



Laurynas Katkus

Stopping by the Roadside

A word of thanks to French geographers

Laurynas Katkus, a Lithuanian poet and essayist records his relationship with the West from his first stay in Great Britain in 1992 until today. His personal development, from a simplified admiration of the Western lifestyle to a more nuanced and critical reflection is mirrored in the story of Central Europe's gradual integration into and emancipation from the European Union.

Eleven years ago I returned to Vilnius from England for Christmas. It was my first long stay in the West: as part of the student exchange programme I picked apples for a farmer, and later I attended a university English course. I took a bus to Warsaw, where I planned to board a train heading to Vilnius. However, the trains were too full of small traders and speculators, and after considerable trouble, I only managed to get into third class. I was sitting between some men who often travelled back and forth on this route (their passports, though recently issued, had only a few pages free of border-crossing stamps); they were drinking vodka and I didn't blame them: spirits were the only way of enduring such a journey. It took us all night to go quite a short distance as we had to change trains several times. Lithuania, like the rest of the former Soviet Union, had the wider Russian-style tracks, while in Poland they used the European gauge.

At dawn, sleepy and cold, we got off at a small border railway station built as long ago as the Czarist period. Its few benches were not up to coping with such a crowd: people were standing, sitting and lying everywhere. Some Central Asians came up with the best idea – without ceremony they threw huge bags stuffed with jeans in the middle of the room and, having flopped down on them, enjoyed a balmy sleep. In the train I had met some Belgians who, like me, were going to Vilnius: it appeared that the Belgian Christian Democratic Party had delegated them to Lithuania to establish relations with our regenerated Christian Democrats. Whether the party had run out of cash or their thirst for adventure was strong, they had chosen this very original means of travelling. We elbowed our way to the only ticket window and, having bought tickets, went out to the platform. Looking around, one of the Belgian Christian Democrats said, "If I'd been told yesterday that such places existed in Europe, I'd never have believed it."

I returned home to wintry Vilnius. True, the coldest weather had already gone: because of parliamentary elections and, as I jokingly claimed, my return, the authorities had turned on the central heating. Friends had told me about some tricks that could help you to sleep, wash, write, and kiss in such a climate. Though in England my salary only allowed me to shop at the cheapest market, here I went to the central Vilniaus Street, exchanged five pounds, and was

given a heap of temporary banknotes. For less than half of that, at the only symbol of the free market – a 24-hour stall – I bought brandy, cakes and fruit and threw a homecoming party for my friends (who were quite numerous).

It was not a success. The recent elections had been won by the thinly-disguised Communists and most of my friends were "in great pain for the people". The furious shocks shuddering through all levels of life as part of the maturation process seemed to have ceased, and everything to have returned to the starting point.

Lithuania had been independent for several years already and the political system was capitalistic but nothing had changed, indeed things had simply become even more ravaged and cracked.

Someone suggested establishing a new political party, another proposed spitting upon politics, throwing a party in the time of plague and enjoying select art and philosophy despite everything, and a third suggested emigration. Their agitation revealed itself in macabre jokes and mockery of one another. They asked me about only one thing: why I had come back. Frankly speaking, I didn't have anything much to say to them. I still bore in me the feeling of satisfied, colourful, wild and wonderful London: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, South Bank Centre, the theatre of social types and races in the Underground. Museums full of art and antiquities, and cafés where men and women sipped unknown drinks. My nose was still used to the scents of tea and Christmas wine, perfume and carpets, cleanliness and order (smells create the aura of a place much more strongly than images do). But what could I say? One had to experience all that.

My friends were first-year students. At the universities where they were studying, the faculty was still represented by old professors who had barely struck out the Marxist statements from their course materials. Study methods and curriculum, too, remained the same: a lot of cramming and no choice. Literature, once works by dissidents or emigrants had been reprinted, reflected a deadly calm. Critique of the Soviet system, which had soaked up the energy of most writers and intellectuals, had lost its object. Ideas had grown petty; the traditions of the nineteenth century were being propagated, though some of them smacked of chauvinism – and almost all of provincial boredom. And they were studying Western European languages and could already compare local literature with foreign works – unfortunately not to the advantage of the former.

They were standing at the threshold of a beautiful and tempting world. Wouldn't it be better to get on a train and start from scratch? That was the way chosen by many of the local people whose works were now valued and studied. The West would gratefully accept them as living evidence of the fact that what had been their lives and what they had been fighting for was not worthless. And what could be changed in this country anyway?

