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An amorphous society

Lithuania in the era of high post-communism

The period of "high post-communism" in eastern Europe is defined by efforts to control collective memory, political discourse dominated by abstract concepts, dilettantism, and the cult of entertainment. Writing from the Lithuanian perspective, Almantas Samalavicius finds society caught in between the extremes of hysterical activity and blind resignation.

Democracy, like a good book, needs time.
Benjamin Barber

Seen from the outside, Lithuania seems exemplary — it was the first Baltic republic to liberate itself from the grip of the Soviet regime and one of the first post-Soviet countries to be accepted into the European Union. Moreover, it is today ranked as one of economically more advanced countries in the region. Seen from the inside, however, many things turn out to be far more problematic. In what follows, I will analyze some of the features of "high post-communist" society, hoping that the Lithuanian experience will also prove relevant to the discussion of the condition of other post-communist countries.

Signs that Lithuania has entered the era of high post-communism abound. For a while, the mass optimism accompanying membership of the European Union inspired a belief that Lithuania would soon become a fully fledged European country and that "western" standards of living would be reached. True, expectations were somewhat more restrained than on the eve of independence, when many economists and politicians, dazzled by mythical hopes, alleged that in three or four years Lithuania would reach the economic level of Sweden or Norway. However, the EU integration processes that temporarily concealed the social reality of delayed post-communism were not without their share of faith the magical, almost miraculous powers of the unified Europe. For example, without serious critical analysis or deeper consideration, the Lithuanian Parliament ratified the new Constitution of the European Union, which was shortly thereafter vigorously rejected by the "old" European countries. Another example: for a whole decade after the restoration of independence, certain charismatic politicians repeatedly explained to the public that Lithuania not only could, but also should give Europe lessons in "moral politics" — as if Lithuania were the only country in possession of the metaphysical qualities necessary to accomplish this noble, messianic task. This mentality within the political elite and a part of society bears not only the traces of the Soviet occupation but also of the tsarist colonization that lasted more than 150 years.

Politics is increasingly ruled by populist rhetoric, so it is not surprising that in recent years special efforts have been made to control collective memory. There have been multiple attempts to replace it with social amnesia or at least to inculcate in society a number of contradictory or even basically conflicting versions of the Soviet past. There has been fierce competition between several mnemonic groups over the right to dominate the rewriting of the past. To generalize, the Left has been struggling with the Right. In this struggle, members of the former communist establishment count on the support of impoverished and marginalized strata of society, which feel nostalgia for the social stability of the Soviet period. However, the process of transition from memory to oblivion is complex — in addition to collective and individual memory, there is the politics of memory, in other words state rituals, signs, and symbols of commemoration. Moreover, the memory of separate individuals or groups includes both the Soviet period, the dramatic postwar period, and even the interwar independence period. The range of interpretations of Lithuanian history is very wide. Political groups seeking to control memory try to impose upon society contradictory versions of the past. Over the last decade, the former communist nomenclature has been doing its best in trying to justify its role during the period of dependence.

Memory is also "corrected" by a rapidly changing social vocabulary. In conditions of high post–communism, political discourse is dominated by abstract concepts devoid of any concrete content. Among them are, for example, "democracy", "civil society", "the free market", "economic development", "economic strategies", and "knowledge society". The linguist Uwe Pörksen has aptly called such pliant concepts "plastic words" and their overall effect "the tyranny of modular language".¹ According to Pörksen, the bureaucratic jargon of experts isolates people from reality and puts them in an imaginary reality in which concepts lose their meaning and can signify anything. Such a political discourse consciously or unconsciously draws the contours of a non–existent (though universally sought–after) civil and/or welfare society. Abstract verbal formulas and figures are manipulated to provide an image of Europeanization, rapid economic progress and wellbeing — a virtual reality that has nothing to do with complex social reality.

