Lithuania’s Accession to the European Union: Looking through the Eyes of the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture—What was expected to happen? What happened? Why did it happen that way?

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Abstract

This paper describes the role of the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture (LCA) as an advocate for the interests of its members in consultations with representatives of the Lithuanian government while the Agriculture chapter of the European Union’s acquis for accession was negotiated. The study employed a form of practical action research that was instrumental in orientation; it also relied on the emic knowledge of a key informant, i.e., the Director’s Advisor of the LCA, as well as selected archival documents. Six contexts and related conclusions are reported that describe significant behaviors and actions of the LCA and the Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture (LMA) as the Agriculture chapter of Lithuania’s EU accession was negotiated. Although the Agriculture chapter was resolved, many uncertainties surrounding accession still remain, especially in the agricultural sector and its rural context. Moreover, issues such as trust or lack thereof, poor communication, past confrontations, professional or even personal jealousies may have interfered with the ability of the LCA and LMA to work together effectively. Strong and sustained attempts must be made to resolve these and related issues. Then, these parties can move forward as willing partners who are pursuing the common aim of furthering the welfare of Lithuanian agriculture, its people and their nation as Lithuania continues its journey of accession to the European Union.
Introduction

“In 1953 (before Stalin’s death), Churchill, in conversation with a much younger protégé, John Colville, remarked that if he lived his “normal span” Colville “should assuredly see Eastern Europe free of Communism” (Lukacs, 2002, p. 14). “Counting Colville’s expectable threescore and ten [i.e., 70 years] that would have been [into] the 1980s—which was exactly what happened” (p. 14).

As the world bore witness, Churchill’s admonition to his young colleague proved prescient. Dissolution of the Soviet Union precipitated innumerable changes; many of them are registered on today’s map of Europe. One phenomenon set in motion by these events was the once impending, and now realized, enlargement of the European Union (EU). Recently, 10 countries were invited to join the EU; one of these nations was Lithuania. Although all sectors of Lithuanian society have confronted foreseen as well as unforeseen challenges associated with EU accession, it is the agricultural sector and concomitantly rural Lithuanians who may be the most challenged of all.

To this end, the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture (LCA) and the entire Lithuanian countryside bear the mark of significant change, tension, re-examination of values, and, in some cases, even changes in heretofore deeply-embedded philosophical positions. Getting more distant in time will make it easier to summarize key events and issues, and, hopefully, the overall picture will become clearer. At the same time, getting more distant from today, we will forget more and more of the truth. Then, as we are accustomed, we will begin to “make up” something in between truth and fiction, and the telling of “legends” will begin.

Even today, while everything is so near and fresh, it is still difficult to look very far into the future. So, it is extremely important to stop for a while and try to put into perspective the plethora of events experienced during the past few years. Perhaps this will help us to get some “fresh air,” to refresh our minds, and to once again ask “Where is the North?”, “Where is the West?” in respect to our position and world view. Moreover, to make decisions about the direction of future activities, and to once again dive—well, not dive, it feels more like to be “driven”—into an unprecedented vortex of history in which the Lithuanian state now finds itself in relation to its European neighbors and to its newfound place in the European Union.

Background and Conceptual Framework

Lithuania is a Former Soviet Republic; it is also one of the Baltic states. Today, Lithuania is an Eastern European nation, and one of 10 countries that were asked to join the European Union (EU) in 2004. Agriculture and the natural resource system is a significant part of the Lithuanian economy. It is estimated that nine percent of Lithuania’s gross domestic product is derived from the agricultural sector (Navickaitė, 2002, p. 27). According to the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science (EURYDICE, 1999), for the year 1997 “about 21.7% of the working population was engaged in agriculture” (p. 1). About one-third of Lithuania’s citizens live in rural areas (The Ministry of Agriculture, The Republic of Lithuania, 2000, p. 16).
Moreover, “Agricultural reform in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been one of the most intractable transition issues and is now proving to be problematic in EU accession talks. . . . Agricultural reform also encompasses potentially volatile social and political issues, ranging from underemployment to foreign ownership of agricultural land” (The World Bank Group, 2002). So, European Union accession policies and procedures that impacted agriculture and rural development were a priori concerns for agrarian stakeholders (Malcolm, 1999) such as the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture (LCA) and its members.

