Remembrance, History, and Justice

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After Communism: Identity and Morality in the Baltic Countries

Eastern European countries seem locked mentally somewhere between the discovery of the intrinsic logic of capitalism characteristic of the nineteenth century and the post-Weimar Republic period. This is a period characterized by an incredibly fast economic growth and a passionate advocacy of the values of free enterprise and capitalism, accompanied by a good deal of anomie, fission of the body social, stark social contrasts, shocking degrees of corruption, a culture of poverty (to recall Oscar Lewis’s term which refers to low trust, self-victimization, disbelief in social ties and networks, contempt for institutions, and so on), and cynicism.

In the Baltic region, the post-modern and post-totalitarian era proved capable of squeezing two centuries of uninterrupted European history within two decades of “transition.” The Baltic States and other East-Central European countries moved from the planned economy of communism to free-market economy and global capitalism. In a way, Eastern Europe appears to have become a kind of laboratory where the speed of social change and cultural transformation could be measured and tested. In fact, the Baltic countries and their societies are far ahead of what we know as the grand historical narrative, or, plainly, predictable and moralizing history; nay, these societies are faster than history.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, identity and morality became, in the Baltic States, core issues of political existence. One was tempted to apply to the Baltic countries the description used by Milan
Kundera in “The Tragedy of Central Europe” published in 1984¹ to characterize Central European countries: a huge variety of cultures and thought in a small area. Yet the question immediately raised was if the connection that binds Lithuanians to their neighbors, Latvia and Estonia, will be just a remembrance of common enslavement and a sense of insecurity. Will we be able to create a new Baltic regional identity, one that is both global and open and in which we can map our past and our present according to altogether different criteria?

Up to now modernity in Western Europe was supplying a theory to explain the world around us. The point is that Eastern Europe has changed the world becoming more than a theory-emanating entity. Eastern Europe is a laboratory of change and a vast area of side effects and damage inflicted by modernity on the world. As such, it still supplies empirical evidence to the West to judge the “second modernity” (according to Ulrich Beck²), or “liquid modernity” (as Zygmunt Bauman would have it³), squeezed and condensed here in less than two decades.

As Vytautas Kavolis (1930–1996), an eminent Lithuanian émigré sociologist, described the Baltic region, it appears as a laboratory of change deeply embedded in Eastern Europe, itself a boundary region of Europe. It is the laboratory where the great challenges and tensions of modernity can be tested; where the scenarios for European life in the not-too-distant future take shape.

Does the Baltic Region Exist After 1990?

What is the relationship between Lithuania and the other two Baltic nations? It differs from Latvia and Estonia in more than one way. No matter how rich in historically formed religious communities and minorities it is, Catholic Lithuania, due to its historic liaisons with

Poland and other Central and East European nations, is much more of an East-Central European nation than Lutheran Latvia and Estonia. Therefore, it would be quite misleading to assume seemingly identical paths by the Baltic States to their role and place in modern history.

Lithuania's history and its understanding would be unthinkable without taking into account countries such as Poland, Belarus, or Ukraine. Latvia is inseparable from major German and Swedish influences, and Estonia from Swedish and Danish, not to mention its close cultural ties with Finland.

Lithuania is an old polity with a strong presence in medieval and Renaissance Europe. Latvia and Estonia emerged as new political actors in the twentieth century. It was with sound reason, then, that after 1990, when Lithuania and the other two Baltic nations became independent, politicians and the media started making jokes about the unity of the three Baltic sisters. It had been achieved by them through their common experience of having once been three inmates in the same prison cell.

Small wonder, then, that this situation led Toomas Hendrik Ilves, a former foreign minister (then president) of Estonia, to describe the latter as a Nordic country, rather than a Baltic nation. In fact, once they had come into existence, the Baltic States underwent considerable political changes in the twentieth century. It is worth recalling that Finland, before the World War II, was considered a Baltic State, too. That is to say that 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 between the Baltic States are too obvious to require emphasis. All three nations stood at the same historic crossroads after the First World War. 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, nonterritorial cultural autonomy to their large minorities, Lithuania to its Jewish, Latvia to German, and Estonia to German and Russian minorities. All three sought 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. It suffices to mention that the presidents of all three Baltic States have been,
or continue to be, émigrés, who spent much of their lives abroad and who returned to their respective countries when they restored independence after 1990: Valdas Adamkus in Lithuania, Vaira Vike-Freiberga in Latvia, and Toomas Hendrik Ilves in Estonia. Most important, the trajectories of the Lithuanian and Baltic identity allow us to understand the history of the twentieth century better than anything else.

Yet questions arise: What will the Baltic Region be like in the twenty-first century? What will be the common denominator between Klaipeda, Riga, Tallinn, Kaliningrad, and St. Petersburg in the new epoch? Will the Baltic States come closer to the Nordic states, or will they remain a border region in which contrasting Eastern and Western European conceptions of politics and public life continue to fight it out amongst themselves? Will we able to apply to the Baltic countries that description by which Milan Kundera attempted to identify Central European countries: a huge variety of culture and thought in a small area? Will the bonds that tie us to our neighbors be just a remembrance of common enslavement and a sense of insecurity, or will we create a new Baltic regional identity, one that is both global and open and in which we can map our past and our present according to altogether different criteria?

These are some of the questions the problem of a Baltic region raises. Formulating them is no less useful and meaningful than answering them. Possibly here is where some vital experiences are tried out, experiences that larger, more influential countries have not yet had but which await them in the future. It may be that the Baltics were and still remain a laboratory where the great challenges and tensions of modernity can be tested and the scenarios for European life in the not-too-distant future take shape.

**Faster than History**

Interestingly enough, the “faster than history” idiom acquires a special meaning when dealing with social change in Central and Eastern Europe. The speed of time in what Czesław Miłosz and Milan Kundera, each in his own way, described as “yet another Europe” is beyond the historical, cultural, and political imaginations of Western Europeans and North Americans. After the collapse of the Soviet
Union, post-Soviet and post-Communist countries underwent considerable social and cultural change. To paraphrase the title of Kundera’s novel that became one more admirable idiom to express the East-Central European sense of history and grasp of life, all this leads to the experience of the unbearable lightness of change.

What happened in Western Europe as the greatest events and civilization-shaping movements of centuries acquired a form—in Central and Eastern Europe—of mandatory and rapid economic and political programs that had to be implemented by successor states of the Soviet Union. This is to say that the new democracies had to catch up with the Western part of history to qualify for the exclusive and honorary club of Europe. Moreover, “yet another Europe” had to become even faster than history, transforming itself into a more or less recognizable collective actor of global economy and politics.

