in the Baltic Sea directly over the area where the undersea cable was being laid.

--When Lithuania - where the public had long supported nuclear power generation - planned a new nuclear power station with the Japanese company Hitachi, a host of hostile NGOs suddenly appeared on the scene to organise the project's rejection in a referendum. These, he said, were linked to the Kremlin and were conspicuously absent in subsequent controversies about nuclear energy in Lithuania and neighbouring Belarus.

In a lively question and answer session, Mr Semaska was asked about relations with Belarus and the outlook for punishing the Lukashenko regime for forcing the Ryanair flight to Vilnius to land in its territory. Expressing a personal opinion, he doubted whether the West could greatly influence the government in Minsk, which seemed destined to fall more deeply under Moscow's influence as a result of the episode.

When asked about Belarus's threat to flood the European Union with migrants, he warned that his government would act rigorously to screen those arriving across the border between Belarus and Lithuania. "We will find that 90% are economic migrants" from places like Iraq and Turkey, he predicted. Lithuania would make arrangements to send those people back to their home countries so that others would be deterred from coming.

Mr Semaska made clear that he would like other European countries to follow Lithuania's tough approach to the hybrid threats posed by Russia. But he also acknowledged the need for compromise in certain circumstances.

He made no secret of his opposition to the Nordstream II gas pipeline project which will deliver Russian gas to Germany, bypassing Ukraine and Poland. A particular concern was the leverage it will give Russia in Germany, whose companies have invested some 5 billion euros in the project. But he backed US President Biden's decision not to impose sanctions on the companies concerned as "the lesser of two evils". Sanctions would have been a "disaster", he said. They would have imperilled US-German relations and Transatlantic relations more broadly. "German public opinion would have become very anti-American".

Rounding off the session, AEJ UK Chairman William Horsley asked Mr Semaska whether we are in a "new Cold War". The ambassador's reply was sharp and to the point.

"We are in a worse shape than during the real Cold war", he said. Then Europe was divided by an Iron Curtain so there were fewer channels of influence and less scope for Russia to penetrate Western societies. "Now they can abuse our openness, our liberal democracy, our principles in this asymmetrical way to attack us, and in a much more dangerous way than in the Cold War," he said.

It is vital to "understand that you can only negotiate and achieve something meaningful with a society such as Russia or China from a position of strength", he said. That means being able to close channels of influence, to resist pressure from their lobbyists, to make decisions that are convincing because they are based on open and public discussion and to show there is public support for investment in defence.

"You can only approach a partner that is not a 'goodwill partner' from a position of strength, not from weakness nor illusory hopes of a better outcome", Mr Semaska insisted. "There will be no goodwill from that side. Only power can impress such an actor. That is our experience."