The LCA originated during the inter-war period when Lithuania was an independent republic, and was re-established when the nation regained its independence in 1991. It is a non-governmental organization comprising more than “100 agricultural self-governing organizations” (Navickaitė, 2002, p. 27), most representing different agricultural commodities and goods produced in Lithuania.

The European Commission first recommended Lithuania for accession negotiations in 1999 (Europa, 2001). All but three of the 31 chapters of the EU *acquis* (i.e., the corpus of pretexts or “directives” for admission into the EU) were negotiated and closed by June 2002. However, Agriculture was one of three remaining chapters still being discussed as late as fall 2002. To this end, the LCA attempted to play a unique and distinctive role as an advocate for its member groups in consultations with representatives of the Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture (LMA) while the Agriculture chapter of the European Union’s *acquis* for accession was negotiated. However, the LCA’s relationship and interaction with the LMA was frequently frustrating and unproductive.

Understanding the role of an agricultural non-governmental organization (ANGO) in mediating the interests of its member groups in an attempt to effectively advocate a “collective” position to a third-party, i.e., the LMA, as that agency, in turn, negotiated with a supra-governing authority (the EU) was the purpose of this manuscript. One that may hold important lessons for the future as organs of the “third sector” such as the LCA are called on increasingly to assist with solving the systemic economic and social problems (Mitlin, 1998) exemplified by the agricultural sector and its rural context in Lithuania.

**Purpose and Objectives**

This paper describes the role of the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture (LCA) as an advocate for the interests of its members in consultations with representatives of the Lithuanian government—Ministry of Agriculture (LMA) officials as well as other members of the Lithuanian EU Accession negotiating team—while the Agriculture chapter of the European Union’s *acquis* for accession was negotiated. Specific objectives of the study included the following: (1) Identify significant actors who participated in negotiating the Agriculture chapter of Lithuania’s EU accession. (2) Describe selected LCA actions related to its interaction with the LMA as the Agriculture chapter of Lithuania’s EU accession was negotiated. (3) Describe the LMA’s actions that mitigated the LCA’s role related to negotiating the Agriculture chapter of Lithuania’s EU accession. (4) Discuss selected strategies employed by the LCA as it attempted to advocate interests of its members to the
LMA while the Agriculture chapter of Lithuania’s EU accession was negotiated. (5) Identify significant implications concluded about the LCA’s effectiveness as an advocate for Lithuania’s agricultural sector and what these implications may mean in the future.

**Methods and Procedures**

Miller (1998) suggested a “soft systems methodology [SSM]” as “a philosophical basis for conducting inquiry”—one that “deals with problem setting, and involves stakeholders in the research process in the local context” (n. p. #). Issues, such as the one identified by this study, are frequently “complex, situated, problematic relationships” (Stake, 2000, p. 440) that may be examined by treating them as instrumental cases (Stake).

Moreover, Strike asserted that, “action research aims at an epistemology of practice . . . for the practitioner while contributing a utilitarian or use function to the solution of social practice problems” (as cited in McKernan, 1991, p. 312). Further, McKernan stated that John Elliott operationalized action research as “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it” (p. 312). And, that, “Key to Elliott’s analysis is the idea that the action researcher builds up a personal interpretative understanding of the work” (p. 312). McKernan considered this a kind of reflective inquiry and called it “practical action research” (p. 311). In addition, Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) posited that key informant interviews hold high potential for providing unique understandings and insights about a phenomenon that may not be readily discernible by other means. “A key informant can also be someone who has a way of communicating that represents or captures the essence of what the participants say and do” (National Science Foundation, 1997, p. 3-14).

