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LITHUANIA DECLARES INDEPENDENCE FROM THE USSR

by Ina Navazelskis

Sunday, March 11, was overcast, wet. A light drizzle fell, sometimes escalating into rain, sometimes tapering off into mist. It did not seem the kind of day that anything much should happen - certainly not anything as momentous as declaring a nation's independence.

The streets of Vilnius were empty. Only some 300 - 500 people, braving the clammy weather, waited outside the Supreme Soviet (aka Parliament, aka the Supreme Council) in the heart of the Lithuanian capital. A few had been there from as early as 8 A.M. (The morning session only began at 10 A.M.) As evening fell, some people held lighted candles, shielding the flames from the rain. Others pressed flowers into the arms of their heroes -- the newly elected parliamentarians -- who occasionally appeared in the front courtyard. The crowd sang, cried, clapped. Some people shouted "Vytautas" (calling for Sajudis leader Vytautas Landsbergis); others simply said "Ačiu!" (Thank you!).

It was not anywhere near the mass turnouts of hundreds of thousands of people, so common over the past few years. But to participate in this, the parliamentary manifestation of the "reestablishment of the Lithuanian state" it was not necessary to be present in body -- spirit was enough. So most people in Lithuania sat at home, glued to their television sets. Independence was thus witnessed in private circles of family and friends.

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That did not make it any less THE national public experience. When at 10.44 P.M. Vytautas Landsbergis, the newly elected President of the Parliament, declared that "The act has been passed. I congratulate the Supreme Council; I congratulate Lithuania" one knew, without actually seeing it, that champagne corks popped and tears flowed across the country. It was all a bit mind-boggling. Less than two years ago, independence had still been the subversive idea, the forbidden word, the unreachable goal. (Indeed, only a few brave souls nervously floated the notion of "sovereignty" for the republic.) Now, all of a sudden, here it was -- in living technicolor.

Television had made this a shared public experience; yet, it was also intensely personal. Older people remembered what it had meant to survive fifty years without independence. Its loss in 1940 -- sanctioned by two great dictators, one a neighbor to the east (Stalin), the other to the west (Hitler) -- had ushered in an era that signalled more than foreign occupation, more than a new ideological order. It was an era that had mercilessly destroyed people; thousands physically, many more spiritually. From the dissidents who only recently sat in Soviet jails for having dared to openly demand independence -- a handful, including Balys Gajauskas (a 37 year veteran of Soviet prisons) were now newly-elected parliamentarians -- to those Communist Party apparatchiks who secretly gnashed their teeth each humiliating time Moscow reminded them who was boss, to the collective farm workers who bitterly remembered that once, before deportations (which for thousands meant death), they had owned their own land -- tragic individual destinies spanned several generations.

But how did a nation, so clearly defeated, manage to resurrect itself from "the dustheap of history"? (to borrow a phrase that Leon Trotsky once used to consign Russian anarchists)

Although strong-armed by Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler, and forcibly annexed to the Soviet Union in 1940, Lithuania had never been entirely vanquished. At first there had even been armed resistance. As the Red Army began its march on Berlin in late 1944, a bloody guerilla war broke out in Lithuania. It dragged on until 1953. Although there are no concrete statistics (yet), it is estimated that the cost was at least 50,000 lives --this in a country of less than 3 million people. And it all happened on the heels of World War II, when Lithuania was several times the battleground between Nazi and Soviet forces.

In the post-war Europe that emerged, such resistance was of course doomed. Outwardly it looked as if most people had finally, however unwillingly, accepted defeat and with it, the new status quo. But over the years the need to delineate an identity separate from the violently imposed Soviet one -- inwardly Lithuanians always groaned whenever foreigners mistook them for Russians -- became a form of resistance that had a power all its own.

That resentment, that stubbornness, that unwillingness to reshape themselves into prescribed versions of "homo sovieticus"* laid the necessary psychological foundations to resurrect the goal of political independence. Although for decades submerged, such resistance found expression in ways both subtle and creative. It very rarely was political -- at least not in the direct sense. It could not afford to be.

Setting The Stage

For 61 year old architect Algirdas Nasvytis, for example, resistance meant following his own inner vision professionally. For him, March 11 marked the ultimate reward after 20 years of discreet but determined effort. As the chief architect of the Lithuanian Parliament, years ago Algirdas Nasvytis, together with his twin brother, Vytautas, consciously, quietly, and quite literally set about building the stage for Lithuanian independence.

Their work began in 1970, when the brothers won a republic-wide competition to design a new government complex. Given their bourgeois pedigree, the award of this contract was unusual. Neither brother was a member of the Communist Party. And their connection, through a cousin's marriage, to the family of the ultimate persona non grata -- Antanas Smetona, who was the former president of Lithuania from 1926-1940 -- was even more incriminating.

