

ILN - 10

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Vilnius, Lithuania

May 12, 1991

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"On Critics and Criticisms: Vytautas Landsbergis Speaks"

by Ina Navazelskis

During the long day that I followed Vytautas Landsbergis, the President of Lithuania's Supreme Council around, there were many opportunities to ask him what he thought about a variety of topics. In my report, ILN - 9), "April 30: One Day in the Life of Vytautas Landsbergis" I tried to include most of his responses. They covered a wide spectrum -- ranging from how Landsbergis thought relations with the Soviet Union currently stood, to how he dealt with the frustrating inefficiency in administrative matters that he had to face with everyday.

Still, not everything could fit in. Some of the most interesting moments found no place. In the early evening of April 30, for example, we had a long discussion on issues that related more to the internal atmosphere in Lithuania today rather than Lithuania's (very sorry) geopolitical position. Interrupted only once, that discussion was as frank as I could have asked for. Reading it over now in black and white -- and in translation -- it seems more adversarial, more tension-filled than it actually was. I remember our talk as friendly; though I will allow myself to make one observation -- I think that some of that friendliness was quite calculated on Mr Landsbergis' part. Okay, maybe on mine, too -- my style is to ask confrontational questions in as nice a way I know how. I hate adversarial stances. Still, despite the sometimes blunt things said, there was a genuine spontaneity, a friendly back-and-forth in person that might have gotten lost when transposed to paper. I hope not.

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Sometimes I have rephrased my questions into better English than how I originally asked them -- without, of course, making them out to be totally different questions. I have also edited Landsbergis' responses somewhat -- sometimes because he asked that certain things "be only between us" or because certain analogies were too remote, requiring more explanation than the statement was worth. I have tried, too, to clean up the "ums and ahs" and half sentences that occur in normal speech that are so distracting when transcribed. But I have purposely applied a very light touch here; believing that keep^{ing} some of that in adds to the atmosphere of the discussion itself.

The interview began shortly after 7 p.m., just after Landsbergis finished giving a ten-minute interview to a Moscow-based Western correspondent.

VL: (The Moscow correspondent asked me) how I reacted to the Forum's criticism (the new opposition coalition, the Lithuanian Forum for the Future) that we do not look at negotiations with the Soviet Union with sufficient seriousness and that we have prepared very little for possible difficulties ahead. So I said that we hear such criticisms constantly -- last year and now, too. It is such an empty criticism, because there is no concrete reproach that says that, here we didn't do something or that we did something wrong. When it is said that one pays insufficient attention, then I compare this to if you would say that I pay too little attention to my family. No one could ever say that he pays enough attention, because one can always pay more. It really is too little. Each one of us really pays insufficient attention to his children. So you can repeat this criticism daily -- you do too little.

IN: On the other hand, at one point last year it looked like all efforts were being turned westwards and there was very little contact with democratic forces in Russia. Somehow, attention was diverted from supporters there. And only when there was a disappointment from the West did that attention get re-diverted back. When I was in Moscow last July, for example (July 1990), the only one there cultivating the field was Bickauskas (Lithuania's official representative) and one aide. That was it.

VL: Well, of course, one can say that in a way. But in the same way, one could say that right here in Lithuania at any given time, (for example) we are paying too much attention to agricultural questions. And one could say -- "But they are neglecting the workers!"...That could be so...But human resources are very limited here.

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IN: I would like to focus on this point. Problems can arise for a great many reasons. That not enough attention is being paid does not necessarily mean that the fault lies here (with Landsbergis). It could be here, but it might also be somewhere else entirely. But that fact that something (ie., in this case, that insufficient attention being paid to the Soviet Union) exists, is a reflection of something else. And the thing is to understand that "something."

VL: This is a disease of the system. One could say that I am at fault that a different system is not operating here; one which operates better.

IN: Once you cross that threshold from opposition to power, the following day ---

VL: You are (already) guilty. Well, okay -- if you please. If one wants to say that I am guilty -- please (go ahead)!

IN: You're not giving in to any provocations!

VL: Well, of course -- you're the good guys, we're the bad! (Landsbergis laughs). You say, therefore you must know.

IN: I would like to return to Visakavicius (a trade union leader Landsbergis first described to me as trustworthy, and later said that he was told, by a reliable source, that he was not. See ILN - 9) Do you know how to think of him now, or is it still an open question?