Accordingly, this inquiry was a form of practical action research (McKernan) that was *instrumental* in its orientation (Stake) while it relied on the emic knowledge of a key informant, i.e., the Director’s Advisor of the LCA, (Gall et al.; National Science Foundation) as well as selected archival documents. Some of the documents were “confidential” internal working papers of the LCA and only specific portions could be used, and then only very judiciously. Other documents referred to in the paper can be found through public sources such as search engines available on the World Wide Web and regularly published periodicals, or, in some cases, through systematic searches of selected European and American university libraries.

**Results and Conclusions**

1. **Preparation for Accession Negotiations with the EU: Forming the Lithuanian State’s Position on Agricultural Issues**

   **Context:** Invited by the Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture (LMA), representatives of the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture (LCA) participated as a “regular participant” in the working groups that prepared the government’s EU Accession negotiation positions (Figure 1). Unfortunately, this proved to be counter-productive and, at times, even harmful to the LCA. Decisions made were based on majority agreement or, in some cases, majority non-objection; and, frequently, LCA representatives were not given the opportunity to state
clearly the LCA’s position on the issues at hand. Later, many of the LCA’s constituent member groups blamed it for accepting decisions that they viewed as harmful to the Lithuanian agricultural sector. This same problem remains because the current LCA representative to the LMA consulting body (i.e., the Collegium) functions under similar conditions.

**Conclusions:** National non-governmental organizations should not prepare or participate in preparation of governmental decisions under conditions that make them look and behave the same as a governmental structure. In this way, the NGO’s actions—as perceived by stakeholders—are less likely to be distorted or misinterpreted, and the state and its governmental structures are held responsible for decisions that, ultimately, were theirs alone.

Rather, following the example of current EU members (e.g., Denmark), representatives of agricultural non-governmental organizations (ANGOs) should actively participate as evaluators during the preparation of important documents, proposals, decisions, etc. They must know how and why the documents/decisions were prepared; then, they should state their comments and/or proposals as deemed appropriate. Further, the opinions of ANGO representatives should be stated clearly in the appendix of the final document, i.e., a dissenting or “minority report” of sorts. Otherwise, how can interested stakeholders understand the words, actions, and positions of the ANGO representative(s) as they related to the issues at hand? This procedure would better ensure open, consistent, accurate, and fair collaboration between the responsible governmental entity(ies) and interested ANGO(s), as well as present an accurate picture of what occurred to interested stakeholders.

2. The Question of Permanent Representation of Agricultural Non-Governmental Organizations at the EU headquarters in Brussels, Belgium

**Context:** The LCA first discussed the issue of ANGOs being permanently represented in Brussels during the summer of 2001. The LCA held that such representation was essential if it was to lobby effectively in the future for policies, programs, and activities of benefit to its members. This was no mere caprice on the part of the LCA: Earlier successes of Slovenia, Hungary, Estonia, and Latvia demonstrated the usefulness and importance of such representation in defending their respective national interests.

**Conclusions:** The LCA had no means of covering the costs of having representatives in Brussels; so, it applied for funds from the LMA. The LMA’s response was negative. However, after collecting more background information on this issue, the LCA concluded that governmental officials did not relish the likelihood that the Chamber would receive significant information through independent or “uncensored” channels by way of formal and informal networks in Brussels. This conclusion puts additional stress on the importance of having such representation, i.e., of a permanent nature, in the first place.
**Figure 1.** Preparation of Lithuanian Republic (LR) Negotiating Position, or Amendment of it, for EU Accession Negotiations

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**3. Participation of the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture in a Meeting between Lithuanian and EU Accession Negotiators**

*Context:* Because the agricultural negotiations were not going well, the LCA asked LMA officials to allow its representatives to observe the negotiations. Previously, the government’s negotiators had said that there was “nothing to hide” and they “do their best”
in the negotiations. However, it was extremely difficult to get Lithuanian officials to agree to LCA representatives observing the Lithuanian EU Accession negotiations. First, Lithuanian government officials said that the EU side would not agree to such an arrangement. Then the LCA presented the Latvian example: The Latvian government, on its own initiative, included a permanent ANGO representative in its negotiating delegation, and it incurred the related costs. Moreover, EU officials voiced no opposition to this arrangement. So, Lithuanian government officials looked elsewhere for reasons to prevent LCA representatives from participating in the negotiations. Subsequently, the LCA received an official letter from the LMA that stipulated requirements for the involvement of any potential LCA “observers.” First, these persons had to be elected LCA leaders, in other words, the Chamber would not be allowed to designate an employee who, presumably, would be a professional or expert regarding the issues in question. Further, these persons had to be “trusted by farmers,” speak fluent English, and be very knowledgeable about the significant issues facing each sector of Lithuania’s agricultural system. In addition, it was required that any designated representative be capable of making significant contributions to the work of the EU Accession negotiating team.