Capitalism, which had long been presented in Soviet high school textbooks as the major menace to humankind, now seems more aggressive and dynamic in post-Soviet societies than in far more moderate, timid, egalitarian, social-democratic, welfare-state-orientated, and post-capitalist Western European countries. Sweden, Finland, and the rest of the Nordic countries, for instance, can only marvel at what they perceive as a sort of old-fashioned, historically recycled, and ruthless capitalism of the Balts—or, to put it in more conventional terms, the libertarian economy of Estonia and other Baltic countries. The countries that used to symbolize to Soviet citizens the embodiment of “wild capitalism” with its overt glorification of the winners and contempt for the losers now appear to them as astonishingly communitarian, warm, and humane.

Indeed, they are pure and innocent in comparison with the “first come first served” or “grab the stolen” or “catch it all” type of mentality that paradoxically, albeit logically, blends with a sort of Marxism turned upside down. This extremely vulgar variety of economic determinism and materialism in Lithuania and other East-Central European countries barely surprises those who know quite well that the last thing one could expect to be named among priorities is the issue of culture. Although quite a few pay lip service to it without giving much consideration as to how to foster intellectual dialogue among countries, somehow almost everybody agrees there that the West has to pay for “the culture, uniqueness, and spirituality” of post-totalitarian countries.
These former-communist societies are faster than history, yet slower than a lifetime. People often complain here that their lives and careers have been ruined by this rapid social change and grand transformation. They take it as a tragedy arguing (and not without reason) that their lives, energies, and works have been wasted, if not completely spoiled. A lifetime of a human being proves insufficient to witness a thrilling and sweeping transformation of society.

Vytautas Kavolis worked out a theory of post-modernism as an attempt to reconcile what has been separated by modernity. At the same time, the idea of post-modernism served, for Kavolis, as an interpretative framework for the split between the modernist and the anti-modernist. He accorded the concept of the post-modern to the process of desovietization, too: “If desovietization, in its diversity of forms, continues relatively unhindered and does not become complacent with its own rhetoric, it has the potentiality of becoming a first-rate (that is, ‘enriching’) civilizational movement. If the concept of the ‘postmodern’ can still be retrieved from the cultists who have made it a monopoly of their own exuberance, desovietization could even be considered, in some of its cultural emphases, as ‘postmodern.’ (I conceive of the ‘postmodern’ not as antimodernist, but as the building of bridges between the ‘modernist’ and the ‘antimodernist’).”

Artists and humanists in Lithuania might fill many gaps and bridge some parts of human sensibility divided between disciplines and scattered across the universe of our global culture. They are ahead of many social and political processes that are on their way in Lithuania. They predict and passionately deny these processes, laugh at them, make fun of them, anticipate and critically question them. The contemporary art has become a sort of social and cultural critique in our post-modern world—yet this applies to Central and East European societies better than to anybody else.

At the same time, contemporary art and culture may prevent the spread of one more disease of our time—unlimited manipulations of public opinion shamelessly performed in the name of freedom and democracy. It can do this by calling into question everything that fails to do justice to humanity or respect human dignity. In doing so, con-

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temporary artists and scholars would be able to find their raison d’être in our age of the divorce of words and meanings, power and politics, politeness and sensitivity—along with their efforts to help restore the damaged sociability and power of association crucial for their societies. In the twentieth century, modern artists hated the crowd intensely and spoke up in favor of the individual. Post-modern art, if properly understood, could advocate community, thus attempting reconciliation of the individual and community or society.

Whatever the speed of life and the intensity of change, our epoch can be faster than history—especially, if the latter is measured like it was a century ago. Yet it will always be slower than a lifetime of a particular human individual. The efforts within contemporary culture to reconcile the individual with him or herself, with community, society, and history would therefore come as a perfect tribute to what always remains beyond or ahead of history—values, humanity, and the miracle of human dialogue.

The Culture of Determinism

The phenomena of innocence and self-victimization are instrumental in shaping what might be termed the culture and determinism of poverty. Victimized consciousness is moved by the belief in malevolent and sinister forces of the universe—allegedly manifesting themselves through secret and elusive human agencies—that come to manipulate and dominate the world through their subversive activities immediately targeted at a single actor, the most vulnerable and fragile one. The principle of evil is permanently ascribed to the big and powerful, while reserving the principle of good exclusively for the small, vulnerable and fragile. By implication, one cannot err or sin because she/he happens to belong to a small, vulnerable and fragile group. Or vice versa, one can never be on the right side if she/he, by birth and upbringing, belong to a privileged or powerful one. This means that my human value and merit are predetermined and, subsequently, can be lightly judged by my race, gender, nationality, or class.

This sort of modern barbarity, which takes all human beings as irreversibly shaped and moved by biological or social forces with no moral or intellectual choice involved, stands powerfully behind con-
sporad theory. Regrettably, modern barbarity, which deprives humanity of the sense of human fellowship and tends to replace it with the concepts of natural animosity and ever-lasting struggle between irreconcilable groups or forces, tends to surface and extend its influence beyond underground consciousness. Far from being qualified as social pathology, it assumes its status as what is supposed to be normal and even progressive.

A conspiracy theory allows no room for critical self-reflexivity and critical self-discovery. At this point, it is a mortal enemy of moral philosophy. Whereas modern political philosophy, if properly understood, is an extension of moral philosophy, the conspiracy theory’s point of departure is the radical denial of theoretical reflection, critical judgment, and moral accountability. Instead, the core assumption of any conspiracy theory is that the agencies of good and evil are established once and for all, that the only distinction between good and evil is that good is powerless and condemned to suffer endlessly, while evil is all-powerful and solely motivated by the hunger for power. In this reading, infinite manipulation and unlimited power are the ultimate ends that motivate evil forces. The world is too naïve, vulnerable, and fragile to unmask the real masters and their dirty manipulations with which they keep that world in the darkness of ignorance, stupidity and self-deception—this is the revealing message conspiracy theory conveys to its adherents.

Vytautas Kavolis suggested that this phenomenon is deeply rooted in a modern system of moralization, which he termed the culture of determinism. Kavolis puts it thus:

A modern amoral culture, in the sense that it tends to eliminate the notion of individual moral responsibility without taking collective responsibility seriously, is the culture of determinism. In this culture it is assumed that individuals are shaped and moved by biological or social forces in all essentials beyond the control, or even the possibility of major choices, of individuals affected by them. The four major intellectual foci of this culture are the theory that “biology (or racial inheritance) is destiny,” the belief that the human being is and should be nothing but a utility-calculating, pleasure-maximizing machine; the conviction that the individual is, in currently existing societies, only a victim of the
After Communism

“oppressive,” “impoverished,” “devitalizing,” or “traditionally constricted” social conditions of his or her existence (without the ability to become an agent of his fate and assume responsibility for her actions); and the notion that he can be helped out of such conditions solely by the “guidance of experts” who have a “rational social policy” at their disposal, in the determination of which those who are to be helped participate merely as instruments of the experts. 