Their ideological unsuitability was overlooked, but the step from blueprint to building nevertheless took over ten years. (This was, after all, still the Soviet Union.) Today, the entire modern government complex is located at the end of Vilnius' mile-long central boulevard, Gediminas Prospect -- known until last year as Lenin Prospect. Parliament itself is a modern square four story white building with large rectangular orange tinted glass windows. In front, three sides extend out to frame an airy open courtyard. In back, Parliament is buttressed by the Ministry of Finance and the Trade Union Council buildings. Flanked on one side by the Neris River, on the other by the Mazvydas State Library, (an imposing structure reminiscent of a Greek temple), Parliament is separated from them by a vast concrete plaza -- ideal space for rallies and demonstrations.

Inside the main entrance, immediately to the right of huge brass double doors, a desk with phones in various colors is manned by militia men, who check everyone's ID cards. The airy foyer -- the ceiling is two and a half stories high -- is lined on both sides by plush brown velvet armchairs and modular sofa sections. (occupied, during the past month, mostly by weary foreign TV crews.) A staircase on the left leads up to a hastily set up Press

* (The official ideology touted internationalism; yet it was a given that the ideal New Soviet Man was Russian).

room (second floor) and President's office (third floor). A staircase on the right leads up to offices of Presidium members and a large conference room (also third floor). Two other staircases, recessed at the back, lead to the central chamber of Parliament itself. The center of the main lobby, a sunken enclave, is also lined with sofas -- ideal for discreet and comfortable lobbying.

The total effect is functional, spacious, business-like. While there are none of the signs of wealth, such as gleaming brass fixtures or smooth imported marble, so often found in modern buildings in Western countries, there is also an absence of the shoddiness so common in structures throughout Eastern Europe. (All the materials used to build and furnish Parliament, save for granite floors from the Ukraine, and the orange-tinted as well as stained glass windows from East Germany, were produced in Lithuania.)

As he sat inside the central chamber in Parliament recently, architect Algirdas Nasvytis fit in well with the environment he created. He wore a light yellow shirt and sported a dark mustard colored suede jacket. He sat in an flap seat upholstered in a deep golden fabric, and scanned walls that were a neutral beige. A diminutive man with thinning wavy silver hair, Nasvytis clearly favored the same color schemes -- various hues of beige and gold -- in his personal attire as well as his interior design.

He definitely did not look like someone who rebelled against the established order. But Nasvytis is a perfect example of that subtle resistance to Sovietization which at first glance is usually not recognizable. Some Lithuanians themselves mistook it for something else entirely. The comments Nasvytis heard when Parliament first opened its doors in late 1983 testify as much. Why, he was then asked, had he designed such a nice building for those rotten Communists? Because, he answered, "someday a real Parliament will appear," and then "the building will be ours."

Nasvytis had purposely designed Parliament to easily accommodate such a monumental change. If you look closely, he explained, you cannot find any permanently built-in symbols heralding the "Soviet Socialist" part of the Lithuanian Republic. Neither the two large bronze reliefs on either side of the entrance to the building -- which show human figures moving in the same direction -- nor the stained glass windows in the lobby display the well-known Soviet hammer and sickle. And, added Nasvytis, those Soviet symbols that are in place -- such as two large bronze Soviet Lithuanian crests -- one above the main entrance and the other in the central chamber -- can easily be removed. Nasvytis recalled that when the building was first completed, the president of the Supreme Soviet at the time noticed this peculiar absence as well, but did nothing about it.

The Power of Symbols

Maybe he should have. On March 11, those Soviet symbols disappeared just as easily as Nasvytis predicted that they would. At about 7 P.M., as foreign television cameras rolled, theater director Jonas Jurašas, one of the honored guests at the day's ceremonies, directed perhaps one of the more politically satisfying acts of his career. (Jurašas had left Lithuania in 1974 after publicly resisting censorship of one of his plays; he went on to direct productions both on- and off Broadway. Now he was back for an extended visit, directing a play at the repertory company from which he had been kicked out almost 20 years earlier.) As a few young men climbed up to tear down the bronze Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic crest above the front entrance to Parliament, Jurašas shouted out directions from below. Later, a batik tapestry featuring a medieval knight on a horse, (a traditional Lithuanian symbol called a Vytis), was hung in the empty space.

It was rumored that this entire spectacle was not so much a spontaneous act as the inspiration of foreign television crews, who of course had nothing against capturing a split-second visual that said it all... If so, their suggestions were more than willingly accepted. But there really was no need to suggest anything. The removal of Soviet symbols was written into the ceremonies. Later in the evening in Parliament's central chamber, as the tri-color yellow, green and red Lithuanian national flag covered the second Soviet Lithuanian crest behind the rostrum, people stood and clapped.