So, instead of accepting LCA representatives as “active observers” or “advisors,” in a sense, the Lithuanian government demanded that the representatives do the official negotiators’ jobs as well. Apparently, LMA officials were afraid the aforementioned obstacles would not be sufficient because they also demanded that one of the two LCA representatives hold a doctor of science degree. Essentially, the government demanded that these individuals serve as “official” but not LMA-employed negotiators while all costs associated with their roles were to be provided by the non-governmental LCA. Unfortunately, the LMA’s behavior was contrary to what the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2001) prescribes, i.e., nations can “strengthen government-citizen relations,” especially, by properly exercising the principles of “transparency” and “accountability” (p. 74) in dealings with elements of the third sector.

Conclusions: After strident discussions and numerous demands, LCA representatives were permitted to participate in one EU Accession negotiation meeting. In essence, the representatives witnessed a single “performance” from the “second act” of the negotiation process. Unfortunately, the LCA representatives had little chance to delve into the details of what occurred or to grasp the core issues discussed at that moment. Regrettably, they could not even count on friendly assistance or explanatory interpretation from officials of their own country. They could only conclude that the negotiation process was extremely complicated.

So, it appeared that for what Lithuanian government officials had hoped did occur, essentially, Lithuanian farmers were “fooled” once again. Moreover, the issue of ANGO representatives advising or even observing the Lithuanian EU Accession negotiation, as it related to agriculture, was closed. Yet how can a state, one that is navigating the EU Accession process and negotiating the nettlesome issues inherent to agriculture, not be seriously handicapped if it does not seek the input and active participation of its ANGOs? Further, can such a state that is not interested in learning about the needs and wishes of its citizens ever be an able defender of those interests? The LCA’s experience suggests that the answer to these questions is a resounding NO!
4. Results of Lithuanian and EU Negotiations on Selected Agricultural Issues

**Context:** One should not overlook the “experience” of the EU negotiators. In fact, they undoubtedly acted like “smart traders,” i.e., first offering very little then offering more while loudly exclaiming that the newfound position was due to their kindheartedness. The results of negotiations with such a person is nearly always very profitable for the trader, and less so for the other party involved.

**Conclusions:** Although the Lithuanian government chose to surrender its original position on nearly all agricultural issues, the result was better than the conditions proposed by the EU in the beginning. The most significant concessions were an increase in the rate of subsidization to agricultural producers from 25% to 45%, and a shortening of the time required for transition to occur from ten to seven years (Nielsen, 2002). In addition, the unconditional selling of agricultural land to foreign citizens (The World Bank Group, 2002) was originally agreed to by the Lithuanian negotiators but later, only after much hectoring from rural citizens and their representatives, the issue was re-opened and a seven-year transition period was negotiated instead.

5. Future Relations with COPA and COGECA

**Context:** COPA (Committee of Agricultural Organisations in the European Union)-COGECA (General Committee for Agricultural Cooperation in the European Union) (n.d.) are very active, experienced agricultural lobbying organizations in Europe. Initially, Lithuanian ANGOs made a mistake concerning these organizations: It seemed self-evident that they would be interested in defending the interests of all European farmers, including Lithuanians. This illusion was actively supported by ardent speeches made by COPA and COGECA representatives during their visits to Lithuania. Later events, especially after the EU accession negotiations began and as the date for accession moved closer, made the LCA view COPA and COGECA more realistically.