This gives rise to well–founded doubts as to whether, under conditions of post–communism, one can talk about society at all. Is society merely another malleable verbal phantom or mirage that disappears as soon as we switch off the television? How could the "people", having been mistreated, battered, and Sovietized for over half a century, turn into a conscious society in fifteen years? Perhaps those critics who urge us to limit ourselves to building communal structures instead of talking about society are right. At a time of rapidly increasing social segregation, it seems that all that Lithuanians have in common are their passports and state symbols. Maybe there is some truth in the popular TV commercial that claims that all that unites Lithuanians is "beer and victories". An amorphous society, formless politics, a reality made virtual, an unstable economy, chaotic alternation between order and disorder, outbreaks of social hysteria and apathy — these are just some of the features of high post–communism.

Many critics and commentators agree that, in the seventeenth year of independence, Lithuania is rather gloomy. The country is tormented by the post–communist nightmare that it failed to create the conditions for a more or less normal life for all social strata (and not only the "cream of society"). More than half a million inhabitants have emigrated from Lithuania to the West (400 000, according to official statistics) and many will probably never return. The

mass emigration of talented students, highly qualified professionals, intellectuals of pension age, and even young people without higher education, is underway. While some prefer to take unskilled jobs abroad rather than feel themselves unnecessary and humiliated in their homeland, there are others who, frustrated and tired of waiting, withdraw from life of their own free will: Lithuania has the highest suicide rate in Europe, having left behind Hungary, the former "leader" in this field. The state of transition, which has lasted unexpectedly long, has dissipated the illusions summed up in an election slogan: "Lithuania, a good place to live for everyone".

The theatricality of politics

Let us analyze which features are the most typical of the amorphous society of "high post-communism" without, of course, attempting to present a complete register of its characteristics. More than ten years ago, I wrote that political life in Lithuania was beginning to acquire certain features of a theatrical performance. At that time, it was merely a metaphor for the theatrical character of politics. Today, politics has become theatrical in the figurative sense. Probably in no other European country is the mass media (particularly television) so closely related to politics as in Lithuania. Even Hollywood stars appear less frequently on the television screen than Lithuanian political figures, however minor. Politicians dominate talk shows, and each knows precisely what he or she has to say, what is expected from them, and what will result. Lithuanian politicians seem to have learned one of the most important principles of mass communication: if you appear constantly on the television screen it means that you exist. And the opposite — those who don't get onto television or the glossy covers of lifestyle magazines find themselves outside the margins of politics.

Particularly suspicious is the role of professional political scientists in these talk shows. Instead of analysing and criticizing processes taking place in society, they provide a public relations service to one or more political group, even if these are supposedly in competition. Under conditions of high post-communism, the independence of political scientists is a mere fiction. As the sphere of politics becomes increasingly virtual, the boundaries between theatrical and political performance rapidly disintegrate. In the first case, the performers are actors, which is their profession and duty; in the second, they are politicians who have scorned their professional duty and have turned into puppets that perform the public roles assigned to them.

The triumph of dilettantism

In the words of one of the most incisive analysts of Lithuanian society, Ricardas Gavelis:

Dilettantism is our basic problem, probably one of the most important problems in our unhappy life. Apparently, we contracted this terrible disease from elsewhere, but we succumbed to it with great eagerness and even added some purely Lithuanian symptoms. Until we cure ourselves of this disease, it makes no sense even to dream of any future happiness.²

Almost ten years have passed since these words were written, but dilettantism is still thriving in almost all spheres of life: politics, the economy, social security, the mass media, the school system and higher education... For more

than ten years, reforms have been carried out in such a dilettantish manner that nobody is surprised when they fail. The reform of the Lithuanian healthcare system, advertised with so much fanfare, has boiled down to nothing; the education reform has also brought few results. The "national school" scheme, an explicitly anachronistic idea but one that appealed to certain strata of society, was implemented in 1990 and before long turned into a pseudo-western, prefabricated version of mass secondary education. The illiteracy of young people is growing, though school pupils are exhausted from an unbearable load of work — the cult of social career and inflated curricula have brought secondary education to its knees. The higher education reform is bound to meet a similar fate. Though nobody doubts that it is necessary, in the hands of politicians it may become one more simulation of social action and a waste of large amounts of energy and resources. Discussions over the higher education reform, ongoing for several years, clearly show that the culture of dialogue in high post-communist Lithuania is still in the rudimentary stage — in the words of philosopher Leonidas Donskis, the culture of monologue is still flourishing.

