

SOVIET LITHUANIA: A FAILED CONSERVATIVE EXPERIMENT?

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ABSTRACT As scholars of international relations have noted, the Cold War, which ended with the defeat of the Soviet Union was largely a propaganda war (Halliday), based on conflicting values. Yet it was not a war between the communist and capitalist moral systems; rather, it was a war between the traditionalist conservative values, promoted in the USSR when Stalin came to power and liberal or, so-called 'progressive' values.

While the capitalist West was able to accommodate the values of the 1968 sexual revolution and the further spread of various rights, the Soviet Union clung to a version of Victorian morals in the USSR. When Stalin came to power, the Soviet Union was oriented not towards the future in terms of morality, (what Marxism is alleged to be all about), but firmly towards the past.

In the light of its values the period of Sąjūdis can be characterized, on one hand, as an uneasy alliance between the traditionalists, for whom the Soviet regime was oppressive mainly because of the loss of national sovereignty and the oppression of the Catholic Church, without having any major disagreements about morals, and the West-looking part of Lithuanian society, longing for developments similar to those in the West. To borrow the dichotomy from Isaiah Berlin, the Lithuanian independence movement had one part striving for collective, positive freedom and another, which strove for negative, personal freedom and the advancement of human rights.

This dichotomy is still present in Lithuania and the system of morality, preserved by the Soviet period, is the base on which the traditionalist position stands.

The aim of this presentation is to reflect the impact that the Soviet period had on the current state of liberal values in Lithuania. It is important for answering the question as to whether Lithuania and 'Old Europe' are living in the same period? Our goal here is to map out future research and thus in places we will only scratch the surface of issues. Some of the insights from this presentation have been touched upon already by L. Donskis, V. Laučius, R. Lopata and others but the conclusions drawn here are different.

As the cultural and political Left together with liberals advocate the advancement of ‘traditional’ liberal human rights, the Left stands for gender equality, equal rights for sexual minorities, children’s, and so forth, while harshly criticising notions of the traditional family, exposing marriage as just another case of ‘false consciousness’, and reproducing oppressive patriarchal values. If we are looking at the same agenda in the USSR we see, that it was based on very conservative positions; we will come back to this later. Already in the 1930s, Stalin promoted a return to extremely conservative values. Moreover, this moral discourse is uncomfortably similar to that of conservative traditionalists in Lithuania today.

The term ‘conservative’ in this text means ‘traditionalist’. It is that juncture where conservatism, being a very broad and ambiguous set of values, attitudes and moral positions, can come close to the extreme cultural right¹. Here it should be noted that in the political Lithuanian landscape the populist party *Tvarka ir teisingumas* (Order and Justice) is more conservative in the traditional sense than the Lithuanian Conservative Party *Tėvynės Sąjunga-Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai* (Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats). However, certain positions place these parties very close together, where values are concerned. Of course, traditionally conservative values are much more collectivist and closer to socialism in this matter, than to liberalism.

Complaints about the current situation, and the search for someone to blame for it leads to the usual scapegoat – the Soviet past. The conservatives and those on the economic right use name calling (references to ‘homo sovieticus’) as a trump card in dealing with the trades unions and those on the left. The development of human rights and the better treatment of various minorities by the traditionalists are interpreted in the light that because somehow the New Left *is* connected with the Soviet project and so the Lithuanians should reject all the non-conservative and non-nationalist positions as somehow being Soviet. It is to be implied that traditionalist positions are based on a high level of public uncertainty-avoidance on the psychological level.²

However, are egalitarian values (demands for social justice among the citizens) in the post-Soviet societies really relics from the Soviet past? Alternatively, are conservative traditionalists by-products of the

¹ V. Laučius, *Konservatizmo takoskyros* (Vilnius, 2006).

² G. Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (London, 1991).

