

The Unbearable Lightness of Incessant Change, or Europe's Story Told by Lithuania

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Lithuania cherishes her historical memories of once having been a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country. It also cherishes the most generous and noble-spirited traditions of the Romantic ethos of liberal nationalism, and quite justifiably so. In the late 1980s, Lithuania's national movement of rebirth, *Sajudis*, and its "singing revolution" not only revived the spirit of the nineteenth century epoch of the springtime of the peoples (whose slogan – "For your and our freedom!" – was raised as the banner), but also became a litmus test of the Soviet policy of glasnost and perestroika. The first breakaway republic in the former Soviet Union, Lithuania came to embody the historic triumph of East-Central Europe's time-honored struggle for freedom.

It was with good reason that the great Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, who was born in Lithuania and who regarded Lithuania as his motherland, depicted Lithuania as a mysterious country, which, repeatedly, disappears from history and then returns to it. In 1990, Lithuania restored her independence after fifty years of political and cultural isolation from the rest of the world. In 1918, Lithuania declared her independence after one hundred and twenty-three years as a part of Tsarist Russia. Each time, Lithuania came back into existence through the revival of her historical memory and culture, rather than through the exercise of power. Culture is what led Lithuania from a political non-entity to a political presence. Her culture paved the way to politics, and not the other way around.

Lithuania had long had at least two visions of how to fulfill herself as a modern historical actor. One of them, as mentioned, dealt with Lithuania as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country deeply grounded in the political and cultural realities of the Renaissance and Baroque eras. The other would underline Lithuania as having her roots in Romanticism – the Lithuania of mystical influences, spirituality and organic community. Both visions and interpretations of Lithuanian culture could be richly supported by historical evidence.

The vision of Renaissance and Baroque Lithuania is inseparable from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a unique political entity that preceded the EU in more than one way. That of neo-Romantic Lithuania is deeply permeated with archaic and pagan layers of culture and Roman Catholicism – a blend of archaic religious artwork and a modern, more or less neo-Romantic, mythology of history and culture. It represents a combination of wooden sculpture and architecture, profoundly archaic in its form and character, and modern mysticism, the latter best represented by the composer and painter Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Lithuania's self-image came into existence in the form of a moderate messianic construct, casting this small nation as an important bridge between East and West, the former often reduced to Slavic civilization or Russia. The concept of a synthesis of civilizations – East and West – was elaborated by the Lithuanian philosopher Stasys Salkauskis, particularly in *Sur les confins de deux mondes* [On the Boundary of Two Worlds, 1919], a book on Lithuania he wrote in French at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. So, history claimed that the Republic of Lithuania became an actor on the inter-war European political stage for a short period of time, from 1918 to 1940 when it was occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union. This concept of Lithuania's being on the boundary of two worlds and bridging the civilizations of East and West, elaborated in other works of Salkauskis, was instrumental in an

effort to reflect on the new state's place in the world and also in its cultural and educational policies.

Interestingly enough, Salkauskis argued that Lithuania should never confine herself to one particular pattern of culture. Instead, he insisted, Lithuania should reconcile and embrace, within the limits of her identity and trajectories of consciousness, Germanic, Romance and Slavic influences. The more cultures and influences Lithuania embraces, the more conscious of her complex history and culture it becomes.

Much ink has been spilt since then arguing if it makes sense to take this vision seriously – particularly now when Lithuania has become a member of the EU and NATO, qualifying for membership in clubs that were supposed to be beyond reach for such a long time. Yet we should not forget that Salkauskis's concept of Lithuania as a bridge between the civilizations of East and West stressed the importance of culture conceived of as a concert of nations and their educational process, instead of political domination or power.

Lithuania's accession to the European Union, and also joining NATO, is arguably one of the pivotal events in Lithuanian history. It invites reconsideration of what happened to Lithuania over the past sixteen years. There is little doubt that Lithuania has already achieved a turning point in her history, which might be compared only to her baptism in the fourteenth century. A latecomer to Christianity and modernity, a country with several planes of cultural and civilizational identity, Lithuania seems finally to be on her way to integration in the Western system of trade and security.

Historically speaking, Lithuania is an old polity, which dates back to the early Middle Ages. It has an ancient language and an old culture both recalled and revived during the national rebirth movement in the nineteenth century. One of the greatest powers in medieval Europe whose territory stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, she eventually crumbled and lost her influence in modern Europe. Bearing in mind the fact that the country was part of Tsarist

Russia from 1795 to 1918, that the Lithuanian elite adopted the Polish language and, finally, that Lithuania underwent considerable Russification in the nineteenth century, the emergence of the Republic of Lithuania in 1918 was nothing short of miraculous. Yet Lithuania enjoyed parliamentary democracy for just eight years: from a coup in 1926 until 1940 when the democratic regime was replaced by mild authoritarian rule. Incidentally, this was the case in all three Baltic states.