Thus the hammer and sickle disappeared from the citadel of Lithuanian government; and the much-revered symbols from a longed-for past were restored. The national flag, the Vytis, the Posts of Gediminas -- all these traditional Lithuanian symbols had been adopted by the independent government during the inter-war years. They therefore represented not only cultural and national traditions, but the one brief period in modern Lithuanian history when she was free from foreign domination, and which, quite understandably, the Soviet Union sought to stamp out from living memory. It is not surprising that only two years ago the public display of reminders from that time -- even for a furtive few minutes -- was enough to earn one a hefty jail sentence. That, however, only increased their value. (Last year, when the novelty of displaying national symbols was still new, I asked one man why there was so much emotion attached to what were, after all, merely representations of things. He answered by relating an incident from his own childhood. In 1940, soon after the Soviet occupation, he saw a Red Army officer kick the corpse of a Lithuanian soldier, who wore the Posts of Gediminas on his uniform. The man was then ten years old. That was the last time, he said, that he had seen this medieval Lithuanian crest in public.)

In summer, 1988, the appearance of these long-forbidden symbols had signalled the beginning of the opposition movement, Sajudis. Meetings, demonstrations, grass-roots initiatives all followed. They were all important gestures, awakening a common spirit amongst Lithuanians that people had thought had long ago been extinguished. The culmination, the most important gesture of them all, was the declaration of independence. In keeping with all the events leading up to it -- all of which were extraordinarily indicative of the turbulence in society -- it too, was entirely symbolic.

For the independence declaration to have been more than that, other signs -- less evocative, but more substantial, such as one's own tanks and one's own currency -- would have had to have been in place. But the soldiers in the streets -- most of whom spoke no Lithuanian -- still wore Soviet uniforms, and the currency one used to buy bread was still the Soviet ruble. At certain moments it seemed that the new Lithuanian leadership believed if the sacred word "independence" was repeated often enough, it might actually become reality. (It reminded me of a phrase Khrushchev once uttered, "You want it so badly, but Mama says no.")

Symbols Have Limits

The enthusiasm for independence was of course real enough; the tears shed in front of television sets around the country were real enough. After all, in the February 24th elections to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet, the Sajudis candidates had campaigned on the platform that their fundamental purpose was to reestablish the independent Lithuanian state. They were simply following through on that promise. And although sudden, in Lithuania the declaration wasn't really a surprize. Most political activists here had predicted that it would be declared sometime this year. But as recently as a month ago, few would have said it would happen so soon.

In practical terms, everyone recognized just how unprepared Lithuania is. She has no military force to back up the move, no reserves of food (although food products are a substantial part of the republic's national product) no raw materials, no gold.

The declaration was thus an act of will rather than of reason. Of course, there were various rationalizations offered for why it made cold sound sense to declare independence NOW. The most compelling one was that the Extraordinary Third Session of the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, scheduled to begin in Moscow on March 12, would pass amendments to the Soviet Constitution making it almost impossible to leave the Union. In addition, it was expected that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev would be named to the newly created post of President, and would have the means to consolidate almost dictatorial powers. Neither of these events boded well for Lithuanian interests; it was thought that declaring independence before all this took place would give Lithuania greater leverage juridically. (A joke making the rounds in Vilnius

these past few days: Q: Why is Gorbachev in such a hurry to become President of the Soviet Union? A: So that when he meets with Vytautas Landsbergis, he will feel like an equal.")

But was that all that was necessary to push Lithuania over the brink? At one point before the February 24th elections, Vytautas Landsbergis hinted at another reason: Lithuanians were simply fed up. "Fifty years is enough," he said, adding that if it was not too soon for the Berlin Wall to come down, not too soon to talk about East Germany reuniting with West Germany, then it was not too soon to talk about Lithuania's independence. "We are ready," Landsbergis said -- even if the rest of the world is not.

So, during the two weeks preceding March 11, the momentum in Lithuania suddenly speeded up. The sentiment emerged: Either now or never. It became nothing less than political suicide to urge restraint. To be against independence now was equated with being against independence, period.

Throughout February, almost all Lithuanians I spoke with were unhesitating in their support of independence. Typical was a 70 year old man, a former airplane pilot. I stopped him on a street in Vilnius' Old Town and asked him what he thought about Lithuania declaring independence. His face was lined with wrinkles, he had piercing blue eyes, and he carried hefty shopping bags. His answer came fast and unequivocal. "I would live on bread and water," he said, "just give me freedom." And he pointed to his Russian wife, who stood off to the side, smiling. "She thinks so, too," he added.

He was echoed by a 60-year old physician, Petras Tulevičius. Interviewed on February 24th at his polling place, a local school in Vilnius' Antakalnis district, Tulevičius said that he had voted for the Sajudis candidate. Why? "Sajudis is the only force in which I can believe," he said. "The most important thing for us is to go out from the Soviet Union." And he recalled, "I was ten years old when Lithuania lost independence. I remember the day the Russians came with tanks. I could not understand everything, but I could understand that something was very bad."

After half a century, during which time Lithuanians were erased from international consciousness -- there were also concentrated efforts to erase them from the earth -- was the argument that they were now being impatient entirely fair?

The Elections to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet

Still, public support and psychological readiness alone are not enough to explain the rush. There was also another reason, one common to elections the world over: The winners wanted to secure their power. A minority of idealistic, disillusioned Lithuanians -- in addition to the naturally disgruntled losers -- said, "This declaration is merely a means for some Sajudis individuals to be written into the history books." It was of course much more than that. But it was that too.