I said nothing to them for one more reason: my trip had also given me different, one might say opposite, impressions. Later, having heard or read the stories of many people, I came to the conclusion that my experiences at that time replicated the story of the first encounter of "Easterners" with the West.

It was something like this: longing to experience cultural treasures, social freedoms and the great prosperity about which he or she [Ed. note: For simplicity's sake, let us call our traveller a "he".] has heard so much, an Eastern

European leaves his country for the "real" Europe. However, after the first joy evaporates, he understands that there is no common denominator to which he can reduce that reality and his own country. His favourite writers and artists are last year's snow for the majority of Westerners, and discussion turns on books or films that seem to him shortlived and trivial. Opinions are clearly coloured with one or another, but mostly with the leftist, ideology from which he has just escaped and is not willing to hear any more about. He also finds people of rather strange views showing an active interest in him: they probably see him as a "noble savage" to be proselytized. On the other hand, nobody here argues or debates differences in opinion as they do in the East – and our traveller becomes an integral, almost invisible part of life.

Differences in everyday communication are distinct, too. People are firmly locked into the mechanisms of their society, withdrawn to their shells, coming out only for carefree amusements. Their concerns are trifling in comparison with what he has had to face, but they treat them exceptionally seriously. Yes, they are pleasant and smiling, but it is difficult to say what is inside. Being used to immediate and simple communication, the Eastern European is puzzled by meaningless formalities. He is not sure if his own instincts are the same as those of the Westerners: the laws of personal initiative, benefit and profit effective here seem inactive in his own country.

With agitation he tells them about the struggle for independence, about the demonstrations and the collapse of the dictatorship, but suddenly notices that they are listening to him only out of politeness. He is telling them about the experiences of Communist life but catches himself wondering if they aren't simply fantastic "Martian chronicles" to them. It is not only because of their system – the English, Germans or French are simply unaware of what is going on and where. The representative above all of a smaller state has to start from the beginning again and again: where his country is, what language is spoken there and so on. He has a strange feeling when they demonstrate their ignorance: any person from his country knows several times more about the West and if he doesn't, he feels embarrassed to show it. But, well, why should a Westerner take interest in countries governed by outdated (and dangerous) ideas of nationalism and political sovereignty?

It means, the Easterner thinks, that we are really not cut from the same cloth, we are perhaps different species, as incomparable as reptiles and mammals? But we have already heard that from Soviet propaganda. So shall we return home without hesitation? But our senses speak to us of London...

It has been a decade since then, and much has changed. Warsaw and Vilnius are connected by decent trains that can move both on wider and European tracks. They no longer carry crowds of speculators but twenty-year-olds returning from trips or studies, who have never experienced a cultural shock, as most things – from everyday trifles to intellectual trends – are perfectly familiar to them. Back home after the trip, they drop into one of the numerous supermarkets and notice that they are as good as and sometimes better than those in London. The air temperature in the flat depends only on the thickness of one's wallet, and its contents, even if not especially weighty, are no longer just worthless paper. On the river bank, construction of the skyscraper district, the Vilnius counterpart of Potsdam Square, is coming to an end, and Old Town cafés accommodate jolly crowds of people every weekend.

My friends' lives have also changed. They have solved the dilemma they confronted ten years ago in different ways: some gave up studying literature or

philosophy and left for where young minds were needed most – in business and working for the State. It is no exaggeration to say that they now constitute the backbone of business and the Civil Service (just a couple of years ago the average age of employees of the Foreign Ministry did not exceed thirty). Others settled down in European or American megapolises – Berlin, Paris, Chicago. They married, graduated, got a job. I don't think they "betrayed their motherland", as the older generation claim. Most of them keep in touch with their circle of friends, with their town and country, and at the same time have preserved a sober view of that reality. Only some have turned into grotesque "more Western than the Westerners" snobs (which, by the way, also applies to some who have stayed in Lithuania). Neither do I think that their life is especially happy: I know that a continuous balancing between *here* and *there* requires considerable physical and spiritual strength.

That is why a different climate now dominates our Christmas gatherings. Whether we stayed here or emigrated, the last decade taught us a lot. First of all, we learned patience – awaiting changes, observing and assessing what was going on around us. We learned not to wait for miracles and to rely only on our own efforts – it may sound too simple but it took some time to realize that. Though tormented by the Soviet heritage and surges of melancholy, this country has woken up from stagnation – to a great extent due to the efforts of my generation; but not only.