At the same time, Lithuania would be unthinkable without her magnificent Jewish legacy. Prior to the Second World War, Lithuania was famous for her very large Jewish community. About 240,000 Jews lived in Lithuania; only 20,000 survived the Holocaust. The Lithuanian capital, Vilnius – occupied by Poland from 1920 to 1939 – was known around the world as the Jerusalem of the North, and many internationally eminent Jews lived in or were from Lithuania. Needless to say, the history of Jewish civilization would be unthinkable without Lithuania's Jews – the Litvaks.

Suffice it to recall those who inscribed the names of the Litvaks and Lithuania on the cultural map of the twentieth-century world – the philosophers Emmanuel Lévinas and Aron Gurwitsch, the painters Chaim Soutine (a close friend of Amedeo Modigliani in Paris), Pinkus Krémègne, Michel Kikoine, Marc Chagall (all these painters were related to Belarus and, in one way or another, to Lithuania – most importantly, all were Litvaks) and Neemija Arbitblatas, the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, the violinist Jascha Heifetz and the art critic Bernard Berenson.

To cut a long story short, Lithuanian cultural history reads like an exciting novel, if not an adventure story. Small wonder then that much of it remains to be discovered by our fellow Europeans. The same applies to us – only now does Lithuania appear to be capable of truly challenging herself and offering new interpretations of her complex historical past.

What happened in 1940 was a tragedy for the Baltic region: the Baltic states were occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union. Having experienced the worst nightmares of both totalitarian ideologies and regimes during the Second World War, Lithuania was repeatedly occupied by the Soviets in 1945, condemning the country to five decades of isolation from the Western world. Lithuania lost considerable groups from her society: as mentioned, hundreds of thousands of Lithuanian Jews perished in the Holocaust, the most educated and prosperous part of Lithuanian society was either exterminated or exiled to Siberia. Tens of thousands of Lithuanians fled to Germany after WWII. Having spent several years in DP camps in West Germany, some of them moved to the US, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia; others found their shelter in continental Europe.

Modern Lithuania has emerged as a characteristically East-Central European nation with an emphasis on a strong sense of history and also on the critical role of culture and language in the process of political emancipation. Lithuania might quite legitimately be described as a nation of language, culture, and historical memory. Having been confined to a world of total control, severe censorship, violent politics, cynical lies, sinister ideological indoctrination, and brutal violation of all basic human rights, Lithuania, like other nations of Central and Eastern Europe, knows the taste and value of freedom better than any Western European country. Torn away and isolated from the family of free nations for half a century, Lithuania had finally made her return to where it belonged for centuries, namely, the Western world as a shared space of values.

Since the nineteenth century, literature in Lithuania has become something incomparably more than a sheer matter of fiction and aesthetic experience. For a small people – whose native language and Latin alphabet was banned by Tsarist Russia's administration for forty years (1864–1904), and whose book smugglers were engaged in what was regarded as illegal activities,

becoming legendary as heroes of national rebirth and political rebels – literature was bound to become a form of self-assertion and self-discovery.

Czeslaw Milosz, himself born and brought up in Lithuania, once wittily remarked that modern Lithuania was created by a bunch of philologists. If we can assert that culture precedes and anticipates politics, Lithuania would exemplify this better than anything else. The struggle for the survival of the Lithuanian language unavoidably led to its modernization and also to the political mobilization of the intelligentsia.

Modern Lithuanian literature has experienced a number of important influences – Polish, Russian and Scandinavian literatures should be mentioned first. Interestingly enough, two fine writers in pre-war Lithuania, Ignas Seinius and Jurgis Savickis, had much to do with the Nordic countries – the master of Lithuanian impressionist prose Ignas Seinius served as the Lithuanian Ambassador to Sweden, whereas Jurgis Savickis, a skilled writer of political memoir, before he was appointed the Lithuanian representative to the League of Nations in Geneva, acted as a diplomat in Denmark and Finland.

One of the most enigmatic traits of Lithuanian literature was formed during the Soviet period. Lithuanian poets ceased being merely poets. Instead, they were perceived as the very embodiments of truth, honor and conscience. Their readership and the audience of the poetry reading nights would engage in a form of covert action; a conspiracy of souls against the totalitarian regime's cynical lies and contempt for human individuals, peoples and their freedom. The emergence of poetry readings and theatre performances as a sort of silent conspiracy against brutal oppression, evil and cynical lies sheds new light on the elusive side of existence in Soviet Lithuania, particularly in the early 1970s.