For Sajudis, which won such a landslide, still felt threatened by the independent Lithuanian Communist Party (LCP). In forcing the issue now -- the LCP preferred a more gradual, less drastic approach to independence -- some Sajudis activists hoped the LCP would balk. It could then be "unmasked", revealing to the entire nation that it really was still the same old morally bankrupt Party pledged to do Moscow's bidding rather than Lithuania's.

But why was Sajudis so alarmed? After all, the LCP had been trounced in the elections. In the entire 72-year history of the Soviet Union, for the first time non-Communists emerged as victors. Indeed, in the first round of elections, 59 of the newly-elected deputies were non-Communists. Forty-eight belonged to no party at all.

During that first round, Sajudis won a full 80% of the seats. (There were 141 seats in all; 90 were decided on February 24. Of that 90, Sajudis-backed candidates won 72 seats (or 80%); of those 72, only 15 went to LCP candidates who ran under the Sajudis banner. On its own, the LCP won only 12 seats.)

By the time the first session of the new Parliament convened on Saturday, March 10, 133 of the 141 seats had been decided. 98 went to Sajudis-backed candidates (of which 22 were LCP members.) 24 went to LCP candidates not backed by Sajudis. The LCP, therefore, had a total of 46 seats in Parliament. 6 seats went to the rump Communist Party (LCP/CPSU platform) still loyal to Moscow. The rest were held by those few deputies supported neither by the LCP or Sajudis.

With only 22 LCP deputies not backed by Sajudis elected to the Parliament, it was perfectly clear that this was a resounding vote against the party. As Algimantas Cekuolis -- newspaper editor, executive council member of Sajudis, AND member of the LCP -- succinctly put it, "Just to be in the role of 50 years of collaboration is a sin" which Lithuania's voters would not easily forgive.

Nevertheless, the LCP, discredited, its days as a ruling force numbered, had staged a certain comeback. Under the direction of First Secretary Algirdas Brazauskas, the LCP's dramatic split from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in December, 1989, gave the Party a fighting chance in the February elections. Support was of course very modest -- one pre-election poll showed only 12% of the respondents saying that they would vote for it. But for the first time in half a century, that support was genuine. And in late December, for a brief ephemeral moment, the LCP even managed to steal the limelight from Sajudis. Just after the LCP officially broke away from Moscow, people poured into the streets the day after Christmas to cheer Brazauskas. The Party's ranks were thinning out; party cards were being returned daily. Yet at that moment, a few hardy individualists, who never would have imagined it a year ago, actually joined the Party.

But the LCP did more than just steal some of Sajudis' thunder. It coopted the core of its political platform as well. In a dramatic break with past policy, the LCP now adopted political independence -- not autonomy, not sovereignty -- as the basic cornerstone of its program. During elections the previous year (March, 1989) to the all-Union Council of People's Deputies, the LCP's policy had been quite different. "We cannot cross that line" from sovereignty to independence, Brazauskas had said to me in an interview then. (The LCP paid dearly for that position. Of the 42 seats up for election in Lithuania to the Council of People's Deputies, 36 went to Sajudis-backed candidates.)

But the February 24th, 1990 elections to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet were an entirely different matter. At least officially, there was no longer any significant distinction between the goals of both major political forces in Lithuania, Sajudis and the LCP. Unlike the year before, voters now did not have clearly drawn sides from which to choose. To further confuse matters, some of the candidates that Sajudis backed, as an umbrella reform movement, were also members of the LCP. A few Sajudis leaders -- such as Romualdas Ozolas and Kazimeiera Prunskiene, both also LCP members -- had also joined the Party's Central Committee in the past year. All the candidates now wrapped themselves in the newly resurrected symbols. All talked alike. How were voters to know the differences between one candidate and another?

Pre-election pundits declared that voters would find their way out of the muddle by voting for individuals, whose backgrounds and work they were familiar with, rather than party platforms. In a confusing election, it was explained, this was the only way that they would be able to distinguish who was who. A pre-election poll in early February reported that 36% of the respondents surveyed said they would cast their vote based on a candidate's "personality". And in February, 1990, the most popular politician in Lithuania was a Communist, Algirdas Brazauskas. He outranked the most prominent Sajudis leaders -- Kazimiera Prunskiene, Romualdas Ozolas, and Vytautas Landsbergis. It gave Sajudis the jitters.

A year ago, things had been very different. Then, during elections to the all-Union Council of People's Deputies, Sajudis had actually saved Brazauskas' political skin. In March, 1989, the future direction of the Lithuanian Communist Party was still unclear. Fierce internal battles erupted between reformers such as Brazauskas and the hard-line apparatchiks who longed for the good old days. Sajudis was faced with a dilemma. Its candidate, a popular young philosopher named Arvydas Juozaitis, was pitted against Brazauskas in one district of Vilnius. The chances were very high that Juozaitis would defeat Brazauskas, and that would probably result in the latter being removed as First Secretary of the republic. Sajudis decided this was too great a risk, and Juozaitis stepped aside. It was not a gesture of goodwill -- it was calculated, enlightened self-interest. Sajudis did not want someone worse than Brazauskas -- perceived as spineless but more acceptable than the standard CP apparatchiks -- in that spot.

