Information about interviewee:

Vytis Jurkois, Head of Freedom House Vilnius. Interview conducted in Vilnius, Lithuania

R= Respondent – Vytis Jurkois

I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton

I: What is the aim of Russia's compatriot policy?

R: First and foremost it is basically to mess around in the neighbourhood. To use, manipulate, instrumentalise, weaponize citizenship, that might vary depending on the country, but to use the Russia speaking minority, or in some instances majority in the neighbourhood.

I: From the Russian perspective, it is framed as a humanitarian policy.

R: Well, they do not have any interest in the citizens of the Russian Federation, if you look at the track record of human rights and democracy, ok we can forget these words, but if you look at the accountability to the Russian people, then you know it's just funny in a way, why would you care about those outside the country you know the Russian speaking community, if you cannot deal at home. Just an example from Lithuania, our nuclear power plant station we had to close, due to the fact that it was a requirement to the joining of the EU, we were closing it down, it was built in the Soviet Union and had the same reactor as Chernobyl which was a big concern, but interestingly enough it was a nuclear city built for that, a scientific city, in a heavily Russia speaking city, called Visiginas. 80% of the town were Russian speaking, and they were working at the power plant and they had to shut it down because of the EU. Then we had the idea to build a new power plant together with the Japanese, so that people who became unemployed, and they can work there and use their knowledge and knowhow and so on. What do you think? Russia were in favour? No. They were jeopardising the whole plan and they basically killed it, this project, we had consultants we did referendum. Visignias was in favour. The entire Lithuania. The economic opportunities for Visignias were gone. Was Russia or the Kremlin, I prefer to use the word Kremlin. Were the Kremlin working in the interest of the Visiganias populations and the Russian speaking population.? No. These are the controversies we see on a daily basis.

I: Is the term Compatriots deliberately vague?

R: Sure. It means any kind of manipulation can be used. Orthodox church? Yes. It was the Soviet Union, who won the World War? Yes. Russian speaking population? Yes. Russian language? Yes. Whatever. It could be a Lithuanian person, who was a veteran of the second world war, it fits. They are flexible in their approach.

I: Are there NGOs here in Lithuania that are funded by the Kremlin?

R: I think that there must be at least a few, perhaps not directly from Russia, but via some offshore entity, for sure. The problem is that the investment from Russia is only rising in the last two years, you don't have a lot of investigations of that kind. It is hard for the Kremlin to penetrate Lithuanian society, because the Russian speaking minority is relatively small, but they are working with the Polish minority. Poles cooperating with the Kremlin, a lot of people thought that would be impossible. Tomoshenky is wearing this Orange cross, which is certainly not what Poles usually do, but this local politician and MEP in Lithuania is trying to appeal to both Polish and Russian speaking minorities here and the Kremlin is using it. Whichever minority is being allegedly oppressed by the Lithuanian nationalists or majorities.

I: Does the Kremlin still pose a threat to Lithuania?

R: Yes sure. They have a variety of methods, things that work for Latvia and Estonia wouldn't necessarily apply to Lithuania. but they can be smarter. The most common weapon is a classical divide and rule. If you put some fuel into the fire there is a big boom, and we are basically fighting amongst ourselves on some controversial issues and Putin is just smoking and observing and no one can accuse them of doing anything. They do some provocations, sometimes they are targeting, they are using, something which is real, but they are overexaggerating things or amplifying some voices which would be clearly marginal, but they would make everthign possible that it is vocalised to become a major issue in the soceity. At the moment, I don't see, poassibilities for any big group that could say, 'I'm in favour of the Soviet Union, of reminse about the Soveit past'. Yes, if you are a pensioner, you are nostalgia about your younger years, rather than the Soviet past. Who would say that Putin is a good guy? Simply impossible. They use our external vunelbalities or the hesititational speed in the effectivineess for the success story of Lithuania. Or they would seed some doubts in the Euroatlantic community and the European project, also antagonise some local population to the NATO troops, by seeding this idea that Lithuania should be a neautral country, why do we need other militaries around.

I: Do you think it is fair to say that Russian-Lithuanian dual citizenship might be considered a threat to national security?

R: Yes. Estonia and Latvia have a big problem with people with no- citizenship which is technically a human rights violation. You must also understand that it is a matter of national security. The balance would shift substantially, especially in some cities. I understand the logic, why we are so afraid of citizenship. Dual citizenship, even with our referendum that happened last week, it had an algorithm to say that dual citizenship is possible for only those are coming from the countries of the Euro Atlantic community or the Western world, they know any Russian in Lithuania, this wouldn't apply. To be honest, it would take a few dramatic businessmen to say, I'll be a holder of a Russian passport and a Lithuanian passport. If you are not talking about dozens, but hundreds, would it be a concern? Yes. Would it be a tragedy? No. But why would you put any additional risk on the country? We have had enough of the controversies. If a Russian citizen of Lithuanian origin, whose parents were deported during Stalin's depression, would be willing to preserve his or her Russian passport, I would be in favour of that opportunity for sure.