**Conclusions:** It is now clear that the participation of Lithuanian ANGO representatives in COPA and COGECA activities is necessary because these organizations actively cooperate with the European Commission and participate in preparation of the European Council’s agricultural regulations and directives. So, the energetic involvement of LCA representatives in COPA and COGECA is necessary if the LCA wants to protect the national agricultural interests of Lithuania.

The representatives of old EU member ANGOs are experienced, professional lobbyists, who actively defend the interests of their countries on all levels. However, they are not very happy with the impending addition of new members. Currently, they hold strategic positions on COPA, COGECA, and European Commission working committees, and they are not anxious to share their positions with “newcomers.” This perception was supported when COPA and COGECA took a negative position concerning an Estonian-Slovenian initiative that was supported by Latvia, Lithuania, and the Czech Republic. (The initiative was an attempt to create favorable conditions for ANGO representatives from the countries of Middle and Eastern Europe (MEE), so they could begin active involvement as
soon as possible, thus ensuring that COPA and COGECA paid attention to the interests of the
MEE region.) Accordingly, fewer illusions exist now about a so-called “Fraternity of
Eastern and Western European farmers,” a position that was promoted by representatives of
COPA and COGECA during the accession process.

Moreover, without receiving exceptional attention and support at the outset, a strong
chance exists that the interests and concerns of new members will be pushed aside.
Unfortunately, COPA and COGECA requirements concerning yearly membership fees and
other conditions for participation in working groups demonstrate their intention to keep MEE
countries’ ANGO representatives as passive “on-lookers” by attempting to limit their
participation in agriculturally-related lobbying activities.

6. The Changing Lithuanian Society and Changes within the LCA

Context: Lithuania has undergone significant changes caused by its broad-scale
movement toward the EU during the last three years. This ongoing process has changed the
environment of the non-governmental sector as well. Conditions for ANGOs are still changing and the current situation is far from stable.

Until four years ago, the main LCA activities were advisory services and the
promotion of non-traditional agricultural sectors. Looking through the eyes of the past,
today’s LCA is hardly recognizable. Initially, the winds of change forced the LCA to
become involved in never-ending milk, meat, and grain regulation issues. This led to
intensive discussions and, quite often, to disagreements with various governmental structures
concerning their actions and decisions related to the aforementioned sectors. Soon the LCA
was involved in mediating not only between producers and the government, but also between
producers and processors. Long, animated discussions and intense arguments about issues
facing the main agricultural sectors became a daily routine for the LCA. Mitlin (1998) has
described organizations that serve in such a role as “interlocutors,” i.e., NGOs that advocate
“between civil society organisations and between such organisations and the state” (p. 83).
The changes described took place at a time when the Lithuanian state system was
gradually adopting and starting to implement the principles of a democratic system.
Lithuania was opening up to outside influences more and more while simultaneously
reforming its state, business, and community structures in accordance with the “EU model.”

Conclusions: It has become obvious that Lithuania needs an ANGO that would
represent and defend the common interests of national agriculture and rural communities,
first to the EU and then globally as well. On one hand, the government would gain a partner
to help it efficiently communicate with agricultural producers and rural citizens (Mitlin,
1998), thus avoiding many of the conflicts and misunderstandings that frequently occur.
Such an organization would ally with the government as it defended its national interests.

On the other hand, ANGOs in current EU member states are very influential. So, a
newcomer state, one lacking a well organized structure that is supported by its government,
would find it very difficult to defend its national interests while trying to withstand pressures
from other member states. If a Lithuanian ANGO is to defend effectively the common
interests of agricultural producers and rural communities, it will have to become an efficient and aggressive lobbying organization. One that knows well—even better than its own government—the agricultural policies and positions of its nation, of the EU and its member states, and those of the various non-EU countries that are major agricultural producers in the world. It must be extremely well-informed about the latest news and react swiftly to emerging opportunities and threats. Such an organization will need a well-functioning information center that is capable of conducting thorough research and analyses, as well as efficiently gathering information and disseminating findings. Also, a national lobbying organization requires a strong professional-technical network, which would employ qualified experts and analysts who are able to skillfully monitor and evaluate situations in their sectors.