Brazauskas' popularity in March 1989 was at a dangerously low point -- he was still feeling the stigma of having failed to follow Estonia's lead and declare Lithuanian sovereignty in November 1988. That failure, he admitted in our interview on the eve of the March, 1989 elections, had cost him dearly politically. His position within the LCP had not been strengthened, and whatever support his reform policies had amongst the population evaporated.

A year later, Brazauskas had learned well from his political mistakes. And such self-interested generosity on Sajudis' part had vanished. Brazauskas was now perceived the greatest threat to the reform movement's consolidation of power. In his native district of Kaišiadorys, Brazauskas had won a whopping 91.7% of the vote; almost a full third more than the 60% that the citizens of the fifth largest city in Lithuania, Panevėžys, awarded their victorious Sajudis candidate, Vytautas Landsbergis.

(Brazauskas' popularity today is unquestioned. When I saw him debate his Sajudis opponent, a cardiologist named Alfredas Smailys, in Kietaviškės village (main means of subsistence; fish-farming) some 60 kilometers to the west of Vilnius, there was no contest. Most of the villagers did not know Smailys' name, paying no attention to the campaign posters hanging in the village Party headquarters. Brazauskas was the hero of the day; the villagers turned out to see the man who had stood up to Gorbachev. The hallways of the small two story party headquarters were packed. They clapped politely for Smailys, but their cheers and enthusiasm was reserved for Brazauskas. Smailys himself was deferential. Probably realizing he stood no chance of winning, his manner towards Brazauskas was more that of a friendly challenger rather than ideological enemy. As Brazauskas left the meeting hall, escorted by what seemed to be the entire village, to two cars where aides from Vilnius waited to rush him off to the next campaign stop, Smailys stood at the side, ignored. Humble as Brazauskas' two-car campaign entourage was, it still outshone what Smailys had to offer. Minutes after the First Secretary drove away, the Sajudis candidate got into a yellow Soviet tin box of a car, and with no one waving good-by, putt-putted off by himself.)

Thus, Brazauskas, who could not save the Party, nevertheless managed to save himself, and a few other top Party officials. True, none took any chances; all ran in remote districts where they were assured of victory. They were not disappointed. In addition to Brazauskas 91.7%, second secretary of the Party Vladimir Beriozov won 79.7%, Central Committee Secretary Justas Paleckis won 75.0%, and Central Committee Secretary Kestutis Glaveckas won 60.4%. The Party leaders, still unused to the idea that they would no longer be calling all the shots, were certain that these returns could guarantee them a substantial voice in a new coalition government.

They couldn't have been more wrong. In the two weeks between the February 24th elections and the March 11 declaration of independence, the victors of the elections virtually ignored the

LCP. Sajudis formed a "Sajudis Deputies Club" (SDC), whose members were all the Sajudis-backed winners in the elections. Their task was to draw up the necessary documents for the takeover of power and the declaration of independence. They worked, it seemed, sometimes round the clock.

The Club had little time for the LCP. Before the first week of the new parliamentary session was over, Valdimir Beriozov complained of a nascent witch hunt against the Communists, "We were virtually ignored." he accused the Parliament's new deputies, adding that the first time the LCP was brought in on any debate was during an open meeting at 4 p.m., March 10, the eve of the declaration of independence. The reply from Sajudis' Kazimieras Uoka, a former bulldozer operator, came fast and biting. What talk of a witchhunt can there be, he responded angrily. "When we were only five of us amongst several hundred (in the former Parliamentary plenary session). We did not use such terms."

Uoka was of course right. The LCP might accuse Sajudis of being gloating winners, but they were not exactly gracious losers. Still, Landsbergis met with Brazauskas no more than a handful of times during the two weeks prior to March 11. Both men wanted the post of President of the Supreme Council -- Brazauskas to retain it, Landsbergis to win it. Both men were confident of victory.

One was to be sorely disappointed. In the final days, Brazauskas' name evoked snickers during discussions in Sajudis Deputies Club meetings. The few Sajudis members who suggested that Brazauskas be retained as president of the Parliament, in the interests of a smoother, less jolting transition to independence, met, at best, with stony silence. The dominant sentiment was that if Brazauskas stayed, there would be no declaration of independence at all.

There was some justification for this, for Brazauskas, visiting Gorbachev in early March, returned to Vilnius urging restraint. Gorbachev had warned him that if Lithuania decided to break away, all further payments for goods from the Union would have to be in hard currency -- currency which of course Lithuania did not have. In addition, border regions in the southeast part of Lithuania as well as the port city of Klaipeda were territories that the Soviet Union hinted at laying claim to. The message was aimed to upset Lithuanians, and it did. Being cast as the bearer of bad news did no great wonders for Brazauskas, either.