From the perspective of the present, Ricardas Gavelis probably failed to predict only one thing: not only is dilettantism constantly growing, but it is also becoming institutionalized. Dilettantes are pushing their way into power structures and, upon becoming politicians or high officials, see to it that their offspring, relatives, and friends get snug state jobs. It was no accident that over the last seventeen years the number of employees in the state sector has expanded greatly. Along with the sharp increase in the number of officials, bureaucracy is becoming as boggy and opaque as a dark forest. However minor the problem, Lithuanians must knock on a great many official doors until an elementary solution is reached. Certainly, the bureaucratization of the state and municipal structures is a result not only of dilettantism — the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus is undoubtedly related to politicians' wish to control all spheres of life.³ However it is dilettantism that creates so many additional bureaucratic obstacles.

It is an irony of fate that Lenin's slogan that every cook should be able to rule the state has been put to life in the country that was the first to liberate itself from the "brotherly" embrace of soviet Russia. There are plenty of poorly qualified politicians in post-Soviet Lithuania and a distinctive feature of such "political cooks" is insatiable greed and the resulting corruption — another gloomy index puts us among the most corrupt countries in the European Union. Dilettantism in the epoch of high post-communism, having found itself in ideal social conditions, has become a self-perpetuating system.

The cult of entertainment

Even the ancient Romans realized the power of entertainment in politics — the plebeians needed "bread and games". Unlike communists or Islamic fundamentalists, who put a great deal of effort into seeking to restrict the freedom of entertainment (particularly public), Lithuanian post-communists have turned it into a cult. This can be interpreted in several ways. Prolonged fasting is normally followed by long "bouts" of overeating; feasting without any sense of measure is an attempt to compensate for the lost time. After the meagre repertoire of Soviet entertainment, together with prohibitions and control (a fast lasting over half a century), society went to the other extreme: the sudden collision with consumer society provoked an immediate hunger for mass entertainment. The entertainment business, which satisfies these needs and artificially creates them, has grown out of all proportion and has acquired

dangerous features in post-communist Lithuania. Particularly alarming is the media's orientation to lowbrow, primitive, uneducated consumers. The large part of Lithuanian television programming is aimed at the "common folk": dwellers of the countryside and the periphery, the suburban proletariat, and uneducated youth. It is to them that reality television, TV game shows and talk shows, whose vulgar undertones are on a par with Soviet propaganda, is dedicated. Symptomatically, the creators of the most popular television programs have emerged from Soviet structures, bringing with them mental habits, dramatic clichés, a specific vocabulary, and easily recognizable intonations (a local dialect is imitated by vulgarizing it).

It did not take long for politicians to realize the power of the cult of entertainment. That is why they so eagerly participate in various show business products, even those which parody Lithuanian politicians. Paradoxically, parody improves politicians' reputations. An individual, transferred onto the television screen, becomes a comical but amiable character, qualities that, in the long run, are attributed to the real person. The parodied politician becomes nearer to the "common folk" — the electorate. Social rage and hate dissipate and the masses experience relief. What kind of duties can such a politician perform? Is there any point in insisting that a brainless dimwit should become society's "architect"? If a character that "amuses the spectators/electors to death"⁴ departs from the political arena, he or she disappears from the television screens as well. Evenings at the television, which have become the sole entertainment of a statistical Lithuanian, become even more miserable and bleak. Faint nostalgia for figures no longer on the political arena can be felt even in news programmes.

The thriving of conformism

Of all nations, the most ideal is Lithuania before it approached the spirit of the cultured world and got to know its essence. But let it not boast of its ideality, because it will repeat the same mistakes, as it did in those times when it was fighting against the Cross. I assert with full conviction — and soon the entire society will understand too — that not a single enemy has done us so much harm as we ourselves with our uncontrolled and wild temperament, our raving, our uncritical and uncultured character.⁵

Thus wrote one of the first critics of Lithuanian culture, Julijonas Linde-Dobilas, in 1922, calling the lack of criticism one of the greatest obstacles in modern Lithuanian culture. Many decades later, the situation is repeating itself. Linde-Dobilas wrote the words above after Lithuania had liberated itself from the hundred-and-fifty-year oppression of the tsarist Russian empire. Then, the foundations of an independent state were being built; now we are discussing the problem of conformism after the fifty-year Soviet occupation. Our contemporary thinking habits have been formed by the mental heritage not only of the Soviet period, but also the long centuries of serfdom, which instilled in the consciousness of many Lithuanians a tendency to reconcile and adapt themselves to any situation, particularly those related with power imposed by an alien country and its goals to rule and control. The forms of adaptation prevalent in the Soviet period are discussed unwillingly and unsystematically both in public and in academia. However, awareness-raising in society will accelerate only if we conscientiously analyze the legacy of occupation-colonization, which is still very much alive in post-communist society, though carefully and ingeniously camouflaged.