I: What is the logic behind the fear?

R: Anything, anything. From gathering intelligence to contravening or causing some turbulence. It is a complicated matter. I have a couple of friends who are Russian and who escaped Russia, because of the human rights violation, they planned for asylum here, but yet, the institutions will use their suspicions, though they stood on right side of democracy and opposing the Kremlin machine, and yet you can never be really sure about Russian agents. Who can blame given Salisbury attacks, I think from a security stance, the only solution is to have more transparency here. To be more easily to deal with any form of corruption with European money, and that’s not an easy task, look at London, there is a potential for a large amount of Russian money. It is very hard for big money. We know very little of Russia. We lost the ability a few years ago to know what is what. It is another reason to make sure. Any businessmen coming from Russia, any investment, needs to be monitories. Technically the double standards, is close to something we could call discrimination.

I: Passportization is not uniform. Why?

R: I don't think that there is a grand strategy. I think that the Kremlin is very situational and very flexible. They are working on a couple of scenarios at the same time, so they can evaluate and pounce. They have relatively a lot of resources and are not accountable to their people of international institutions.

I: So opportunistic?

R: Yes. I am using the metaphor, one of the Kremlin's advantages that they have, is unaccounted money. They have wasted money, whereas we have to count every single penny. Someone who came up without that idea, and used all their money for that, if they failed, the money would be somewhere in Cyprus or London.

I: How important is the historical revisionist rhetoric from the Kremlin?

R: It is more effective in terms, that they are pushing some buttons that there is a harsh reaction. So if they are aggressively attacking something, like we need to dismantle this monument. To show us in a hysterical, and that is what we need to avoid. To be very principles and at the same time very calm. I think that we can improve a lot. When the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said, we are not Russophobic, we are Putinophoic and Kremlinophic, that is a different thing entirely.

I: Do you think social integration is a problem in Lithuania?

R: I think that the Russian speaking community is generally pretty well integrated. Again it is a small proportion of the population, compared to the Polish minority, the Russian speaking population, except in Visaginas. Yes you have a bigger population in Klaipeda, but I don't see a big problem in integration, most of them are pretty well integrated. That said, I wouldn't say that we need to specifically target the Russian speaking population. Media literacy for all is important, for all, and I think that is the approach. Any citizen despite his or her ethnic background. We have a number of mixed families. We have some situations where you would never ever guess that the mother is Russia or so on. To be honest, I do not see it as a big problem, as we have only one city with a big concentration of Russian speaking population.

I: Do you think this was aided by the initial citizenship policies when independence was achieved?

R: Strategically we were in a much better situation, it is not that we were clever or hopeful, giving everyone citizenship without any predisposition for 5-7% of the population.

I: Are there those with Russian and Lithuanian passports?

R: I don’t think it is substantial but that is why the exception is there in legislation. We had some Russian artists who had Lithuanian citizens, but they were very well respected. I don't see the trouble. To make it as a rule an automatic rule. That is where the temptation is and we are suspicious about it.

I: Can you see parallels between Russia and Hungary?

R: The Russian academics are not talking about the Cold War anymore, they are saying the battle is happening between the liberal and illiberal world. In a way they are saying this liberal world has failed, and Russia is popular in this illiberal world, where money and power has no international principles, no rule of law, rule by law that's fine, rule of law not fine. Traditional values and so on. Basically That kind of trend is the most effective and most dangerous. If they cannot penetrate us, we are in corrupt practices, so they are effective there as well. Since Russia cannot be effective at home, what they do is, they portray that they are doing great. There is no alternative to what Russia is. Let everything around us burn in flames and they are interfering and using the vulnerabilities, like all the referendums and Brexit and that to gain scalps. You know for certain groups and cultures in Europe, that is appealing, then they are demanding and have this messiah syndrome, one man can saves us, and they don’t bother to ask whether he is performing well, but they believe that one man can cure us. That is biggest danger in this period. To avoid medalling from the Kremlin, they do disinformation. We do counter measures. No need to be aggressive to attack. Focus on media literacy. In a way they are throwing all the garbage and fake news to us and we feel like we must respond, they are keeping us busy, giving us distractions. I think that confidence in what we are, confidence in democracy, it is not an easy one, that is the best one and the advantage that we have. That's is how to deal with criticism in Europe. Every kind of criticism in Europe is good, without it we cannot progress and develop, Russia does not have this. long term, we should not get into this argument. Today we might feel the need to do respond, but we don't need to.