5 Kavolis’s concept of a modern amoral culture sheds new light on why victimized groups or societies relate to the ruling élites as patients to diagnosing and curing specialists. At the same time, it allows us an essential comprehensive point of entry: we can understand why and how victimized culture manifests itself as the culture of destiny and determinism—in contrast to the culture of freedom and choice.

This concept reveals the links between all kinds of deterministic theories, especially in the social sciences. Kavolis starts by quoting Sigmund Freud’s dictum, “Biology is destiny;” and then goes on to show other modes of discourse that speak out in favor of inexorable laws of racial inheritance, history, milieu, societal life, social organization, and so forth. A modern amoral culture denying individual responsibility and moral choice, or the culture of determinism in Kavolis’s parlance, is a system of moralization disseminated in the modern moral imagination. Hence, we can identify what might be called natural innocence and victimization. According to this attitude, people cannot in principle control biological or social forces. On the contrary, particular individuals and even entire societies are shaped and moved by those forces. Since the world is controlled and dominated by powerful groups, clandestine international organizations, or secret agencies and their elusive experts, individuals cannot assume moral responsibility for their actions. Nor can they influence or change the state of affairs. Such an attitude is characteristic of marginalized and victimized groups, but it is equally characteristic of the kind of consciousness shaped by anti-liberal and anti-democratic regimes.

5 Vytautas Kavolis, Moralizing Cultures (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 48.
The Culture of Poverty

The culture of determinism is also characteristic of what Oscar Lewis described as the culture of poverty. The culture of poverty is not identical to real poverty, according to Lewis, who studied for many years the trajectories of the identities of people living in the shanties of Puerto Rico and Mexico, their value orientations and evaluations of the world. There are cases, when groups living in poverty have their social networks, conspicuous cooperation and social forms (for instance, East Europe’s Jews during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century or craftsmen from India). The culture of poverty manifests itself first of all in an absolute distrust of institutions and the state, unwillingness to participate in the state’s life, and the conviction that everything in the world is predetermined—social roles, distribution of power, wealth and poverty.

Let us say that the culture of poverty was not characteristic of Fidel Castro’s post-revolution Cuba, since the society (even the poorest layers of it) acquired its value and a sense of the meaning of life, as Lewis had noticed, in the revolution. A strong sense of fatalism, a low level of social trust, a matriarchal family, man’s distancing of himself from the most important family problems—these are all characteristic of the culture of poverty. In other words, this whole anthropological complex of the culture of poverty clearly points to the fact that it is a variant of determinism.

Incidentally, Lewis has discovered that the main characteristics of the culture of poverty— isolation, disbelief in the possibility of social linkage, fatalism, distrust of everything—have been encountered even in wealthy people’s thinking and worldviews. At this point, it is worth remembering that Kavolis, as early as 1996, asked rhetorically whether the culture of poverty exists in Lithuania. In fact, ample evidence shows the solid foundations that the culture of poverty has in Lithuania. As recent sociological polls suggest, a strong sense of helplessness, fatalism, and failure is accompanied by a growing hostility to liberal

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After Communism

democracy and democratic institutions. Quite a few Lithuanians would prefer an authoritarian leader to parliamentary democracy. They would favor the strong man’s rule, rather than the rule of law, representation, and the division of powers. Powers of association have deteriorated considerably. Social atomization and the fragmentation of society have gone so far as to allow us to talk about new forms of cultural colonization, isolation, and marginalization. The Soviet regime seems to have transformed Lithuania into a kind of low-trust nation where disbelief in authorities and institutions threatens the fragile foundations of civil society, yet where people—oddly enough—place an enormous amount of trust in the media and TV, in particular.

This sort of explosive and destructive potential was revealed and successfully exploited by Lithuanian populists during the presidential election in 2002 and afterward. People of the older generation often feel that their lives have been spoiled, if not totally wasted. Many of them have lost their jobs and savings. Their children have left the country and settled in Ireland or Spain, whereas they have to live on a miserable pension. It is hardly possible to convince these people that Lithuania has a vibrant economy or that it is “a Baltic tiger” (as Poland’s Leszek Balcerowicz once described it). Quite a large segment of Lithuanian society lives beyond the EU reality.

In fact, Lithuania has the highest suicide rate in the world—quite a sad and scary fact that might shed new light on the degree of social depression, alienation, and despair in Lithuanian society. Moreover, growing emigration has deprived the country of many young and highly qualified people. Nearly 800,000 people have left Lithuania over the past twenty years settling in the United States, Great Britain, Ireland, and Western Europe. Consequently the country has lost much of its potential, and the countryside has been deprived of some prospects for more rapid economic and social development.

The fragmentation and segmentation of Lithuanian society has reached dangerous limits and can become a threat to democracy, not to mention social cohesion and civic solidarity. During the Paksas scandal, which ended in 2004 with the impeachment of Lithuanian President Rolandas Paksas, some political commentators and politicians coined the phrase “two Lithuanias,” thus dividing Lithuanian society into the “sugar-beets”—the term runkeliai in Lithuanian is a far from innocent word, and in this context appears as a derogatory term—
and the “élite.” At this point, great uncertainty hangs over Lithuania’s future. As the presidential scandal has shown, there are still all too many temptations to talk of two Lithuanias. On the one hand, there is the westward-looking and dynamic Lithuania, celebrating its dynamism and rejoicing over the accession of Lithuania to the European Union (EU) and NATO. On the other, there is the élite-abandoned, long-suffering, divided and depressed Lithuania, longing for something like the equality-in-misery it knew in the Soviet Union.

Each time it comes to an election, a certain segment of society perceives the vote as an opportunity for revenge against the much-hated and semi-mythical élite. Usually these voters of despair and revenge are described as the aforementioned “sugar-beets,” although it would be naïve to reduce this problem to the depressed countryside. Quite a few Lithuanian tycoons and public figures overtly supported Rolandas Paksas and then Viktor Uspaskich, another populist politician who founded the Labor Party, made up by the graduates of the Higher Institutions of the Communist Party, former functionaries, and the nouveaux riches.