Conformism has penetrated almost all spheres of life. The fear of authority produces ingratiation. In public offices, hierarchical relations thrive, and instead of initiative, unconditional subservience is encouraged. Silent resignation rules even in higher education, which should be the most active centre for critical thought. The instinct to adapt, which developed in the Soviet period (and in the opinion of many academicians and cultural figures, helped the Lithuanian nation to survive), has blossomed in all its "beauty" in the era of high post–communism. This ugly, long–instilled instinct is one of the greatest culprits of social mimicry and atrophy. In manipulating it, the authorities (whatever their orientation may be) strengthen their control over the citizens and increase their dependence on the state. It is not until we succeed in conquering this instinct that the obedient amorphous mass will become a civil society.

The mirage of civil society

A good ten years ago, before the period of high post–communism, an "open society" following the ideas of philosopher Karl Popper and his former student, the financier, and philanthropist George Soros, was considered a panacea for all social ills. It is difficult to say to what extent we have moved towards an open society during this period, but the activity of the Soros fund brought considerable benefits to Lithuania (and to eastern Europe as a whole) during the period of economic hardship. Among other things, it has left distinct traces in the sphere of intellectual life: some excellent books in the humanities and social sciences (mainly by liberal authors) were translated, and Lithuanian academics mastered the contemporary vernacular that allowed them to feel themselves on a par with their colleagues from the West.

Recently, however, the concept of open society has been pushed out of mass circulation by the more fashionable category of civil society, which has become established in the vocabulary of politicians and social analysts. Its content is still rather vague and undefined — though perhaps it is these features that make it so attractive. After each election, commentators on Lithuania's social life (journalists as well as philosophers, political scientists, sociologists and economists) diagnose whether the foundations of civil society have become firmer or, on the contrary, have been shattered. For example, when the populist Rolandas Paksas, who had rallied a party of vague ideology, was voted president, the majority of intellectuals concluded that the rudiments of civil society were not to be found in Lithuania. When he was removed from office after an interpellation half a year later and replaced by his former rival, Valdas Adamkus, it was remarked, to all–round delight, that there still were some signs of a civil society. Was such a miracle of social and civil maturity possible? In any case, the concept of civil society only became more vague and mysterious than before.

Recently, the determination to build a strong civil society has increased significantly. Structures aimed at building civil society on a national scale have also emerged; but despite their suggestive and even sincere rhetoric, neither their scale nor their results have been satisfactory. One of the impediments is the intelligentsia's naïve conviction that one can build civil society "from above", with well–educated intellectuals enlightening and instructing the lowbrow masses. However, the fate of the rationalist intentions of the age of Enlightenment already proved the pure utopianism of such thinking. It only remains to be lamented that in the era of high post–communism, people still rely upon and believe in the power of preaching. The coordinators of civil unity send lecturers from the capital to smaller cities and towns to teach the

basics of civil society building. Though some spontaneous manifestations of civil consciousness do occur, it is impossible to build the sought-after society by means of the vertical sunbeams of enlightenment. Until the vertical methods of social activity are replaced by horizontal ones, until more community radio stations, newspapers, citizens' clubs, associations and similar network structures appear on the initiative of local inhabitants in the most remote corners of the country, the efforts of the orators of civil society will be in vain. If we do not study, critically analyze and creatively apply the experience of civil initiatives of other countries, the civil movement in the Lithuania of high post-communism will turn into just another unsuccessful Enlightenment project, of which there have been plenty in eastern Europe.