VL: You know, there is no end to open questions. No end. We say about ourselves that here in Lithuania people suspect one another (NOTE: of betrayal, in all shapes and forms) much too much. That is so. But really, there is no end to a great deal of such criss-crossing information -- who is doing what, who is friends with whom, and what is being planned. We know that this is a KGB weapon to get people to have conflicts with one another. And it seems to me that they (the KGB) were able to get to Prunskiene by just this sort of method (the rest is off the record)...In this way, they are able to get to one. They reach certain results. I have also, at some point, gotten information about Navazelskyte (Miss Navazelskis) -- who she is friends with, what kind of people gather, and what is talked about --

IN: (laughing) So what is it that we talk about -- is it something interesting?

VL: Well, no, there is a certain -- ah, it's not important.

IN: I fully believe you.

VL: Well, I get such information, and I put it to one side. I don't have to check it, it's only that I try not to accept it fully, not to believe such information completely. But I cannot say that regarding Visakavicius, for example, that this is -- that I really don't believe it at all.

IN: Or that you believe 100%.

VL: Or that I believe it 100%. And as far as Navazelskyte goes, well...(laughs).

IN: I have to say that this is one of the hardest things for me to deal with here in Lithuania, because I am used to speaking rather freely. Maybe I also say some stupid things, I don't know. But I am not used to artificially restricting (what I say).

VL: Well, yes, to control (your words).

IN: That's right -- to control myself. I am quite critical of quite a few things that go on here, but I would not say something behind one's back that I wouldn't tell them to their face. It seems so unnecessary. In the States I have friends who are conservatives, I am more liberal, we argue and then we go out and have a drink.

VL: There can be all sorts of things. There are certain fields of gravitation...these aren't just these sorts of ideological gravitational fields, where you compete with one another and something comes out of that, the way it normally should be. Beyond those Lithuanian fields of gravitation, there are already non-Lithuanian interests, who through these fields try to get their fingers into Lithuania's affairs.

IN: Are they that clever and that smart that they sufficiently know each person's --

VL: (with emphasis) They know like the devil himself -- like the devil himself. In this field they are all professionals.

IN: That is, psychological experts.

VL: Psychological experts and they also have large dossiers about who is doing what with whom, who is friends with whom, what kind of views they hold, their weak points, through which (weak points) can one catch and pull (someone) in or, for example, to trip them up with something. We sometimes receive certain information about what kind of coming wave there will be, for example, of secret rumors, slander, hounding -- on whom will all this be focussed.

Or, in the final analysis, one can see (how this works) on the surface -- the foam (from those waves). For example, the Respublika newspaper (publishes) such foam. There was a wave against Uoka (Kazimieras Uoka, Lithuania's State Controller). Also there was one against Cepaitis (Virgilijus Cepaitis, head of the conservative Independence Party). Then they quit, but they don't forget. Now there is one against Vaisvila (Zigmas Vaisvila, deputy Prime Minister). Now Respublika is taken up (with a campaign) against Vaisvila. There are all sorts of pamphlets, all sorts of one-sentence bubbles (Respublika has a section call "In One Sentence" where rumors and facts both are reported) trying to show how Vaisvila is inappropriate in his job, trying to discredit him, perhaps also the whole government through him...

IN: I don't doubt that (ulterior motives) exist. But since there are individuals, with all their weaknesses and limitations, who are in one or another post, how should one then point out those weaknesses and limitations, which are sometimes quite conspicuous and can be serious obstacles? How to do this, when people here are used to taking everything so personally?

VL: You mean, how to criticize them?

IN: That's right -- how to express criticism which would not be part of that cycle that you describe. Or is it that criticism will unavoidable always be part of such a cycle?

VL: Well, you see, it is one thing to always take things personally. That certainly exists. But it is another thing when criticism is expressed and then transformed into a certain discreditation. If that person would be just an average worker, his character would not be important to anyone. But since he is visible when he is, for example, part of the "bad guys government" right?, then the purpose of criticism is not that he should pay attention and not make the same mistake again. Understand, there is a political battle going on.

IN: But the argument that you then use is "Please don't say anything, because our enemies will exploit this." And such words were used by every new government. Whether they were better or worse -- whether they developed into bloody (regimes), like the Bolsheviks, or whether other simply turned into small repressed societies that weren't marked by too much tolerance -- the justifying logic is the same.