March 11 at the Supreme Council

Still, he believed that he had a fighting chance for the post of President of the Parliament. Throughout the week and a half prior to March 11, petitions had been circulated amongst people calling for Brazauskas' election to the post. Sajudis angrily charged that this was an organized campaign whose purpose was to snatch away victory from those who had justly won it. LCP advocates retorted that it was nothing of the kind -- the petition campaign

was a spontaneous, genuine reflection of public opinion. Most likely, it was both.

In the early afternoon on March 11, both men addressed the Parliament's plenary session, Landsbergis following Brazauskas. Both fielded several questions from various deputies -- Brazauskas agitated and embattled, Landsbergis calm and confident. Brazauskas repeated his by now well-known views, "The restoration of independence is our immediate task recognized by all Lithuania," he said, but also cautioned, that "If we only have political sovereignty, it is not enough. We must work very hard to have economic sovereignty".

But Brazauskas' moment of glory had passed. March 11 was Vytautas Landsbergis' day. While the one spoke of caution, the other spoke of vision. "We need to come to our free land and defend our lives and those of our children," Landsbergis said, and added, "I would like to say one thing, as I feel it. Beyond us, and within us as well, are the expectations of many of the people of Lithuania. An expectation of what will be, and worries about how things will be. It seems to me that this expectation is greater and our determination is greater than fear. Who will best be able to contribute to whether that expectation becomes reality? What your hearts, intuition and experience tell you -- that is the one you should vote for. Your will expresses the will of the people of Lithuania."

At 3.30 p.m., a vote was taken. There were 38 votes for Brazauskas, 95 votes against. There were 91 votes for Landsbergis, 42 votes against. The deputies all rose, clapping. It had been expected.

Another six and a half hours passed before the second, most crucial vote of the day was taken. In between, there was a letter read aloud from the last Foreign Minister of independent Lithuania, Juozas Urbšus, a speech from the former Russian dissident, Sergei Kovalev, greetings from Czechoslovakia's Civic Forum. After ten p.m. now-President Landsbergis read the act reinstating the declaration of independence. Voting was by alphabetical roll call, the deputies standing to acknowledge their vote. 124 -- Brazauskas included -- voted for it. Six -- all members of the LCP/CPSU platform -- abstained. Three deputies did not participate. It took about five minutes to read all the names. Five minutes -- plus fifty years -- to reinstate Lithuanian statehood. Five minutes to deal the first blow to what was the Soviet empire.

Many went to bed that night feeling they had witnessed history being made. New players had emerged on the stage that Algirdas Nasvytis had built. How long would they -- and the independence they declared -- survive?

CHRONOLOGY: FEBRUARY 5 - MARCH 11, 1990

- Feb. 5 Sajudis holds political convention "Lithuania's Road", backs 143 candidates for the February 24th elections to the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian Republic
- Feb. 7 Current Lithuanian Supreme Soviet deputies declare that both Lithuania's petition on July 21, 1940 to join the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union's acceptance of that petition on August 3, 1940, are invalid
- Feb. 16 For only the second time since the end of World War II, Lithuanians publicly commemorate the 72nd anniversary of the 1918 declaration of independence from czarist Russia. Countless celebrations held throughout the country
- Feb. 24 First free elections held to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet; 472 candidates campaign for 141 seats
- The opposition movement Sajudis wins by a landslide, claiming 72, or 80%, of the 90 seats decided in the first round. This marks the first time in the Soviet Union's history that a non-Communist majority wins. In the new Parliament, the independent Lithuanian Communist Party will now be a minority party
- March 4 Run-off elections held to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet; 26 seats decided. 17 go to Sajudis candidates
- March 5 Victorious Sajudis-backed deputies form the "Sajudis Deputies Club" caucus; begin preparing documents for the declaration of independence
- March 7 For the first time publicly, Sajudis Executive Council member Kazimieras Motieka announces over Lithuanian TV that independence will be declared on March 11
- Tiesa, the newspaper of the Lithuanian Communist Party, publishes an interview with First Secretary Algirdas Brazauskas based on meeting with Gorbachev in Moscow a few days earlier. Brazauskas reports that Gorbachev threatens to lay claim to certain Lithuanian territories and will require payment in hard currency for Soviet goods should the Lithuanians declare independence
- March 8 Sajudis Council (over 200 delegates) meets for the last time before new session of parliament is convened, confirms the opposition movement's mandate. Newly-formed Sajudis Deputies Club begins almost non-stop meetings until Supreme Soviet plenary session convenes.
- March 10 Final run-off elections held to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet; polls close at 8 p.m. Combined with run-off elections held on March 7 & 8, 17 seats now decided. 9

go to Sajudis candidates.

4 p.m. First official public meeting between the Sajudis majority and the the LCP minority in Parliament

9 p.m. Newly elected Parliament convenes. There are now 133 deputies; 70 belong to no party, 40 are LCP; 9 are Social Democrats; 5 are LCP/CPSU; 4 are Greens; 3 are Democrats and 2 are Christian Democrats. 12 are women. 98 were backed by Sajudis.