All of the above, though, does not explain the roots of the culture of poverty in Lithuania, especially if one bears in mind Lewis’s idea that the culture of poverty does not necessarily coincide with actual poverty. At this point, most telling was the fact that 34.2 percent of Lithuanians—according to the results of a sociological poll conducted by the market analysis and research group Rait on December 2–5, 2004—thought that the period of 1990–2004, that is, the period of the newly-gained independence of Lithuania, was the most unfortunate period in the country’s entire history. Only 29.7 percent of respondents reserved this honor for the Soviet period, and even fewer—22.7 percent—for the period under Tsarist Russia (1795–1915). Small wonder, then, that many commentators shocked by this outcome jumped to conclusions diagnosing a new social disease. They suggested that Lithuania is suffering from an identity crisis, amnesia, political illiteracy, the loss of the sense of history, and, ultimately, the disappearance of national pride.

The culture of complaint coupled with the culture of poverty go so far as to depict Lithuania as an unfortunate, corrupt, cynical,

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7 For more on this, see http://www.rait.lt/.
After Communism

predatory, amoral country devoid of justice, benevolence, fairness, and respect for human dignity, a country which does not have a future among civilized countries of the EU, and so on. Yet on a closer inspection, it appears that the main characteristics of the culture of poverty— isolation, disbelief in a possibility of social link, fatalism, distrust of everything—are stronger in Lithuania than ever. Most probably it is the high price Lithuania has to pay for an incredibly fast and drastic socio-cultural change. This became especially obvious from 2009 onward, as Lithuania—and Latvia as well—suffered a dramatic slowdown of their economies accompanied by a backlash of far-right, xenophobic, homophobic, and anti-Semitic attitudes.\(^8\) Lithuania went so far as to challenge core European values, such as human rights and civil liberties, and to question the moral validity of the EU.

On July 14, 2009 we celebrated two hundred and twenty years from the beginning of the French Revolution. One would have expected a celebration of the date trying to embrace the new reality of Europe—first and foremost, its unique and historically unprecedented solidarity. One would have thought that the day marked the reconciliation of Europe, the Old and the New—to use Donald Rumsfeld’s parsimony—especially in the light of the election of the Polish MEP Jerzy Buzek, the former prime minister of Poland and one of the heroes of the Solidarity movement, President of the European Parliament. A unique chance opened up to put many things behind us, including the frequent clashes of the moral and political sensibilities of the “two Europes,” meaning the Old Europe’s liberal and tolerant attitudes towards human diversity, and the New Europe’s old-fashioned infatuations and reactive conservatism. Yet this was not to be. It would have been too good to be true.

How ironic that on that same day when the newly elected European Parliament opened its plenary session, the Seimas, that is, Lithuania’s parliament, adopted the law which rejected, almost overnight, everything that today’s Europe stands for and is all about. The new Lithuanian Law on the Protection of Minors from the Detrimental Effects of Public Information adopted on July 14, 2009 struck human rights defenders and media people, both in Lithuania and in the EU,

as overtly homophobic and profoundly undemocratic. This law was vetoed twice by the former President of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus, yet he was overruled by the Seimas. In addition, the law was severely criticized by the current President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė. Moreover, the law in question has been criticized in vigorous terms by the Lithuanian media, political commentators, and several civil liberties and human rights defenders who have stressed its homophobic substance along with its dangerous political implications, such as censorship and self-censorship. Needless to say, this law had little if anything to do with the protection of children. Instead, it was against gay and lesbian citizens of the country. Whatever the case, the equation of homosexuality to physical violence and necrophilia is morally repugnant and deeply disgraceful.

Still, it was difficult to believe that the adoption of such a law was possible in an EU country at the beginning of the twenty-first century. One can take this law as an unfortunate move or as a profound misunderstanding, to say the very least. Changes to articles 310 in the penal code and 214 in the administrative code, which were debated in the Seimas, criminalize—with the threat of a fine, community work or imprisonment—anyone involved in the “promotion” of homosexuality in “any public space.” If this is not the slide to state-sponsored homophobia and the criminalization of public self-expression by Lithuania’s gay and lesbian citizens, what is it? Is it not a sad reminder of the cycle of abuse in a country that suffered isolation and humiliation for more than five decades?

This law was a disgrace, but even more so would be an attempt to obfuscate, trivialize, and, in effect, justify it. This is why a sort of déjà vu appeared on hearing how some conservative politicians in the European Parliament (EP) tried to depict the EP Resolution criticizing the law as a blow allegedly dealt by the EP to the national parliament of a sovereign country. In their understanding, the idea to ask for the Human Rights Agency’s expert opinion on whether this law contradicts fundamental rights would jeopardize the independence and sovereignty of Lithuania.

If we apply double standards refusing to react to the violations of human rights within the EU, yet simultaneously engaging in verbose assaults on Russia, China, or Iran, are we not in peril of closing ranks with those profoundly undemocratic countries? What would be the dividing line between the EU and Russia if we had adopted the prin-
principle of noninterference with national parliaments on such matters as human rights?

This would signify the end of Europe the way it is now. If so much sound and fury comes defending the “holy” rights of the national parliament to criminalize diversity, are we not at risk of transforming the EU into merely an amoral trading bloc? All in all, European values, norms and solidarity prevailed, and the EP sent a powerful message reasserting the simple truth that civil liberties and human rights can never be confined to domestic affairs. They are not the property of the state, no matter how just and democratic that state might be. And they never will be so far as the EU is concerned.

What happened to us? Did we decide to use democracy in a nonchalant and selective way, appropriating some parts that suit us while discarding what we dislike? Had it become the enthusiastic “yes” to the simplistic notion of democracy as a 50 + 1 methodology, yet the strong “no” to minorities? “Yes” to the right to practice our mainstream Lithuanian culture, national identity, and Roman Catholic faith, yet the resolute “no” to gay and lesbian rights? If so, not a single chance exists that such a selective and arbitrary concept of democracy will be ever accepted in the EU—and rightly so.

It turned out to be difficult to be independent and responsible for the social and moral order that allows every citizen to experience their sense of pride and dignity. It is hard to extend our modern political and moral sensibilities to the extent of every human being, regardless of his or her creed, faith, or gender. The simplest things, as we thought of them in the 1990s, turned out to be the most challenging ones. We have had a valuable lesson in democracy.