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VL: Well, you see, if I said, please don't say something because our enemies will use this, and if you will say it anyway, and then I will go, Krrrk! (Landsbergis makes a gesture which connotes the wringing of a neck), that is already something wrong. But if, for example, I say to you, "Well, you are talking about how things seem to you. But did you think about the context?" I can ask you to think about that context. And if you don't think about it -- well, so what -- I won't do anything to you. But I can ask -- there is nothing wrong with that.

IN: Of course not.

VL: Well, you see, I will be accused that by drawing your attention to the context, I want to muzzle mouths. I don't muzzle anyone. But I will say "You write in such and such a way. But what does that mean in our situation?" Do you understand -- I do say this. Then Landsbergis is against freedom of the press. They know perfectly well that I am not against freedom of the press and since I know that they know this, and since they talk like that on purpose....(blast, the tape ended!!!!)

(on to side B)...one can express almost every time -- the state is not satisfied with its people. But I say, we are the same as our people, so what do you want from us? If others will take over our places, they will also come from the same people. And so we always return to Moses, who wandered around in the desert for 40 years so that all those who were born in slavery would die out. He brought a nation -- a nation of free people (to the Promised Land) -- but not a nation taken straight out of slavery. (VL laughs.) But 40 years -- that's a long time! After 20 years of the Lithuanian Republic, something already started to happen, a generation of young intelligentsia had grown up in Lithuania. (VL pauses, and utters perhaps the most sorrow-filled question I hear him ask) What kind of Lithuania could we have had if we had had only ten more years!...But everything went pfft (VL draws a finger across his throat). Some landed there (meaning in the West and in Siberia,) others here.

IN: This reminds me of the questions of internal as well as external enemies. Your mentioning slavery brings it up. There is a certain psychology that I call a slave psychology, or victim psychology. And I think that Lithuanians -- and not only Lithuanians -- suffer from it. I think the same thing operates with many American blacks, although slavery was abolished over a hundred years ago. The psychology still exists, because it has been reinforced by a pervasive racism that still exists, that tells a black person that he or she is still worthless, still second-rate.

That is the external enemy. But the internal enemy is that voice inside that then says, "All my troubles are somebody else's doing." A slave psychology doesn't allow a person to take responsibility for his own actions.

VL: The analogy is not appropriate in our case. We don't want to be the ones who will blame the Russians for the next hundred years. We want to take responsibility for ourselves, and -- after ten years, take a look at what we have done. Then (we would see) what we ourselves (have accomplished.) But it has been only one year -- and already we are being blamed. You can notice this yourself. Your liberal friends or whoever else -- now the government is guilty with all that is wrong in Lithuania, you understand. So sometimes one is forced to say -- listen, have you already forgotten? (Have you forgotten) that there are a whole lot of other forces here?...And we don't say that we ourselves are absolute wonders, if only others would stop putting up obstacles. We also aren't very good, but don't say that well, everything that is bad is because we work badly.

IN: But you know, sometimes I find myself leaning towards that point of view when I hear the words "less democracy -- more independence!" Can you first have only independence and then only later democracy? And I hear such sentiments from very good-hearted people, who really sacrifice and give of themselves out of idealism and want only what is best.

VL: This "democracy-independence" (concept) is sometimes being turned inside out -- that this government, for example, is one that doesn't care about democracy, for this or that reason. Last year, for example, Prunskiene (the ex-Prime Minister) introduced a draft proposal to limit (the outflow of goods from Lithuania). It was the time of the economic blockade, and so we introduced limitations and restrictions. We instituted state controls, customs operations. All the liberals and not only liberals -- sometimes liberals in the commerce sphere -- said that this was bad in principle and bad in practice. Maybe so. I cannot say that we really -- now we are changing these things. But it was a certain effort to try to defend ourselves. And that effort to defend ourselves was exactly this introduction of restrictions.

(With emphasis) There is a war going on! One cannot forget this! At one time we (some of his inner circle) were joking between ourselves about this. And then one person said it publicly to a group of journalists, that in reality, there is a war going on and if we, for example, introduced the -- censorship that is normally imposed during wartime, we would have grounds for justifying such a move.

But we don't do this! We just appeal to journalists that they should think about this -- that there is a war. And ever since then, they are blowing this bubble that I want to introduce censorship. Well -- they are lying. There are those that want to discredit us. It had been a joke, but it was a joke with a certain reminder. When a war is going on, say, when the British fought against the Germans, were there no restrictions of any kind? Whoever wants to, can go anywhere he wants, say whatever he wants. There probably were restrictions, no?