Soviet experiment themselves? Firstly, it is important to emphasise that the cultural dimension is very important in the right–left political spectrum, so that we have to deal with two axes – economic and cultural. If we add the cultural dimension, it is easier to trace ideological differences between parties. Liberals culturally are on the left – promoting broad changes for the sake of the individual, and economically on the right, supporting a free market. Christian-Democrats culturally would be on the right, supporting traditional values, and economically on the left. The *Rerum novarum* encyclical of Leo XIII, issued in 1891, provides Christian grounds for the trade unions and the welfare state. At the same time egalitarianism can be typical of a nation, which was formerly part of an empire, when all members of the nation are treated as having the same status, excluding those, who are ethnically and culturally different. That is one of the explanations of Eastern European anti-Semitism.

The failure of the Soviet state to follow the Marxist path has been discussed widely since the Stalinist period. In 1957, Milovan Djilas of Yugoslavia in his book *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*³ indicated the lack of egalitarianism in the European communist countries and the development of the new ruling class. Mikhail Voslensky explored the same topic in his influential analysis *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class*⁴ written in 1984. This line of thinking emphasises the hierarchical nature of the Soviet society, which by its nature is much closer to authoritarian or conservative positions, than to the egalitarian leftist understanding.

The notion that the Bolshevik coup in Russia contradicted Marxist theory itself was indicated even by leftist revolutionaries such as Antonio Gramsci. In the famous passage from the introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx stated:

No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions for their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or at least in the process of formation.⁵

³ M. Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (New York, 1982).

⁴ M. Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class* (New York, 1984).

⁵ Quoted in J.H. Hallowell, J.M. Porter, *Political Philosophy* (Scarborough, ONT, 1997), p. 587.

The said productive forces in the Russian empire were heavily underdeveloped. In Russia, there were only five million industrial workers out of a population of 150 million and more than 80 per cent of the population were peasants. It is actually possible to interpret the Russian revolution as being premature and harmful for Marxist utopianism.

Although it is a very interesting topic, we are not trying to explain why the Communist project did not take off in the USSR. What is of real interest and importance here is the dimension of moral values in the USSR.

As has already been indicated, under Stalin the USSR was based on a conservative system of morality. On this dimension, no revolutionary break with the past happened in the Soviet Union. Despite official contempt for 'bourgeois values', the USSR embodied those values, and it held a very Victorian interpretation of them.

From 1930, major significance was attached to the family, which was interpreted very traditionally, emphasising monogamy, having a negative attitude towards premarital sex and not tolerating cohabitation. Being divorced or even single could affect a person's career prospects rather badly.

This state policy was relaxed in 1967 and 1968, yet social practices did not change much. In the context of permanent shortages of apartments, only married couples had a real chance of obtaining a separate living space. The system of traditional morality would be reproduced as young people were very dependent on their parents when starting adult life and traditionally-minded parents had the last say in opposing a young couple's moving in together (as parents controlled the living space) without being married.

It is also important to stress that alternative sexual orientation was repressed severely in the USSR. From 1934, Article 121 of the Criminal Code of the USSR defined homosexual relations as a crime punishable by five years in prison. A good illustration of the position towards alternative sexual orientation is the often-used quote from the well-known Soviet book on sexual education:

Homosexuality challenges both normal heterosexual relationships and society's cultural, moral attainments. It therefore merits condemnation both as a social phenomenon and as a specific person's behaviour and mental attitude.⁶

⁶ A.G. Khripkova, D.V. Kolesov, *Malchik – podrostok – iunoshka* (Moscow, 1982), pp. 96–100.

Soviet traditionalism is seen clearly also, when looking at the situation of arts. In 1932, the development of the avant-garde, so important for introducing new ideas and social developments, was stopped and the direction of Socialist realism was promoted forcefully by the state. Form and content were often limited, with erotic, religious, abstract, surrealist and expressionist art being forbidden. These policies were continued after Stalin's death. In 1974, a show of unofficial art in a field near Moscow was broken up, and the artworks destroyed with a water cannon and bulldozers. Avant-garde art, jazz, rock, and youth subcultures that were in many instances close to the cultural left in the twentieth century world, were suppressed in the USSR, with traditional art, folk, classical and realism being officially encouraged trends, strengthening the conservative collective mindset.