**Intellectuals: Roles and Identities**

What is the role of intellectuals in the nation- or community-building process? Some scholars of nationalism suggest that intellectuals invent traditions, work out interpretive frameworks for collective identity and self-comprehension, establish collective identities, forge political and moral vocabularies, and even shape their respective nations. At the same time, dissenting intellectuals may challenge their nations by offering an alternative vision or critique of their societies and cultures.
In the early 1990s, some Lithuanian intellectuals were quite optimistic about their social roles in society. For instance, writer Ričardas Gavelis (1950–2002), who might well be described as a caustic public intellectual and libertarian-minded critic of society and culture, responding to the journal *Metmenys* 1993 questionnaire, wrote about the role of what he termed the free intellectual in the following way:

I nevertheless have some hope. It is precisely thanks to the fact that Lithuania dropped out of the general development [of Western culture] that we have managed to preserve a now almost extinct species—the free intellectual. Such creatures are virtually extinct in Europe, and even more so in America. There the intellectual is almost always part of some kind of academic circle. And that means that he unavoidably becomes a member of the state hierarchy, even if he teaches at a private university. Whether they like it or not, they must accommodate the rules of the academic career, of the narrow world of academia, of a narrow context of specialized reference. The era of the free intellectual—of the kind that Russell and Sartre were—has long passed in the world... . In Lithuania, for now, the true intellectual is free whether he wants it or not, because there is basically no influential academic world. For that reason, individual intellectuals have a greater influence on overall cultural development than anywhere else... . I would consider this to be a positive thing. In times of change and confusion free intellectuals are more useful than inflexible academic structures. Individuals are more flexible, more inclined to take risks, are not afraid to lose their academic positions or authority. It is my hope that free intellectuals will be the ones to launch the process of synchronizing Lithuanian and world culture.⁹

Yet quite different positions were expressed regarding the social role of the intellectual in society by Donatas Sauka, a conservative literary scholar. He wrote, as early as 1995, that Lithuanian intellectuals had forgotten their mission to preserve cultural traditions and to defend the

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nation. He advocated the rather well-worn paradigm of the building and defense of the nation against those who tarnished its image and international reputation. Small wonder, then, that Sauka, in doing so, also warned that “the liberals of the younger generation and their older colleagues among émigrés” threatened the injured nation. Sauka put it as follows:

Who, then, defends society’s conservative opinions—who speaks in the name of the injured nation, who expresses its historical insults, who mythologizes its rural moral reputation? Who, really? What is the point of trying out the sharpness of one’s arrows when attacking a monster created by one’s own imagination; but please give us a true picture of its traits, give us its first and last names! The liberals of the younger generation and their older colleagues among émigrés, who often hold condemnatory trials, do not have a concrete target which could embody the essence of such an ideology. And the target of their polemic is not too fresh—but faded ideas and moral directives, statements by the current leaders of the nation that were expressed during the euphoria of the Rebirth period.10

Here we have two opposing concepts of the intellectual. On the one side, Gavelis suggested a concept that depicts the intellectuals as critics of the establishment, society, and culture. On the other side, Sauka presented them as defenders of the nation’s pride and prejudice. What lurks behind the critique of society and culture offered by intellectuals—loyalty or dissent? Fidelity or betrayal? Last but not least, what is the real raison d’être of modern intellectuals? Personification of conscience? Dedication to the nation and its historical injuries and moral traumas? Advocacy of individual reason and conscience? Social and cultural criticism? The politics of loyalty or the politics of dissent? The work for the sake of sustainable society? Preservation of historical memory? The defense of the nation from the attacks of liberals? The struggle against cosmopolitanism?

The essence of the populist struggle against cosmopolitanism is excellently expressed by Romualdas Ozolas, a former MP and the signatory of the Independence Act: “I am a nationalist. Nationalism is the sole source of my strength. Each, according to the level of his stupidity, is free to decide what that means.” The following maxim is a unique pearl of nationalist wisdom: “The cosmopolitan cannot be moral. The cosmopolitan is a-subjective; for that reason, he is incapable of imperative self-questioning.”

The nature of this kind of ghost-chasing is very well expressed in an introductory passage of an issue of the journal of cultural resistance Į laisvę (To Freedom): “A spiritual gap is growing between the sincere Lithuanian intellectual, for whom Lithuanian-ness, Lithuanian culture and the nation’s interests are of the first order, and that new creature—probably a product of the Soviet period—the super-cultural-activist-intellectual, who, supposedly in the name of Western culture, offers obscene trash to television programs, books, and theatre festivals of a questionable nature. Unfortunately, together with these self-named intellectuals comes another threat to the Lithuanian nation—cosmopolitanism.”

Interestingly enough, one thing that has long been taken for granted in Lithuania—the idea that the real intellectual is a dedicated educator, builder, and shaper of the nation, rather than a public thinker or social and cultural critic—underwent considerable change and was put into question over the past ten years. If very few have critically questioned the idea that the intellectual is or at least ought to be instrumental in the nation-building process, things started changing around 1995. The mainstream Lithuanian nationalism was challenged by a new approach, which brought about the concept of civil society instead of the people or the nation. Some local intellectuals began increasingly associating themselves with civil society, the community-building process, and the public domain. This tendency was extremely timely and important, bearing in mind the deterioration of social links and networks, anomie, and the atomization of Lithuanian society. The Lithuanian philosopher Arvydas Šliogeris anticipated and aptly described this shift, calling into question Gavelis’s enthusiasm for

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11 Ibid., 36.
12 Ibid.
After Communism

individual intellectuals, and placing more emphasis on the community-building instead of personal emancipation. Despite some undertones of Kulturpessimismus, that is, a sort of extremely harsh and exaggerated critique of Lithuanian public life, Šliogeris’s standpoint sheds new light on the critical importance of public debate for society in transition. According to Šliogeris,

Several years of independence have proven our inability to order our present rationally, our lack of common sense, and even any sense. What can that pitiful handful of active and thinking people—still capable of seeing the world clearly, simply, with a sober and cold eye—accomplish? Some such individuals exist, but they are powerless, because the parade is being led by the mobile vulgus and its idols. Is there any hope? Yes, there is, but that hope is hazy and cannot be transformed into a technical project, because in its deepest essence it is non-technical, anti-technical. My hope is all tied to the spontaneous emergence of small communities in which organic future forms of communal existence can begin to grow. However, these new forms of community can only develop somewhere beyond the boundaries of existing “organized” forms of (political, religious, economic, educational) life. The instigators of these communities must say a determined No to all, absolutely all, currently dominating structures of public and private life, because those structures are in fact dead and continue to exist only from habit. Democracy, freedom, prosperity, spirituality, truth, conscience, Christianity, culture, tradition—all of this has turned into ideological chatter and self-deception. If “values” and forms of existence remain as they are, it is no longer possible to breathe life back into these things. Why do I speak about the creation of new types of communities? For, after all, here remains the danger that such a newly created community will be nothing but a herd of slaves and schizophrenics ruled by paranoid and cynical Rasputins. There are already more than enough such sects in today’s world. The formation of authentic communities involves enormous risk. But there is no other option, because individuals are ultimately helpless.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} Cited in Donskis, \textit{Identity and Freedom}, 9.
It is widely and rightly assumed that loyalty and betrayal are among the key concepts of the ethic of nationalism. The marriage of state and culture, which seems the essence of the congruence between political power structure and collective identity, usually offers a simple explanation of loyalty and dissent. Within such an interpretative framework of nationalism, loyalty is seen as a kind of once-and-for-all commitment of the individual to his or her nation and its historical-cultural substance, whereas betrayal is identified as a failure to commit him or herself to a common cause or as a diversion from the object of political loyalty and cultural/linguistic fidelity.