That sweet word: populism

Nowadays, any discussion of the social and political changes in many eastern central European countries cannot do without the concept of "populism"; it has become obligatory in the vocabulary of politicians, political analysts and commentators. Like many "plastic words", this concept is elusive and undefined. However, it seems to many that by using it one can explain nearly everything that is happening in the Lithuania of high post-communism. It is not my aim to find out to what extent it can be useful in interpreting the social change in eastern central Europe, but still I have to admit that in the local context this concept still has not acquired a clear meaning.

More severe critics ask: is there a single party in Lithuania to which the label of populism does not stick? Do the social democrats' election rhetoric and promises of social welfare differ in any way from those of the conservatives, though both parties proclaim themselves as "traditional" and thus, according to the definition, not populist? Is there really such a large gap between the supposedly "traditional" parties, which were also founded little more than ten years ago, and the public gestures of Rolandas Paksas and his appeal to "the common folk"? (During the presidential elections, Paksas ingeniously used his experience and image of a professional pilot by piloting a plane to the election districts.) The demagogy of another populist, the former mayor of Vilnius and liberal centrist Arturas Zuokas, did not differ greatly from the rhetorical tricks of the long-serving leftwing leader, ex-communist ("traditionalist") Algirdas Brazauskas — both tried to build an image of a "typical Lithuanian" close to "the people".

Regardless of some specific features of rhetoric, image, character or biography, the entire political elite of high post-communism is characterized by the same qualities: lack of principles, duplicity, and a cynical greed that urges them to drain the state or municipal treasury. In Lithuania, the political marathon runner Algirdas Brazauskas, the former first secretary of the communist party and former president and prime minister, has convinced the younger generation of politicians that amorphous post-communist society is merely an atomized crowd lacking strong social and civil bonds, whose likes and dislikes are easy to manipulate if one has a minimal command of political advertising, image building and public relations. As the dizzying (though short-lived) victory of the former president Rolandas Paksas showed, the best tactic is to import public relations consultants from abroad, even if they are connected to the secret services of a foreign country. Though it should be added that home grown political technologists also seem to have perfectly mastered the tactics and strategy of populism.

Downfalls and relapses

A similar "post-totalitarian pathology" is discerned by sociologists and social critics in many post-communist countries, despite differences of local character and historical development. Lack of responsibility, organization, trust, and social and civil solidarity enables citizens to be easily manipulated. Society is caught in between two extremes — hysterical activity and total apathy mixed with blind resignation. While dilettantism, selfishness and corruption characterizes politics in many post-communist societies, research carried out by Transparency International shows that Lithuania strives to be one of the leaders in the European Union in this respect. It is corruption that western experts regard as one of the most dangerous obstacles for democracy in Lithuania. So, is it true that we have been infected with a graver form of the "post-totalitarian pathology" than our brothers of fate?

How many countries with liberal democracies are there where more than forty purportedly different political parties, themselves hardly aware how their ideologies and programs differ, seek power? The once widely popular, yet now not just somewhat outdated but also unfulfilled prophecies of "the end of ideologies" or "the end of history" should be particularly close to the heart of such political "mongrels". All the more so in that the ideology of the majority of the political parties in the era of high post-communism is one and the same — to be in power in order to be able to lay their hands on the state treasury.

More than ten years ago, the Romanian culture critic Andrei Plesu published a study of post-totalitarian society based on the example of his own country. Comparing the epoch of totalitarianism with a new period of social change, the author stated that:

Frustrated, sleepless, in disjunction with ourselves, we felt exhausted, devalitized, suffocated. We subsisted vegetally in an environment that was at the same time rigid and arbitrary; we were left only with the pride of our isolation and now and then a transient fit of hope. An unexpected explosion suddenly occurred against this background: the neurasthenia dispelled as if by magic, and we became, all of a sudden, hysterical. The usual symptoms of hysteria invaded us, and the centre of gravity of our sickness shifted from the brain to the viscera. We were seized by a pubertal over-excitement, by uncontrollable aggression, by expressionistic shouts and grimaces. We replaced exhaustion with restlessness, excess of caution with excess of disinhibition. When we ere neurasthenic, we expressed less than seethed inside us. Since we became hysterical, we have expressed more than we can cover through mental articulation, through inner content. The pathology of silence made room for jubilant vociferation. Obviously, all these should be perceived as morbid disorders of an organism accepting a long and dramatic purgatory. Dangerous relapses can still happen.⁶

What kind of relapses? According to Plesu, at least three complications are possible: first, society may once again relapse to neurasthenia; second, it can adapt itself to constant hysteria; and third, it can find itself overtaken with the longing for an authoritarian regime, which would help it to conquer neurasthenia and discipline hysteria. All three "relapses" would further social decay and would turn the vision of generally sought-after welfare into an empty illusion.