March 11 The Supreme Soviet reconvenes at 10: 00 a.m.: Vytautas Landsbergis (91 for; 42 against) defeats Algirdas Brazauskas (38 for; 95 against) for presidency of the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet

At 10.44 p.m., Lithuanian Parliament votes to reestablish the independent Lithuanian state its (The vote is is 124 for; six abstain; three do not participate)

**SUPREME COUNCIL OF THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA
ACT
ON THE RESTORATION OF THE LITHUANIAN STATE**

The Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania, expressing the will of the Nation, resolves and solemnly proclaims that the execution of the sovereign power of the Lithuanian state, heretofore constrained by alien forces in 1940, is restored, and henceforth Lithuania is once again in an independent state.

The February 16, 1918 Act of Independence of the Supreme Council of Lithuania and the May 15, 1920 Constituent Assembly Resolution on the restoration of a democratic Lithuanian State have never lost their legal force and are the constitutional foundation of the Lithuanian State.

The territory of Lithuania is integral and indivisible, and the Constitution of any other state has no jurisdiction within it.

The Lithuanian state emphasizes its adherence to universally recognized principles of international law, recognizes the principle of the inviolability of borders as formulated in Helsinki in 1975 in the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and guarantees the rights of individuals, citizens and ethnic communities.

The Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania, expressing sovereign power, by this act begins to achieve the state's full sovereignty.

Vytautas Landsbergis

Liudvikas Sabutis

President
Supreme Council of the
Republic of Lithuania

Secretary
Supreme Council of the
Republic of Lithuania

Vilnius, March 11, 1990

LITHUANIAN NATIONAL SYMBOLS

Given that symbols are such an important part of the developments here, with Lithuanians harking back to old traditions as much as trying to create a new society, I thought that a brief explanation of the most important ones is necessary.

VYTIS. A white knight, his sword drawn on a leaping horse, pointed westwards, against a red background -- this was the official "Grand Duchy of Lithuania" emblem in the Middle Ages. It can be found on coins as far back as the thirteenth century. The knight symbolized Lithuania's readiness to fight (of course only for dignity, honor, goodness, etc. etc.) In order to defend herself. On March 11, the Vytis was once more adopted as the official state emblem.

NATIONAL FLAG. This is a recent symbol, a creation of the twentieth century. After Lithuania first declared her independence on February 16, 1918, an artist was commissioned to come up with a suitable flag. The flag was adopted two months later. It consists of three horizontal stripes of yellow, green and red, chosen because those colors most often appeared in Lithuanian folk art. In her book, Lithuanian Customs and Traditions, author Danute Bindokiene explains their meaning. Yellow stands for "the fertile field of Lithuania, golden with ripe rye, wheat, flax and other grains." Green stands for "the nation's vitality (as represented in nature also)". Red stands for "the blood shed in defending the homeland's freedom." On March 11, the tri-color was once more adopted as the official flag of the Lithuanian Republic.

THE POSTS OF GEDIMINAS. This is the family crest of Grand Duke Gediminas, the legendary founder of the city of Vilnius and the founder of the ruling Lithuanian dynasty of dukes and knights during the country's glory days in the Middle Ages. The posts are explained as follows: The bottom horizontal line symbolizes the land, the fundamental source of the nation's material well-being, upon which everything else depends. The vertical lines symbolize the spirit, which draws sustenance from the values developed in one's native land. The four vertical posts form three gateways; the two on the side are open, the one in the middle is enclosed. The open gateways represent the nation's need to remain open to outside influences, to the East and West, to the seas and the continents. The closed, central gateway represents the nation's ethnographic base, her heart, her center. On top of this enclosed gateway is another vertical line. That represents the post from which a flag waves.



The Lithuanian Communist Party: Post-election blues?

by Ina Navazelkis
Special to the Lithuanian Review

This past Sunday — the day after republic-wide elections to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet — was not a happy one for Lithuania's Communist Party leader, Algirdas Brazauskas. Although the undisputed winner in his own native district of Kaunadorys — elected by a whopping 91.7% — Brazauskas masked whatever personal triumph he might have felt. Before leaving for Moscow Sunday evening, he impassively told a Lithuanian television reporter that the election results, as a whole, gave him no reason to either "clap or cry".

He might well have felt like crying anyway. The umbrella opposition movement, Sajudis, won a landslide victory against Brazauskas' own independent Lithuanian Communist Party (LCP). Sajudis-backed candidates gained over 50% of the vote in 72 out of 90 districts — assuring them of a substantial majority in the new parliament. As the week progressed, Sajudis already began to prepare for the assumption of the power it had won. According to figures released by the official election commission, the LCP carried only 27 districts — and in 15 of these, it was Sajudis' blessing that assured the LCP candidates victory. On its own, the LCP won a mere 12 seats.

