

## Nanovic Research Grant Proposal

### Democratic Transition in the Baltic States

#### **Introduction**

As an American political science student of Eastern European descent, I have often found that my academic interests are shaped by my family history. Over the course of my study at Notre Dame, and as I have begun research for my senior thesis, my interest has been continually drawn to the study of independence movements and the consolidation of democracy. This summer, I would like to travel to Lithuania in order to study these themes in a region that has undergone successful democratic transition in the last 25 years. I will study the trajectory of the country's democratic transition because I want to better understand why Lithuania represents a "success story," especially with regards to the establishment of parliamentary democracy. This research will ultimately serve to shed light on current regional trends and will help me assess whether the Baltic "successes" are threatened by recent developments, such as the rise of a newly assertive Russia.

I intend to spend four weeks in Lithuania's capital city of Vilnius, working in the Lithuanian Central State Archives, studying archival documents pertaining to Lithuania's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1990 and the subsequent establishment of a Western-style state and market economy.

#### **Background**

The fall of the Soviet Union was cemented by its territorial dissolution, in which the former Soviet Republics declared independence and seceded from the Union. The Baltics were at the forefront of this wave of independence movements, and were the first to have their independence formally recognized. In the 25 years since these events, the post-Soviet region has experienced unequal levels of liberalization. In many post-Soviet states, especially in the Central Asian republics, the former Communist leadership retained its control over the government, even after independence. The region is now characterized by a plethora of semi-authoritarian, presidentialist governments, hybridized economies that have not fully embraced marketization, and rampant political and economic corruption. The Baltics, by contrast, seem to stand as a relatively successful example, as they have succeeded in consolidating parliamentary democracy, market economies, and have relatively low levels of corruption and electoral fraud.

For these reasons, the Baltics are often treated as outliers in post-Soviet literature. They are not textbook examples of the broad regional trends outlined above, and are thus often omitted entirely from the discussion. My research aims to explore that which makes the Baltics different, and to assess the extent to which their “success” has been substantive. I will study the way in which democracy in the Baltics was consolidated, and will look at which historical, institutional, and actor-level factors produced such a different result in the Baltics than in the rest of post-Soviet Europe. My research aims to update the work that has already been established on this topic by analyzing emergent threats to Baltic democracy, such as the rise of an aggressive Russian neighbor that may attempt to use the same tactics in the Baltics as it did in Crimea in 2014.

### **Methods**

My research is focused on Lithuania because it is the largest of the Baltic states, and because I am fluent in Lithuanian, which will allow me to conduct research using both English and Lithuanian sources. I intend to spend time in the Lithuanian capital city of Vilnius, in the Lithuanian Central State Archives and the Lithuanian State Modern Archives. These archives house Lithuania’s records and documents from the Soviet occupation period, up through the declaration of independence and the reestablishment of the Lithuanian state. The Central State Archives would provide an unparalleled opportunity to see inside the workings of Lithuania’s 1980’s-1990’s underground independence organization, “Sajudis,” a word which roughly translates to, “The Movement.” These archives contain voice recordings of Sajudis representatives, as well as over 3,000 video documents from 1988 onwards that pertain to the activities of Sajudis and the restoration of Lithuanian independence. The State Modern Archives hold documents about Lithuania’s current state and public institutions, political parties, and the like. It also contains documents about the “political and professional activities” of the signatories of the 11 March 1990 Act of Parliament that reinstated Lithuanian independence. Few of these records are digitized, which necessitates an in-person visit to the archives.

Access to these archives will flesh out my understanding of the people and circumstances surrounding Lithuania’s re-declaration of independence in 1990. I hope to better understand how Lithuania’s current political institutions were designed and the effect that this has had on the durability of Lithuanian democracy.

### **Academic Credentials and Professional Goals**

My summer research would serve as the basis for my senior thesis, which I will be writing during the 2017-2018 school year under the supervision of Professor Susanne Wengle, who specializes in post-Soviet politics. My background in Eastern European studies includes my coursework during my year abroad at Oxford University, where I studied the modules "Politics in Russia and the Former Soviet Union," with Professor Paul Chaisty of St. Antony's College, and "International Relations during the Cold War" with Dr. Jonathan Leader Maynard of New College. My studies at Notre Dame have also supplemented my knowledge in this research area: in my first year, I wrote a paper entitled "Defending the Baltic States" for a US Foreign Policy seminar, in which I argued that a US commitment to defend Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia against Russian aggression is paramount in maintaining the credibility of NATO. In my second year, I studied "War Termination and the Durability of Peace" with Dr. Sarah Daly, which familiarized me with democratic transition scholarship. Furthermore, I am qualified to study in Lithuania because of my lifelong fluency in the language, as well as my 10 years studying Lithuanian grammar, literature, and history at Maironis Lithuanian School in Lemont, Illinois.

This research opportunity will enrich my understanding of comparative politics by allowing me to immerse myself in a country that has recently undergone democratization and marketization. It will improve my critical thinking and analytical skills by helping me to understand the factors that contributed to the success of the Lithuanian independence movement, and the factors that may undermine its ongoing success. As I look towards graduate school and consider pursuing either a Master's degree in political science or a career in international law, I believe that this research opportunity will further not only my academic goals, but my professional aspirations as well.