At the same time, Lithuania has a sensitive grasp of political and cultural pluralism by virtue of once having been a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country. Although political, linguistic and cultural nationalism has considerably changed the character of modern political existence in Lithuania

and beyond, Lithuania still has much to say about a peaceful co-existence of religions, cultures and ethnic groups. This is undoubtedly one of the assets and sources of strength of Lithuanian political culture, which reaffirms its roots in Central European tradition of cultural diversity.

Lithuania is a country of emigrants, and it has always been so. Despite the country's relatively small size, Lithuanian culture is disseminated all over the world. Throughout the twentieth century, Lithuanians were a nation of emigrants, settling in Western Europe, North America, South America and Australia, and forming a particularly active and influential Diaspora in the United States of America. It is therefore worth mentioning some émigré scholars who were and continue to be active in Lithuanian culture.

To name just a few: the archaeologist and student of mythology Marija Gimbutas in the USA, the civilization theorist and sociologist of culture Vytautas Kavolis in the USA, the semiotician and literary scholar Algirdas Julius Greimas in France, the art historian Jurgis Baltrusaitis in France (whose father Jurgis Baltrusaitis, a Lithuanian diplomat in Moscow, established himself as a Russian poet writing in Russian and joined the great Russian symbolists), and the political theorist Aleksandras Shtromas in the UK and the USA. All of them had a great impact on Lithuanian culture.

Lithuanian émigrés played a critical role in twentieth-century Lithuanian politics and culture. If they had not championed the Lithuanian cause in the West, Lithuania would have had difficulty restoring her independence. Probably even more important was their role in creating an alternative vision for the future of the country or "yet another Lithuania." They made a major contribution to what has been termed by Tomas Venclova, a great poet and literary scholar who teaches literature at Yale University, the second voice of culture, the voice which acquires crucial significance when the first voice either remains silent or sings the wrong or imposed melody.

What is the relationship between Lithuania and the other two Baltic nations? In more than one way, Lithuania differs from Latvia and Estonia. No matter how rich of her historically formed religious communities and minorities, the Roman Catholic Lithuania, due to her historic liaisons with Poland and other Central/East European nations, is much more of an East-Central European nation than the Lutheran Latvia and Estonia. It would be quite misleading to assume the seemingly identical paths of the Baltic states to their role and place in modern history. Lithuania's history and its understanding would be unthinkable without taking into account such countries as Poland, Belarus and Ukraine, among others, whereas Latvia is inseparable from major German and Swedish influences, and Estonia from Swedish and Danish, not to mention her close cultural ties with Finland. As mentioned already, Lithuania is an old polity with her strong presence in Mediaeval and Renaissance Europe, whilst Latvia and Estonia emerged as the new political actors in the twentieth century.

It was with sound reason, then, that after 1990, when Lithuania and other two Baltic nations became independent, politicians and media people started making jokes about the unity of three Baltic sisters, which was achieved by them through their common experience of once having been three inmates in the same cell of that same prison. This led the former foreign minister (now president) Toomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia so far as to describe Estonia as a Nordic country, rather as a Baltic nation. In fact, the Baltic states, having come into existence, underwent considerable political change in the twentieth century. It is worth recalling that Finland, before World War II, was considered a Baltic State, too. This is to say that the four Baltic states existed in interwar Europe – the fact that only three entered the twenty-first century, is a grimace of recent history.

Yet some similarities and affinities of the Baltic states are too obvious to need emphasis. All three nations stood at the same historic crossroads after World War I; all were linked to the fate of Russia in terms of (in)dependence and emancipation; all three existed as independent states from 1918 to 1940; at that

time, all three introduced liberal minority policies granting a sort of personal, non-territorial cultural autonomy to their large minorities – Lithuania to her Jewish, Latvia to German, and Estonia to German and Russian minorities; all three sought the source of strength and inspiration in their ancient languages and cultures; all have a strong Romantic element in their historical memory and self-perception; last but not least, all benefited from émigrés and their role in politics and culture.

Suffice it to mention that presidents of all three Baltic states were or continue to be émigrés who spent much of their time abroad and who returned to their respective countries when they restored independence after 1990 – Valdas Adamkus of Lithuania, Vaira Vyke-Freiberga of Latvia, and Toomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia. Most importantly, the trajectories of Lithuanian and Baltic identity allow us to understand the history of the twentieth century better than anything else.

The Baltic states allow us a glimpse of the twentieth century history better than anything else. If we seek to understand the horrible political and mental legacies of totalitarianism, a painful withdrawal from Europe's public space and value system followed by a gradual return to it, or the transformation from the planned economy to the nearly libertarian free-market zeal so characteristic of the Baltic region now, then we have to study the modern saga of, as Arnold J. Toynbee would have it, the withdrawal-and-return of the Baltic states.