With the Soviet occupation, the leftist orientations and values in formerly authoritarian Lithuania did not get a stronger hand (contrary to the arguments of the current 'Right' in Lithuania) precisely because the Stalinist regime did not promote them. Quite the contrary, apart from the economical dimension, the policies of nationalization, and the fight against 'private initiative', the moral dimension was left intact. In fact the traditionalist nationalist mentality, stripped of the possibility to express its political goals explicitly, was used by the Soviet regime to encourage traditional Lithuanian nationalism somewhat, as for instance, in official interpretations of the history of Lithuanian relations with Poland. The Norwegian researcher Kjetil Duvold discusses the effect of the Leninist regimes on the former Eastern Europe:

Crawford and Lijphart (1995) have listed five fundamental Communist legacies (i) history of 'backwardness'; (ii) lack of successor elite; (iii) weak party systems; (iv) interrupted nation-building; (v) the endurance of old institutions; and (vi) after-effects of command economy.

Finally, it is worth mentioning a type of legacy ... absent on Crawford and Lijphart list, namely *values*. Some might argue that decades of state socialism generated political passivity, authoritarian and patriarchal political values, and deep suspicion towards elites (Eckstein et al. 1998). Along a slightly different dimension, communist rule may also have affected general attitudes towards economic redistribution and the role of the state as a provider of social goods: some kind of "welfare paternalism" – perhaps similar to trends found in, for instance, Scandinavia, but obviously without the resources to 'feed'

it anymore. An interesting supplement to this “values argument” is the sheer *isolation* of Eastern Europe for so many decades, which prevented citizens – entire societies – from taking part in and adapting to changing international norms, let alone societal and cultural trends that were dominant in the so-called ‘free world’.⁷

Elaborating on this observation by Duvold, it is very important to note that the above-mentioned authoritarian and patriarchal political values were not generated, but rather preserved by the Soviet occupation from the interwar period and the Russian empire. The same goes for economic redistribution – the nation states created in place of the old empires had to effect land reform to redistribute the land and thus change social hierarchies. That is why under such circumstances the strong tendency towards egalitarian values (among the titular ethnicity!) is felt, providing ground for the corporatist tendencies. In fact, in the interwar period the authoritarian corporatist state was a political trend, with Lithuania being no exception.

The legacy of the Soviet Union is the fact that it preserved and further strengthened the belief that there should be one solution to social problems. Lithuania is facing a big problem in understanding pluralism and tolerance. As Sir Ralph Dahrendorf said in an oft-quoted interview: ‘If we don’t manage to regulate conflict, if we try to ignore it, or if we try to create a world of ultimate harmony, we are quite likely to end up with worse conflicts than if we accept the fact that people have different interests and different aspirations, and devise institutions in which it is possible for people to express these differences, which is what democracy, in my view, is about. Democracy, in other words, is not about the emergence of some unified view from “the people”, but it’s about organizing conflict and living with conflict’.⁸

The problem with consolidating democracy in Lithuania lies in the failure to understand that members of each social group have their own rightful interests, and in the lack of dialogue. Although different intellectuals and public figures on the political Right in Lithuania are mourning a stillborn civil society, they are neglecting their own impact on that. From the beginning of the re-establishment of independence, the trade unions and collective action on the part

⁷ K. Duvold, *Making Sense of Baltic Democracy: Public Support and Political Representation in Nationalising States* (Örebro, 2006), p. 56.

⁸ Quoted in K. Allan, *The Social Lens: An Invitation to Social and Sociological Theory* (Thousand Oaks, 2010), p. 242.

of employees have been vilified in most of the media and by public figures as relics from the Soviet past, or communist irrational irresponsibility. (Although, as we have seen, egalitarianism should not be associated only with Marxism.) This means that dialogue is virtually non-existent in Lithuania. Instead of discussion, those on the political right are advocating the only solution to the situation – the wealthy ‘leading’ the rest. This traditionalist conservative model was preserved during the Soviet period, where the gap between the ruling class (*nomenklatura*) and the rest of the society was enormous, and in the re-established Lithuanian state, this mindset is combined with neoliberal economics. This lack of dialogue is fuelling extremist nationalist tendencies when cries for preserving traditional culture against the influence of the morally ‘decadent West’, and for social justice (for the titular nationals) are becoming stronger and more dangerous.