We understand that our situation is far from unique: ideological dictatorship and isolation scarred not only Lithuania, not only Eastern Europe but also other continents. We have learned not to absolutize our troubles however painful they are, but to compare them with the problems of others. It appears that "the experience of dictatorship" some were so proud of, is valuable only when it encourages you to live and think in a different way; otherwise it varies little from the experiences of some "reality show" filmed in extreme conditions.

As for the West, we have stopped expecting what it can't give us: the resolution of our own problems, which some had unconsciously hoped could be done for us. We no longer envy Westerners' prosperity (though it may not be easy sometimes), and at the same time we realize that better living conditions do not turn them into robots. Our awe for works of art and ideas from the West has also disappeared: now we have our own postmodernists and conservatives, DJs and installation artists. The era of imitation and assimilation is coming to an end: now we are not interested in what is new or what is nicely packaged, but are rather attracted to what is ingenious and multidimensional, what processes the material accumulated by this society. The groans that "we are not interesting to anyone" have also died away as the Lithuanian theatre, literature and fine arts have won modest but significant recognition outside the country.

In general, it has become clear that the image of the West we had in our heads was over-simplified. It has become clear that one name covers very different states, nations and communities. Relations with them have become more specific: groups of Francophones, Anglophiles, Germanophiles, etc. have appeared. We follow the Western press not because we consider it the ultimate authority but because it broadens our outlook.

I don't know whether the attitudes of the other part of the continent have changed. It seems to me that Eastern Europeans are still often regarded as poor relations who should listen respectfully and be thankful for all the gifts they

have received. During recent years, they may have provoked this opinion themselves, but I am sure that such a patronizing view also does harm to the Westerners: it does not underline their best qualities. Particularly the middle class still has an image of Eastern Europe as a land of woods and wild animals. The exclamation of a Berlin doctor who examined a leg plastered in Lithuania – "They certainly know how to put on a cast!" – is still characteristic of many. The greatest attention is given to works of art that emphasize abnormal and aggressive aspects of life in Eastern Europe, as they correspond to the stereotyped image of the region; "Eastern" irony is more difficult to grasp, as is the avoidance of lofty concepts and abstract declarations. Although nurturance of one's own culture is no longer regarded as the manifestation of nationalism or fascism, it is still not fully conceivable that Eastern European countries should have not only a vision of the European future but also their own interests, which do not always coincide with those of Western Europe.

This makes the exceptions – whose number, we note, is growing – all the more gratifying. In any case, I wish to thank the French geographers who established that the geographical centre of Europe is twenty kilometres away from Vilnius. However, poking a pencil at the map is neither meaningful nor useless: it urges us to be proud, it offers political and prospective economic benefits and one more opportunity to startle ("Where do you come from?" – Oh, twenty kilometres from the centre of Europe."). But I hope that it is a good omen prophesying a better future for the continent, with the disappearance of the partitions and prejudices between East and West, but also North and South.

It is not, however, worth expecting our goals to coincide completely, and that is all to the good because Europe is interesting precisely for its differences. Besides, every person and community has its own core values that rule their world, giving it scale and meaning. Fate decided that for me Vilnius is such a place. Here I see the depth and breadth of my own space and not only its surface. I see faces and, in them, can read people's character, social standing or the stories of their lives. I know the past of this region, the tangle of languages and cultures, the unbelievable political changes. And I remember the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh, who wrote:

Parochialism and provincialism are direct opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – towards which his eyes are turned – has to say on the subject... The parochial mentality on the other hand never is in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish...
Parochialism is universal: it deals with fundamentals.

So I get into a car and take the northern highway. The lights of the city soon disappear and the car is submerged in the December shadows. Petrol stations and repair shops appear at an ever slower rhythm along the way. I had already started doubting whether I was going in the right direction, but then I see a blurred sign pointing to a narrow road. I go a bit farther and turn off the lights.

I am here. At the centre of Europe. Something special should happen in such a place: smoke billowing out of the earth, an eagle perching on a granite rock, beams of light crossing. Nothing like that: it is silent and deserted.

Not even a cow to remind us of the metamorphosis of a princess who gave her name to the continent: they are locked in a cowhouse for the winter. Only two hills loom over both sides of the road. I climb one of them and turn my back to

the wind that makes the grass rustle underfoot. I see slushy fields and a pond reflecting the balls of clouds. A few wanly glimmering houses where people are preparing Christmas dishes or are already having dinner, talking at the table.

Is that all? Nothing more?

No. A lorry has stopped at the sign marking the centre of Europe. The driver has decided to take a rest.

Published 2004-07-12
Original in Lithuanian
Translation by Almag-Institut
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