However, huge gaps exist between different patterns of nationalism. For conservative or radical nationalists, even a social and cultural critique of one’s people and state can be regarded as nothing more and nothing less than treason. For their liberal counterparts, it is precisely what constitutes political awareness, civic virtue, and a conscious dedication to the people, culture, and state. Upon closer look, it appears that the concepts of loyalty, dissent, and betrayal can be instrumental in mapping the liberal and democratic facet of nationalism because they are both political and moral categories. It is impossible to analyze them without touching upon crucial issues of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as political culture, liberal democracy, poverty, hatred, populism, manipulative exchanges and deliberate political manipulations, social criticism, and political commitment. The analysis of the aforementioned phenomena may reveal what it means to live in a changing society where all these things increasingly tend to become the nexus of social and political existence. History, socio-cultural dynamics, and the dialectic of identities can be properly understood only where the acceleration of the speed of change reaches its climax, and where social change becomes faster than history.

The Treason of Intellectuals or Identity Crisis?

Tomas Venclova is regarded as one of the most accomplished and noted Lithuanian humanists, and rightly so. An eminent poet, literary scholar, and translator, Venclova had long acted as a conscious and dedicated dissident opposed to the entire project of the former Soviet Union with its crimes against humanity, severe human rights viola-
tions, brutal suppression of all fundamental rights and civil liberties, and violent politics. Having spent a good part of his life in Lithuania, he was exiled to the West in 1977 where he built an academic career, eventually becoming Professor of Slavic Literatures at Yale University. Far from a conservative nationalist, Venclova has always spoken out in favor of liberal values. This could be a clue to his deeply moving and sensitive essay on the tragedy of Lithuania, the Holocaust that claimed the lives of more than 220,000 Lithuanian Jews.

The essay in question, “The Jews and the Lithuanians,” written in the 1970s, made Tomas Venclova the first Lithuanian writer who showed the real scope of the tragedy, admitting the guilt and responsibility of those Lithuanians who collaborated with the Nazis and actively participated in the massacre of the Jews. Deeply embedded in the best intellectual traditions of Eastern and Central Europe, his collection of essays, *Forms of Hope*, reads like a moral map of a great European public intellectual and political thinker.\(^{14}\)

Venclova made a strong and effective comeback to the public domain of Lithuania publishing, in July 2010, an elegantly written and caustic essay “It Suffocates Me Here.” Wittily referring to the clash of the character Strepsiades, a staunch defender of the ancient Greek tradition, and its challenger Socrates, both depicted in Aristophanes’ comedy *The Clouds*, Venclova described some of the ongoing political and moral debates in Lithuania as a backlash of parochialism and moral provincialism, and as a fear of modernity, applying harsh words and judging his country from a critical perspective. Without the shadow of a doubt, the essay became a landmark in the area of public debate. Small wonder that a dozen of angry and noisy reactions to Venclova’s essay appeared over the following two months, as this piece of polemical writing dealt a blow to conservative and nationalistic writers in the country. The bitter response would not be long, though. Adding insult to injury, Venclova’s critics came to describe him as an arrogant and rootless cosmopolitan. The opposing camp, the supporters of the aforementioned essay, implied that Venclova came up with a timely and principled call upon his country to take a closer look at itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century to be able to rethink its past and present.

Furthermore, much in the spirit of Julien Benda’s manifesto *La trahison des clercs* (*The Treason of Intellectuals*), Venclova’s essay became an attack against those who regard the nation-state as the end in itself and against those who see the paramount mission of the intellectual as the defense of the nation-state at any price against the supposed evils of modernity and globalization. To his credit, Venclova was correct in raising this issue, because, the months before the essay’s publication, Lithuanian media was peppered with a number of skeptical comments on the loss of Lithuanian identity and even of the independence after the country’s accession to the EU. Some of the former political activists who fought for the country’s independence in the national liberation movement *Sąjūdis* in the late 1980s had gone so far as to suggest that the EU was hardly any different from the Soviet Union. In their view, both these political formations were the gravediggers of the European peoples and of their independence and liberty.

What can be said in this regard? No matter how critical or skeptical we could be of European bureaucracy or the new managerial class that ignore local sensibilities and cultural differences, such a comparison does not merit serious attention. Yet, this new sort of rhetoric sent a clear message that part of the former political and intellectual elite of Lithuania found themselves deeply alienated from the new political reality of Europe.

In ancient Athens, writes Venclova, Socrates died for his freedom of thought, doubt, and for the right to question everything. As we learned from Socrates, uncertainty is not the enemy of a wise man and an unexamined life is not worth living. These pieces of perennial wisdom became an inescapable part of critical European thought. For Strepsiades and his modern followers, everything has to be certain and easily predictable. Therefore, one’s little garden becomes more important than universal humanity. Whatever the case, says Venclova, it is Strepsiades, rather than the greatest cultural hero of Western Europe Socrates, who is alive and well in present Lithuania. According to him, to defend the pattern of identity and statehood of the nineteenth century, instead of modern moral and political sensibilities, is nothing other than a betrayal of the mission that intellectuals must carry.

The question remains quite timely and serious: What is the pattern of identity that Lithuania and two other Baltic States could main-
tain as a bridge between their precious cultural legacy and the world? In fact, an identity crisis is part of the search for identity. The Baltic States that surfaced to the world restoring their existence and securing their place in the political, mental and intellectual maps of the world, know it better than any other country or region on the globe.

**Memory Wars**

We are witnessing how a sinister tendency is increasingly getting stronger in the United States and in Europe. Politicians find themselves preoccupied with two domains that serve as a new source of inspiration: namely, privacy and history. Birth, death, and sex constitute the new frontiers on the political battlefields.