Accordingly, the time has come to redistribute functions both in Lithuanian society and in governmental sectors. NGOs, wishing success for Lithuanian agriculture and rural citizens, should clearly organize the work and coordinate their activities. Officials of state structures should function as technical specialists—analysts. For example, LMA personnel should be professional strategists and tacticians of agricultural policies and politics (Quispe & Jiménez-Sánchez, 2001) while production, technology, supply, and distribution issues should be delegated to those who know them best—producers and professional advisors.

Discussion and Implications

“The enlargement deal—dubbed the ‘big bang’—will inflate the EU’s population by 75 million to some 453 million, making it the third largest economic union in the world after China and India” (Nielsen, 2002a, p. 1). Further, “Romano Prodi, president of the European Commission, declared that ‘accession of 10 new member states will bring an end to divisions in Europe,’ and that ‘for the first time in history Europe will become one because [of] unification’” (p. 1). Moreover, Valdas Adamkus asserted that, “‘Borders and contrasts are disappearing in an area which has long suffered from deep imbedded structural differences. I think we’re witnessing a new process gaining momentum on the European continent’” (Nielsen, 2002a, p. 1). (It should be noted, however, that soon after Adamkus’ declaration he lost a run-off election to serve a second term as Lithuania’s president. Any relationship between his position on Lithuania’s EU accession and the subsequent election result is unknown.)

Yet some scholars, such as the “Estonian academic Uno Silberg” (Johnson, 2002, p. 1) characterized the EU as a “‘Soviet Union in disguise’ that will force the country [, i.e., Estonia,] to deliberate its progressive economic policies . . .” (p. 1). And still “others say farmers will be ruined by restrictive production quotas and far smaller subsidies than those of their counterparts in current member states” (p. 5). Even the EU contended, “that to reach just 50 percent of the average productivity of the EU-15 (i.e., current member states), the 10 CEE [Central and East European] applicants would have to shed 4 million agricultural jobs” (The World Bank Group, 2002). Some observers even ask, “Will it be possible to sustain the common agricultural policy [CAP] . . . once the newcomers are in?” (Anonymous, 2002a, p. 11). Malcolm (1999) has voiced similar speculation, while others “wonder how their [, i.e., new member states’] farmers will cope with competition from more-subsidised West European producers” (Anonymous, 2002b, p. 23). These are concerns of the LCA and its
member groups as well. They are implicit in several of the aforementioned conclusions: results of Lithuanian and EU negotiations, future relations with COPA and COGECA, and changes occurring in the Lithuanian society as well as change within the LCA.

**Educational Importance**

Civil society or the “third sector” has only one source of “power”—an educated, socially conscious, and active populace. Therefore, continual development of educational opportunities for agricultural producers and other rural citizens must become a priority of the Lithuanian government, the LCA, and related agricultural and rural development NGOs. Without such people, the sector will be dysfunctional and ineffectual. One of the best ways to keep rural citizens actively involved is to provide them information that is relevant and meaningful.

A chasm exists currently in Lithuania between constitutional legal structures of the state and the people, who are frequently late in perceiving the new opportunities, rights, obligations, and responsibilities confronting them (Jones, Stallmann, & Infanger, 2000). In particular, a “dissonance”—at least in philosophical approach if not in desired outcomes—separates members of the LCA and representatives of the LMA. Whether it is rooted in issues of trust or lack thereof, poor communication, past confrontations, professional or even personal jealousies, strong and sustained attempts must be made to resolve them, and then these parties must move forward as willing partners who are pursuing the common aim of furthering the welfare of Lithuanian agriculture, its people and their nation.

Accordingly, state and private sectors should then redouble their efforts towards educating people about the essence of a democratic state—its structures and functions, and the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of its citizens. Components of the fabric that forms a civil society are what make a state sustainable, including specific democratic attitudes, values, and skills that must be learned and, sometimes, re-learned by citizens. Held has called this “‘double democratisation’ which means, in practice, the interdependent transformation of both state and civil society” (as cited in Lehning, 1998, p. 37).

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