The ramifications are dramatic and historic. For the first time in 50 years in Lithuania — and for the first time in the Soviet Union's history — the Communist Party's monopoly on power was soundly rejected in the ballot box. Almost two-thirds (59) of the newly elected deputies are not Communist Party members — 48, according to Sajudis, belong to no party at all. Both the independent LCP, as well as the unofficially dubbed "Night Party" — an estimated 20,000 to 35,000 Communists who reject independence for Lithuania (four of whom were also elected deputies) — stand a chance to regain some ground in the run-off elections. This second round must be held in 45 remaining districts by March 10 (and in most, will be held on March 4 or 8) — for candidates who failed to win the required 50% plus one vote in the first round. (Entirely new elections will be held in six districts by April 24th.)

But the outcome will not dramatically change the realignment of political power in the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet — which presents a challenge as much to Mikhail Gorbachev as it does to Algirdas Brazauskas.

Already there is talk of what Brazauskas' future role — if any — should be in this new government. Some, such as Native Land (Gimtasas Krastas) editor Algrimantas Cekuolis,

believe it unlikely that Brazauskas will continue as president. Yet at a Sajudis press conference on Sunday, Sajudis executive council member Romualdas Ozolas — himself a member of the Politburo — told reporters that Brazauskas was necessary, in some capacity, for conducting Lithuania's affairs in Moscow. And the following day government press spokesman Česlovas Jursenas — one the 12 non-Sajudis backed LCP winners — urged

COMMENT

a "united front" between the LCP and Sajudis, adding that "we have to include all political forces".

This message had already been sounded before the elections. Several top LCP leaders, such as Central Committee secretary Justas Paleckis, had also urged that Sajudis not reject working with the party institutions. Expected to be radically reduced, the "apparatus" is nevertheless still in place. Use it to achieve our common political goals, was LCP's message to Sajudis. So the LCP was already mentally preparing itself for the reality that it would have to share power, even become a minority party in the next government. But it had hoped to win enough seats to be the decisive voice in a coalition.

Certainly this is the scenario that

Brazauskas would have liked to see. When he split the LCP from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) last December, incurring Gorbachev's wrath in the process, he took the greatest gamble of his political life. He then all but co-opted Sajudis' agenda — hoping to steal some of the movement's thunder and prestige — by coming out strongly for the full political and economic independence of Lithuania. The LCP's popularity surged for one glorious — but ephemeral — moment, as thousands of people took to the streets the day after Christmas to show their support for Brazauskas in his defiant stand against Moscow. A few individuals even decided to join the Communist Party, an ironic gesture given the general trend in Lithuania to sever such connections. In two separate opinion polls — the last taken just a few weeks ago — Brazauskas was still ranked the most popular political figure in Lithuania today.

This was just the kind of sentiment that he hoped to use to reverse the LCP's fortunes. (It had been trounced by Sajudis in last year's elections to the all-Union Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow). By so demonstrably changing the party's identity and purpose, he had banked on saving it: the February 24th elections to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet would be the test. With the new LCP now differing little from Sajudis in agenda, how would the people decide who to vote for? Could, and would, the voters still look at the LCP, Sajudis, or any other party affiliation as the main factor in rejecting or accepting a candidate?

With the traditional lines between parties blurred, there was bound to be confusion in the voters' minds — and such confusion could only help the LCP. Outer uniformity extended all the way down to the officially printed information posters for each of the 472 candidates. Hung at the 2,106 polling stations across Lithuania, the posters displayed the candidates' photos and biographies. Even those who belonged to the "Night Party" found themselves crowned with the national Lithuanian tri-color banner and graced with the Gedimino šluipa, a national symbol.

In a pre-election poll taken in early

February, when 1000 randomly sampled respondents were asked "Which party/ movement candidate are you going to give your vote for?" the response was telling. Thirty-six percent found their way out of the muddle by saying that it didn't matter which group supported the candidate, their vote would be based on knowledge of the candidate himself. Fewer — 30% — said they would support a Sajudis-backed candidate, and only 12% said they would vote for the LCP. It was a telling premonition.

The LCP needed to sway those voters who would vote by "personality." And in a curious way, at least the top LCP leadership — all prominent and well respected — managed to do just that. In addition to Brazauskas, the other three LCP Central Committee secretaries, — Vladimir Berizov with 79.7%, Justas Paleckis with 75%, and Kestutis Glaventas with 60.4% — won hands down over their opponents in the remote districts in which they ran.

But, a vote for LCP "personalities" did not mean a vote for the LCP itself, as the election results all too clearly show. The "personalities" rather than the party, had been saved. Brazauskas managed to pull off a considerable feat nevertheless. If, despite his best efforts during the past year, he was unable to secure the LCP's political redemption after 45 years of totalitarian sin, he salvaged enough to permit it a rather graceful — and gradual — exit from the center stage of the Lithuanian political arena. Milos Jakes in Czechoslovakia and Erick Honecker in East Germany — never mind Nicolai Ceausescu in Romania — should have done as much.

Still, the essential questions that need to be answered in the coming weeks are these: As Sajudis now prepares to accept the power it has been given, will the Lithuanian Communist Party really be able to give up the power it has lost? And what, if anything, will Moscow do?

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