As scholars of international relations have noted, the Cold War, which ended with the defeat of the Soviet Union was largely a war of propaganda (Halliday 1994), based on conflicting values. Yet it was not a war between communist and capitalist moral systems; rather it was a conflict between the traditionalist conservative values, promoted in the USSR since Stalin came to power, and the liberal or so-called ‘progressive’ values, or, to put it slightly differently, between spiritual’ (in a broad sense) and consumer values. Even today, looking at Russia, the notion that Russia is different from the West, being much more spiritual (also due to the Soviet past) is rather widespread. Again, talking with many a Lithuanian traditionalist, we see that they tend to value Russian culture much more than Western culture for the same reasons.

The capitalist West was able to accommodate the values of the 1968 sexual revolution and the further spread of various rights, to the great distress of Herbert Marcuse and the extreme left, and it provided for progressive social developments. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was desperately clinging to Victorian morals (the famous bon mot to the effect that ‘there is no sex in the USSR’ sums up the situation rather neatly) and this was one of the sources for the crisis of legitimacy in the USSR. When Stalin came to power, morally-speaking, the Soviet Union was oriented not towards the future, (which is what Marxism, allegedly, is all about) but firmly towards the past.

In the light of their values the Sąjūdis period and the Lithuanian national revival can be characterised as an uneasy alliance between traditionalists, for whom the Soviet regime was unacceptable mainly

because of the loss of national sovereignty, and oppression of the Catholic Church, while having no major disagreements about morality on one hand, and the Western looking part of Lithuanian society, longing for developments similar to those in the West on the other hand. To borrow a dichotomy from Isaiah Berlin⁹, the Lithuanian independence movement contained one part striving for collective, positive freedom and another, which strove for negative, personal freedom and the advancement of human rights.

This dichotomy is still present in Lithuania and the system of morals, preserved by the Soviet period, forms the base on which the position of the traditionalists stands and obscures understanding of broader social and historical trajectories. Unfortunately, the position of traditionalists is pushing Lithuania back into the Russian sphere of influence, first of all in the moral dimension.

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LTSR: ŽLUGĘS KONSERVATYVUS PROJEKTAS?

Santrauka

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Tarptautinių santykių tyrinėtojai pažymi, kad Šaltasis karas, pasibaigęs Sovietinės sistemos pralaimėjimu, iš esmės buvo propagandos karas, pagrįstas konfliktuojančiomis vertybinėmis sistemomis. Tačiau tai nebuvo karas tarp komunistinės ir kapitalistinės moralės sistemų – tai buvo kova tarp tradicionalistinių konservatyvių vertybių, skatintų SSRS Stalinui atėjus į valdžią, ir liberalių, arba vadinamųjų „progresyvių“ vertybių. Kapitalistiniai Vakarai sugebėjo perimti „1968“ vertybes, seksualinę revoliuciją ir tolesnę įvairių teisių plėtrą, o Sovietų Sąjunga kabinosi į Viktorijos laikų moralės variantą. Tai buvo viena iš legitimumo krizės SSRS priešasčių. Stalinui atėjus į valdžią, Sovietų Sąjunga moralės požiūriu nebuvo orientuota į ateitį, o tai iš esmės būdinga ir svarbu marksizmui, – ji buvo tvirtai orientuota į praeitį.

Vertybių požiūriu Sąjūdžio epocha gali būti apibūdinta kaip nelengva sąjunga tarp tradicionalistų ir į Vakarus orientuotos Lietuvos visuomenės dalies, siekusios vertybinės plėtros, panašios į vakarietišką. Performuluojant I. Berlino mintį, pirmieji siekė kolektyvinės, pozityvios laisvės, o antriesiems svarbiausia buvo negatyvi, individuali laisvė. Šis pasidalijimas išlikęs ir šiandieninėje Lietuvoje.

⁹ I. Berlin, *Vienovė ir įvairovė* (Vilnius, 1995), pp. 271–333.