Politics is dying out nowadays if we define it as a translation of our moral and existential concerns into rational and legitimate action for the benefit of society and humanity. Instead it is becoming a set of managerial practices and skillful manipulations with public opinion. In this context, it is not unwise to assume that a swift politicization of privacy and history promises the way out of the present political and ideological vacuum. Suffice it to remember the bitter debates over abortion, euthanasia, and gay marriage over the past twenty or so years to conclude that the poor human individual continues to be regarded either as a property of the state and its institutions or, at best, as a mere instrument and hostage of a political doctrine.

There is nothing new under the sky, though. If we are to believe such incisive dystopian writers as Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell, or groundbreaking social theorists such as Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman, modernity always was, and continues to be, obsessed with how to get as much control over human body and soul as possible without physically exterminating people. The same is true with regard to society’s memory and collective sentiment. As we learn from George Orwell’s *1984*, history depends on who controls the archives and records. Since individuals have no other form of existence than that which is granted by the Party, personal memory has no power to create or restore history. But if memory is controlled or manufactured and updated every day, history degenerates into a justificatory and legitimizing design of power and control. Logically enough, this
leads the Inner Party to assert that who controls the past controls the future and who controls the present controls the past.

If you think that it does not make sense to refer to the Orwellian world any longer, please think about the memory wars in present Europe. That Russia has already become a revisionist power is obvious. Moreover, it attempts to rewrite the history of the twentieth century by rehabilitating Stalin and depicting him as merely a wise, albeit sometimes cruel, modernizer of Russia. In this narrative, Stalin appears as just another version of the Great Modernizer of the State like Peter the Great. Needless to say, an attempt to outlaw what is regarded in Russia as historical revisionism, that is, the criminalization of any effort to put into question whether the Soviet Union with its labor camps, overtly fascist practices, and anti-Semitism (for those who have doubts about this, please do recall the Holodomor in Ukraine or the methodical extermination of Russian Jews and Jewish culture under Stalin) was any better than Nazi Germany, has its logic.

By no means is all this about the past. Already during Mikhail Gorbachev’s reign, a plethora of decent and courageous Russian historians exposed the Soviet Union to have been a criminal state. Stalin was explicitly regarded as a criminal and paranoiac dictator who committed the most horrible crimes against humanity. The fact that Vladimir Putin’s Russia changed the interpretation of history nearly overnight shows that everything is about the present, rather than the past. Although the denial of the Holocaust is too complex a phenomenon to be confined to legal practices and administrative measures, Germany outlawed the denial of the Holocaust out of its firm commitment never to repeat its past. Russia cynically denies its occupation and annexation of the Baltic States, as well as its numerous crimes against European nations, because it is sending a message to us that it would gladly repeat recent history, restoring the past and rehabilitating a political doctrine which Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin’s Russia regarded as overtly criminal and hostile to Russia itself.

Under the circumstances, one could witness an attempt by the Baltic States and the Eastern-Central European nations to work out a viable antidote to Russia’s revisionism. However understandable and logical this attempt, the idea of the political and moral equivalency of Communism and National Socialism is not the most convincing way to do it. Western Europe and the United States will always take a deep
exception to the claim that the Holocaust and Soviet crimes were of the same nature. Therefore, something has to be done to untie this Gordian knot of history. I propose that our politicians and public figures stop romanticizing the political forces of 1941 that tried to save the independence of the Baltic States collaborating with the Nazis. The tragedy was that our countries were “liberated” from the Nazis by the Soviets, instead of Great Britain or the United States.

All in all, only political courage and moral integrity, rather than selective interpretation of history, can end the memory wars with Russia or with the far Left of Western Europe. We cannot allow Russia to distort history spreading ugly lies about the Baltic States as crypto-fascist countries. Yet, we have to be fair and sympathetic to the Holocaust survivors, who fear, and rightly so, that a simplistic and relativistic approach to the Shoah as, supposedly, one of many Holocausts in Europe becomes a sort of obfuscation and trivialization of the tragedy. History can never be left solely to politicians, no matter whether democratic or authoritarian. It is not the property of the political doctrine or regime that it serves. History, if properly understood, is the symbolic design of our existence and moral choices we make every day. Like human privacy, our right to study and critically question history is a cornerstone of freedom.

The Strange Birth of Liberal Lithuania

The American political theorist Mark Lilla once wrote a perceptive review essay on the New Right in France, which he entitled “The Strange Birth of Liberal France.” 15 This title, if slightly paraphrased, would be tailor-made to draw the attention to the adventures of liberalism in Central Europe.

In fact, we have to draw a strict dividing line here between Eastern European and Central European politics. Otherwise, we will be at the peril of missing the main point trying to understand the genesis of liberalism in Lithuania. At this point, Lithuania stands closer to the Central European pattern of post-communist politics than to that of East-

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ern Europe. No matter how similar the cases of endemic corruption, populism, and simplistic political reasoning in all post-Soviet countries, time flies, and Lithuania swiftly became to Moldova or Ukraine what Denmark used to be to Lithuania in the early 1990s—a model state, a benevolent patron, and nearly a rock star in public perception.

I will never forget how an Armenian colleague had once wittily explained to me the crucial difference between the logic of becoming a politician in Armenia and Ukraine. Whereas in Ukraine, he insisted with the stroke of subtle humor, you become rich and only then go to politics, things in Armenia are simple and straight: you go to politics to become rich. We would deceive ourselves by lightly assuming that we are an epoch away from this sort of politics. Much remains to be desired and even more so to be done in Lithuania to get closer to the level of the German political class; yet we deserve to be classified as a different case.

The matrix of Central European politics would shed more light on the strange birth of liberal Lithuania. What is that matrix? I would argue that it is a bipolar logic of political cleavages between the former establishment whose political offspring are still in the Soviet period, and the new one that came into existence after 1990. Whereas the former is essentially made up by the remnants of the Communist Party and therefore has a family resemblance name, be it Socialists or Social Democrats, the latter appears as a fiercely nationalistic and religious party. It is a Heimat-type party with an established moral monopoly of patriotism and local sensibility even if it claims more or less identifiable liberal ancestry (which is the case with Fidesz in Hungary).

Such a Heimat-type political lineage deeply permeated by religious and conservative value orientation is characteristic of the Homeland Union in Lithuania. In the European Parliament, this political formation is quite logically represented in the EPP—European People’s Party, the largest political family dominated by German Christian Democrats. Without a shadow of a doubt, the heirs to the former communist establishment in Central Europe are embraced by the second largest political family in the EP—that is, S&D, or the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

What is left of the hardcore communists and radical left in the EP is the GUE/NGL (European United Left—Nordic Green Left), which is known as home for a mishmash of left-wing radicals of various shades in Europe and pious communist believers from the for-
mer Soviet bloc. Among them nobody is really shocked by figures like Alfrēds Rubiks who can defend such despots and demagogues as the late Hugo Chavez or Alexander Lukashenko in a public debate with tears in their eyes.