A similar scenario of development is possible also in Lithuania; perhaps the least possible is the restoration of the authoritarian regime. On the other hand, one should not forget that with the help of the ominous slogan "There will be order!" and emblems reminiscent of national socialist insignia, even as colourless and inexpressive a person as Rolandas Paksas made his way into the Presidential Palace, and is once again raising populist slogans and promising "order and justice" to the country. In the era of high post-communism, amorphous society longs for a strict hand. Neither is there a lack of unscrupulous people ready to fulfil this longing of *the people*... The absence of resistance to such "relapses" was revealed by the social hysteria provoked by the long and tedious process of the removal of Paksas, which lasted more than half a year. The hysteria took hold of not only society at large, but also politicians, intellectuals, and analysts of social life, though it is they who are responsible for controlling the outbursts of social hysteria.

Recently we have seen another extreme — the symptoms of social neurasthenia are becoming graver, while apathy and despair is increasing in all political parties and all forms of political activity. Lithuanian society, gripped by apathy and indifference, will surely not be able to dissipate the cloud of neurasthenia that is becoming denser and denser. Personalities potentially able to unite society and be brave enough to disperse social despair with actions rather than promises are nowhere to be seen. We can only rely on our common sense, which, as we have experienced more than once, still manifests itself in critical cases.

In order to change the deplorable view of the present and an even more pessimistic scenario of the future (implied by the increasing social segregation, emigration caused by despair, the growing rate of alcoholism, crime, and suicide), the concentrated efforts of all society are needed. But first, society itself needs to be united, since it is becoming more segregated and alienated and is losing the bonds of social solidarity. It is only by becoming united that a *post-communist* society can rally the inner strength to demand from the elected figures that they lead the country from a controlled democracy to normal European democracy.

The twitches of the intelligentsia

Intellectuals, who acted as unifiers of the nation on the eve of independence and in the first years of the "singing revolution", were soon pushed to the margins of political life. Are they to blame in any way for what happened? According to the philosopher Audrius Navickas, a strangely paradoxical situation has arisen in Lithuania:

Interest groups are becoming more and more insolent in appropriating the state, and a sizeable part of society and of the intellectual establishment have isolated themselves from politics, remaining silent at a time when it is necessary to speak and defend their nation's interests.⁷

Over a period of more than a dozen years, politicians, irrespective of party or clan affiliation, have achieved a significant victory against society. They have privatized the discussion on political issues, having isolated themselves from intellectuals (who were assigned a minor role as commentators and interpreters) and procured the services of professional explicators of politics, in other words political scientists. Having realized the demand for their profession and acquired the taste of reward, the latter have discarded ethical

principles and willingly provide their clientele with consulting, marketing, and management services. It is a public secret that the more outstanding specialists of political science are in high demand before every election — they help political parties and their leaders to create an impeccable image, to disguise their dubious and often even shameful deeds of the past. Having thus eliminated all potential critics of the party's programme, it is considerably easier to manipulate the masses.

Why exactly did intellectuals become alienated from politics? The reasons for their conscious or unconscious isolation are multiple and diverse; the intellectuals of other central eastern European countries also retired from politics at some point. According to historian Tony Judt, one of the basic reasons for the decay of intellectuals is the fact that their professed anti-communist ethics and their plea for the necessity of a morally conscious civil society was confronted with stronger social powers. The practice of building the market economy made the concept of "civil society" hopelessly outdated and interesting only to the sociologists interested in the region. The process is similar to what happened in western Europe after WWII, when the pathos of resistance was replaced by the necessity to reconstruct the continent.