IN: Yes, but there is war and there is war. This is a different type of war.

VL: Yes, a different type! But that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist -- that you can pretend that there is no war!

IN: Well, let me take an example -- television. (Critics of the Lithuanian government say that Lithuanian TV is now almost completely under its thumb, even without official censorship) I haven't seen Justas Paleckis, I haven't seen Brazauskas on the screen. (both are members of the Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party, the former independent Lithuanian Communist Party.) I haven't heard other voices aside from those who support the policies of this government! This is something I find very difficult to fathom!

VL: If you say that you don't see Paleckis, that doesn't mean that Landsbergis or Cepaitis have forbidden this -- as is the explanation given (these days). We simply don't get involved. Now, why aren't they seen?...I don't know, I could check. I am asked (by the TV people) we have a certain window set aside for all (political) parties. And those parties speak their views then. Well, okay -- maybe they (the LDLP) think that this is too little, to use just this one hour, for example, for their party. Once they will do so, the following week, they will not be given (the same time slot)...because there will be another party. And they want something every week. Let's say this is the case.

So I am asked, should they be granted privileges, because they are discontent. I don't tell them (the TV people) to grant them privileges. I say, let's look at how things will turn out when everyone gets equal time. By the way, there are many people who are able to sense nuances who maintain that now there is a great deal of material being broadcast over television which fits the way Paleckis would like to have things. He doesn't necessarily have to be there himself.

(VL pauses) Or there are things that they don't like, which are not broadcast. For example, there was a journalist, Valentinavicius, who criticized the collective farm bosses for a number of years. Farm workers and the collective farm bosses are people with different sets of interests, especially in those places where there is a great deal of thievery, corruption, where a person can be terrorized. (This journalist tried) to show these things. Well, then it all started. Why is he instigating people against one another? Why is he raising conflicts in the villages? He was dismissed from that particular department because of pressure from the LDLP. Others then came to me and said, we have to defend him. We have to tell them (the TV people) to leave him alone and allow him to carry on his battle even further. Well, I said, I don't want to butt in. I don't want to give television any orders. I can talk, or advise (them) to somehow balance out this thing, so that (the journalist) should not be thrown out of TV, as the other side is demanding. And in this case, the Union of Journalists did not protest at all; they that so defend the freedom of the press (The Lithuanian Union of Journalists is indeed not happy with Landsbergis). That's right -- they didn't protest. That is also symptomatic.

IN: But there is also another thing. Sometimes it is enough to simply have a few more outspoken members of Parliament make a few phone calls (to the TV reporters) and already there is an atmosphere of fear. I think of this when I recall how the independent Lithuanian Communist Party behaved last year during the declaration of independence on March 11, 1990. They were absolutely quiet, didn't say a word and yet they were convinced that their road -- a gradual step-by-step approach towards independence -- was the right one. And so I wondered. Why are they so quiet? Is it because they want to wait and see the new government first make a mess of things and then they would march in and save the situation? Are they quiet because, in their heart of hearts, they are really as convinced as they say they are about their step-by-step views? Or are they quite because they are afraid? And I dismissed that third interpretation. But more and more, it seems to me that there is more than a little cowardice going on... And so I make a parallel between them and the TV people...

VL: But who threatens them? What does this mean, to be afraid? Will they be beaten up? Will they be arrested? Not at all -- they will neither be beaten up, nor arrested. But you see, if they were to express a certain point of view openly, they would lose a lot of political capital. They would lose credibility. So they stay quiet, in order not to lose this...

IN: ~~But the head of TV can also stay quiet and meekly accept it when irate members of parliament phone him because he may not wish to be accused of being something or other. (I had in mind "enemy of the people")~~

VL: I understand... ~~there has probably something written about this already. It is that certain people who think otherwise stay silent, don't say what they think. Because as they themselves explain, there is a terrible terror going on. Things will go badly for them. What will go badly? Nobody will do anything to them.~~

IN: Well, let's return to that atmosphere of suspicion that we started to talk about earlier.

But we didn't return to that atmosphere of suspicion. At that moment, close to 8 P.M., another of Landsbergis' many guests came in with yet another question on a totally different topic. The evening progressed, and other things were on his mind. (See ILN - 9). No matter; next time.

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