EDUCATION POLITICS PROFILES RESEARCH

Precocious Lithuanian

Director-general, DG Translation - Rytis Martikonis

by **Peter O'Donnell** on 21.11.2012 / 17:00 CET

Appeared in print on 22.11.2012



From teenage military service in the Soviet army to director-general in the European Commission at the age of 45, the career of Rytis Martikonis mirrors the dramatic transformation of Europe. His native Lithuania was one of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and his first professional experience of Brussels was as a junior diplomat of what was in effect a new country that could only dream of EU membership. Since then, his many roles have included deputy foreign minister, deputy negotiator on accession to the European Union, and Lithuania's permanent representative to the EU.

Now, as head of the Commission's translation department, he is in charge of one of the largest translation services in the world and revels in the challenge of deploying 2,500 linguists to ensure that the business of the EU is promptly and accurately accessible to its half-a-billion citizens – and to many beyond. He is also the first Lithuanian to be made a director-general in the Commission (and only the second at that rank from any of the 12 'new' member states).

From ordinary beginnings – his father was a civil servant and his mother worked in town planning – he claims that he won attention, and scholarships to study in the West,

by diligence and determination rather than by academic brilliance. When, at 25, he joined his country's foreign ministry, Lithuania had been independent for less than a year, and he was one of just two staff in the newly created 'European integration' department.

The department's title was prophetic in personal terms too. Within three years he was posted to Lithuania's mission to the EU, housed in an undistinguished suburban townhouse (where the deputy head of the mission was Dalia Grybauskaite?, subsequently European commissioner for financial programming and the budget, and now president of Lithuania). One of his tasks there was to establish relations with the media, and journalists still remember with affection his slightly diffident manner – in contrast to the many strident voices from the dozen countries then vying for EU accession.

His performance was sufficiently effective for him to be appointed, three years later, as director for European integration back in Vilnius. Within another two years he had risen to the rank of state secretary for foreign affairs, with key responsibilities for co-ordinating Lithuania's accession negotiations. He is credited by compatriots with winning the best deal possible for his country on some of the toughest challenges in Lithuania's accession process, including the closure of the Ignalina nuclear power plant, and the transit regime across Lithuania for citizens of the newly isolated Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. He was his country's delegate to the Convention on the Future of Europe and its work on the constitution that eventually led to the Lisbon treaty. He was also instrumental in securing greater EU influence for his country in the closing hours of the negotiations on the Nice treaty.

When Lithuania became an EU member state in the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004, he came back to Brussels full-time, but now with ambassadorial status, as a member of the EU's Political and Security Committee. A year later, he became the youngest recruit to that most elite of Brussels clubs, the Committee of Permanent Representatives, when he was appointed as his country's top ambassador to the EU. There he had the opportunity to put to the test many of the theories he had worked on for so long – and had frequently voiced on

the Convention – about how Europe can best function, and how countries of all sizes can best co-operate to mutual advantage. He also speaks of an evolution in the post-enlargement European Council, with many of the stereotypical relations – particularly between 'old' and 'new' member states – being eroded by force of circumstance, and by the inevitability of alliances that are forged issue-by-issue rather than by affiliation based uniquely on countries' size or seniority.

Admirers and supporters – including his country's long-standing prime minister, Andrius Kubilius, and his current European commissioner, Androulla Vassiliou, as well as friends and colleagues made over 20 years of public service – list numerous virtues: vision, imagination, experience, reliability, efficiency, pragmatism. But it is not always easy to be young and highly regarded, since the precocious are not always welcome among well-established incumbents. Martikonis admits that being a couple of decades younger than most of his peers has sometimes been a curse as well as a blessing.

But he has a reputation – even among those who do not count themselves as his friends – for taking a broad and measured European approach rather than the parochial view of a bureaucrat from a small country. And even among his fellow directors-general – not all of whom are accustomed to finding a former ambassador and minister in their midst, still less one who is conspicuously younger – he has won quiet respect for his approach in inter-service meetings, with his interventions acknowledged as being to the point and concise.

It was at the end of his term on Coreper, when he was scheduled to return to Vilnius as European adviser to the prime minister, that he was offered a senior post in the Commission. At the time, the Commission was facing a self-imposed deadline to ensure a minimum of high-level positions for nationals of 'new' member states, and Lithuania was the only country still unrepresented. Martikonis was made a deputy director in the department for internal market and services in late 2010, and was appointed to the newly created post of deputy director-general in the translation department in early 2011, taking over as director-general in mid-2012. The

appointment, as he sees it, is no mere preferment to reach a quota, but offers real responsibility, demanding rigour in delivering huge volumes of work at high quality to tight schedules, and at the same time touching, through language, the very heart of what matters to national – and European – identity and culture. He personally meets the EU goal that every citizen should know at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue – he speaks English, Russian and some French.

He and his wife, also Lithuanian (and also a Commission official), choose to spend their holiday time in their dacha in rural Lithuania rather than exploring exotic locations, and he is proud that his four daughters feel at home there as well as in Brussels, and choose to read Harry Potter books in Lithuanian rather than in English. But his career is far from over – and he remains ambitious for Europe. As far back as 2003, he suggested: "Why not an EU foreign affairs supremo from Lithuania in 20 years' time?". It may have been an artless thought then, but appears less far-fetched now.

Peter O'Donnell

1967: Born, Kaunas

1985-87: Military service in the Soviet army

1987-93: Law studies, Vilnius University

1989-90: Political sciences and law studies, Bowdoin College, US

1991-92: Political sciences and international relations studies, Aarhus University, Denmark

1992-95: Diplomat, western Europe unit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

1995-99: Counsellor, Mission of Lithuania to the EU

1999-2001: Director of European integration department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

2001-04: Deputy foreign minister

2004-05: Ambassador, political and security committee

2005-10: Permanent representative of Lithuania to the EU

2010-11: Deputy director-general, European Commission's DG Internal Market and Services

2011-12: Deputy director-general, DG Translation

2012-: Director-general, DG Translation