The priorities of the Cold War also played their role. Judt compares postwar French and Italian authors with their colleagues in post-communist eastern Europe and concludes that the latter were far less successful. The only intellectuals in eastern and central Europe that succeeded in crossing the threshold of social change were the so-called technocrats (lawyers, economists, etc.), who had played no substantial role before the Velvet Revolutions. Yet, paradoxical though it may seem, it was precisely their lack of heroism that made them attractive to those who were not dissidents. In Judt's opinion, this position is best reflected in the statement of the Czech prime minister Vaclav Klaus, who claimed that he was neither a dissident nor a henchman nor a moralist. That is what makes him similar to the majority of his fellow citizens.⁸

This statement applies more directly to the intellectual and dissident movements of central Europe — the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. Dissident activity in Soviet Lithuania was much more marginalized, limited, and directed mainly against the persecution of the Catholic Church; it simply did not involve personalities on a par with outstanding Czech or Polish intellectuals. Besides, because their radicalism was threatening, Lithuanian dissidents were already finding themselves offside during *perestroika* or the "Singing Revolution"; well-known lawyers became the more popular activists of the first wave of the Lithuanian national revival movement. Judt is right that unheroic but active and well-known personalities turned out to be more attractive to society than the dissidents and radicals who risked their life and freedom in the underground.

The tendency seems to be similar throughout eastern Europe: even before the beginning of the massive leap to market economy, the more pragmatic "technocrats" forced the humanitarians out of politics with the silent consent of society. On the other hand, humanitarian intellectuals partly have themselves to blame for the fact that they lost the competition for the right to control the political levers. While society's priorities were rapidly changing, they still continued to talk in the outdated language of the "Singing Revolution". Besides, they did not feel that society's values had changed when Lithuania encountered economic difficulties (particularly when Moscow began an economic blockade) — individualism, pragmatism and striving for personal

gain had begun to thrive and the bonds of social solidarity to crumble. Intellectuals returned to their professional and academic milieu, alienated themselves from civil initiatives and sometimes openly loathed political activity. Their authority and significance in social life shrunk like the chagrin's skin.

Edward W. Said⁹ has discussed the temptations and corruptions of the mind to which intellectuals are exposed and which take root when they discard the truth and principled positions, and when they avoid being too political or too controversial for fear of the disapproval of the authorities. Also corrupt are those who seek to retain their reputations for being objective and unbiased yet remain silent regarding certain issues in the hope that they will receive an appropriate reward — a honorary title, a prestigious award, a state position, or an ambassador's title. Suppressing their voice at the time when it is obligatory to talk openly and without compromise, intellectuals shy from their duty to speak the truth, imprisoned by their own indecisiveness. Will Lithuanian intellectuals be able to perform their duty in accelerating the process of building a civil society? Will they be able to reject the menial role offered to them by power? One thing cannot be doubted: it is their stance regarding complicated and complex social–political processes that the fate of both society and themselves will depend upon.

¹ Uwe Pörksen, *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of Modular Language*, Penn State University Press 1995.

² Ricardas Gavelis, "Diletantu epocha ir asmenybės suverenitetas" [The epoch of dilettantes and personal sovereignty], *Literatura ir menas*, 22 Apr 1989.

³ According to the French sociologist Jacques Ellul, neither rule nor control should be understood in only one sense. When it is being applied with regard to the world and things, this kind of relation means greed and unlimited possessiveness. With regard to individuals it means the craving for power and dominance (Jacques Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, New York: The Seabury Press 1978, 35).

⁴ I have borrowed this concept from the title of the book by Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 1985.

⁵ Julijonas Linde–Dobilas, *I slepiningaji dvasios pasauli* [Into the mysterious world of the spirit], Vilnius: Vaga 1996.

⁶ Andrei Plesu, "Post–Totalitarian Pathology: Notes on Romania Six Years After December 1989", *Social Research*, Vol. 63. No. 2 / summer 1996, 561–562.

⁷ Audrius Navickas, "Kaip atsirado Kultūros žmoniu ir pilieciu santalkos kreipimasis?" [How did the address of cultural figures and the citizens' congregation appear?], *Kultūros barai*, 4/2007, 3.

⁸ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, Penguin 2007, 695–696.

⁹ Edward W. Said, *Representations of an Intellectual*, New York: Vintage 1996.

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