And where are the liberals in this matrix? This is the pivotal question. They are doomed to be somewhere in between the two trying to fish in the muddy waters of ideological and political leftovers. This is not to say, however, that genuine liberals do not exist in Lithuania or elsewhere in Central Europe. Of course, they do. Yet the problem is that due to weak traditions of liberal thought and politics in Lithuania, they are relegated to the fringes or are scattered across the spectrum where they may find themselves in other parties that claim and use the same adjective “liberal.”

What happens frequently is that people who pass for liberals may well function anywhere across that same political spectrum—having been dismissed or forgotten elsewhere they become “newly discovered” liberals only due their inability to get closer to the distribution of power and prestige in other parties. Vladimir Tismaneanu once described a big part of Romanian liberals as an opportunistic and ad hoc political force; I am afraid, we could hardly avoid that same labeling.

The most difficult task is to consolidate the truly liberal electorate not only in Lithuania itself but across the UK and Europe as well. Young Lithuanians who study in British, German, Danish, Swedish, or American universities are leaning toward liberalism. Yet they are not always happy with an outdated not to say politically worn-out version of militant ideological liberalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with almost no attention for today’s moral and political sensibilities.

Unfortunately, such an out-of-date variety of liberalism if not libertarianism is presented in Lithuania as sensational news, which comes as an embarrassment to more sophisticated voters who would not exclude the sensitivities and values of center-left from the European and national liberal agenda. Political technocrats who parrot the vocabulary of American neoconservatives appear even more remote from inclusive liberalism able to tackle the most difficult challenges and dilemmas of our time. Therefore, it is high time to think. Otherwise, Lithuanian liberalism will be inexorably doomed to be merely a passing political fact that ceased existing without even having been properly born.
The Lithuanian Media, 1988–2013:
From Remembering to Forgetting

More than a quarter a century has passed since the year 1988 marked the beginning of the end for the former Soviet Union. The national rebirth movement of Lithuania, Sąjūdis, came into existence blazing the trail for Lithuania and other Soviet republics to freedom and independence. Gaining the momentum, consolidating symbolic power and authority, and making people believe that the time has come to change history and world politics restoring justice—all these magnificent things would have been beyond reach if the Lithuanian media had not changed the public domain almost overnight.

In fact, a happy combination of dedication, courage and passion made it possible, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to reform and refurbish the entire public domain of Lithuania. There was no secret in this: old Soviet professionalism deeply embedded in the abyss between specialized writing and political engagement retreated, thus allowing new ways of thinking and writing to step in. Quite a few columnists in the early 1990s came from literature and art criticism. Others were new figures in the media and press with their roots in civil and political protests generated by the Sąjūdis.

Suffice it to mention some celebrity writers who influenced and even shaped the then leading dailies, weeklies, and magazines. Such noted Lithuanian writers and essayists as Jurga Ivanauskaitė (1961–2007) and the aforementioned Ričardas Gavelis (1950–2002) served as columnists for the daily Respublika. Incredible as it sounds, Respublika, especially notorious now for its anti-Semitic and homophobic editorials and slanderous writings, once was home for Ivanauskaitė’s writings on society and culture, and also for Gavelis’s brilliant essays.

Later Gavelis would begin working with the magazine Veidas whose closing section was reserved solely for his provocative, caustic, and ironic pieces. Rolandas Rastauskas, one of the most renowned essayists in Lithuania, was writing his essays exclusively for Lietuvos rytas. All these publications may be said to have greatly benefited from the talent of the aforementioned writers.

The late Gintaras Beresnevičius (1961–2006), a cultural historian and public intellectual who was able to easily surpass any political
commentator in terms of the power and novelty of insight, was a true heir to this characteristically Lithuanian tradition of having a bright humanist capable of lending his or her talent to social analysis and political comment. He was a true heir to Gavelis. Not for a long time, alas. Ivanauskaitė, Gavelis, and Beresnevičius died very young.

What happened next was the swift deterioration of the level of public discourse. The Pandora Box was opened up. Everybody was welcome to comment online, and the debate was measured by sheer commercial success. Quality of thought and expression was not an issue anymore. Lithuanian online publications allowed and even warmly welcomed anonymous comments underneath serious essays and professional comments. These anonymous pearls of wisdom always were and continue to be full of anger, frustration, hatred, ad hominem attacks, overt anti-Semitic remarks, homophobic insinuations, and even more frequently—personal insults, poisonous darts, and toxic lies. This is the ugly face of our media, an aspect which distorted all good and novel things in Lithuanian online press that were brought about by freedom of expression and fundamental political change.

Yet medium is the message. This piece of Marshall McLuhan’s creative genius and powers of anticipation strikes us as a prophecy of the twenty-first century. The idiom, form, language, political and moral sensibilities, and figures of speech—everything had gone with the wind of change overnight. Paper dailies and magazines began dying out right under our noses. The electronic portals started changing the landscape of the Lithuanian media dramatically. It was not that people lost their souls and sensitivities. Instead, Lithuania joined the twenty-first-century world. The old European world had more to lose, though. The post-communist world proved keener to change beyond recognition.

The brutality of the language, along with poor editing and undifferentiated attitudes both to professional assessments and sporadic mass opinions discouraged many gifted authors from writing political commentaries or else contributing to online publications. It was possible that ill manners and sadomasochistic language became a mask on the face of intellectual and moral void. Lack of content and political void, rather than merely an outbreak of stupidity, seems to have been the real reason behind confusion and uncertainty.

In the 1990s, Lithuania had high hopes concerning its bright future: it had a grand narrative and a self-legitimizing discourse of our
return to Europe. On a closer look at our internal debates, it appears that part of our bitter disappointment springs from a radical change of roles: as Oscar Wilde would have had it, it is the horror of Ariel who sees in himself the mirror image of Caliban.

The country entered the phase of organized forgetting. Ours is an age of oblivion. Once we were struck by Milan Kundera’s message in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* that the sad news about the tragedy of Prague as seen through Teresa’s photographs in Switzerland (where she and Tomas come to save their lives and future after the crushing of the velvet revolution of 1968) turned out old news. This is exactly what is happening in Lithuania. The best of our culture and thought is old news. The country and its media are sadly confined to TV reality shows, *Vanity Fair*, and private lives of public figures, which is just another term for showbiz figures.

This is not to say that Lithuania is incapable of good press and quality media. It is rather to suggest that the country seems to have next to nothing to remember and even less to celebrate but political scandals and the ups and downs of its political clowns.