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"What's In A Name?"

Dear Peter,

It was, all around, a sad affair. And you couldn't put the mood at the 21st Congress of the independent Lithuanian Communist Party (LCP) solely down to the miserable winter weather, although that certainly didn't help. As the three-day Congress convened on Friday evening, December 8th, a light snow began to fall; it soon turned to slush. It was all very appropriate.

"Someone saw me wear a black suit yesterday," Česlovas Juršėnas told the 550 delegates on Saturday, December 9. "They asked if I were going to a funeral. I didn't say anything then, but here, amongst my own, I can tell you that I am not."

This sounded suspiciously like bluster to bolster sagging spirits. If so, Juršėnas was the appropriate one to do it. A Communist Party member since 1968 and long identified with the party leadership -- Juršėnas was the Central Committee director in charge of ideology in the press from 1983 to 1988 -- he had emerged relatively unscathed by the eclipse from power that traumatized the party over the past year. A Jaruzelski look-alike, not only was Juršėnas one of the few who had won a seat in Parliament, but he also garnered the post of chief press information officer for the administrative branch of government. He quickly gained a reputation for acerbic, sharp-tongued comments that never failed to nettle political opponents.

But while Juršėnas had the knack of never showing when he was hurting, the same could not be said of his comrades. The atmosphere at the congress was, to put it mildly, somber. It had been the toughest year in decades for the Lithuanian Communist Party -- independent of Moscow for only one year -- and it showed.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

The party's fortunes had been in peril ever since the reform movement Sajudis, founded in June 1988, mounted challenge after challenge to its authority. But they really took a dive this year, starting with the elections to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet last February (now referred to as the Supreme Council or Parliament). The independent Lithuanian Communist Party had lost big, garnering only 12 out of 141 seats. The meaning was clear: the days of Communist Party dictatorship in Lithuania were over.*

Even though many within it had long been expecting the boom to fall, the party had nevertheless been caught psychologically unprepared. Relinquishing power -- held virtually unchallenged for two generations -- was more than a little disconcerting. So the party started waving a conciliatory white flag towards Sajudis and making faint noises about sharing power in a coalition government. But after 50 years under the party's boot, the victors, not exactly gracious winners, were having none of it. Most of 1990 saw an increase in the volume of verbal Commie-bashing, now no longer a dangerous thing to do. Calculating rather than ideological motives for many of those who joined in this chorus cannot be discounted. Often the most strident voices were ex-Komsomol and ex-party people themselves. Anti-Communist sloganeering -- squarely aimed at reform rather than orthodox Communists -- offered irresistible benefits to many newly-baked politicians. It was a neat way to distance oneself from a label that had always been anathema in the public mind, as well as to ensure that those of one's former comrades who still bore it stayed knocked out of the political limelight.

If that were not enough, the party took it on the nose from the orthodox, Stalinist Communists who had remained unswerving in their loyalty to Moscow. This group contested ownership of party assets, and in staking their claims used methods that were -- well, quite in keeping with their principles. With a little help from the Soviet army, which lent armed soldiers to the cause, throughout the year the orthodox Stalinists occupied one party-owned building after another in Vilnius. They started with the Higher Party school, went on to the Party Institute where historical archives were kept, and even struck at the heart of the party properties, the modern Central Committee building in the middle of Vilnius' downtown.

* A further 27 party members had been elected, bringing the total number of CP members in the new Parliament to 39. But the latter had run under the reform movement Sajudis'umbrella, not the party's.*

Under attack from both sides, the independent Lithuanian Communist Party retreated. By the time December rolled around, even party leader Algirdas Brazauskas hadn't been seen on television for months. (Ironically, this was due to Brazauskas' own charisma. He still posed something of a threat to the new leadership; polls taken throughout the year showed him personally more popular than Vytautas Landsbergis. Television exposure was the last thing the newcomers wanted him to enjoy; pressure was exerted on Lithuanian television executives to downplay Brazauskas' role in political life.) Brazauskas ended up keeping a very low profile indeed, busying himself with duties as Deputy Prime Minister in charge of economic affairs.

It was quite a change from one year ago. December 1989 had been Brazauskas', and the reform wing of the Lithuanian Communist Party's, moment of glory. It was then, at the 20th Congress of the Lithuanian Communist Party held on December 19-23, 1989, that he had maneuvered the party to take its most daring step ever. Under Brazauskas' urging, on December 20, 1989, the LCP split from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the first affiliate in the 15-republic Union to do so.

The move had had reverberations far beyond Lithuania -- and Kremlin watchers knew it. Close to 100 foreign journalists had been on hand to witness the 20th Congress at the spacious Opera and Ballet Theatre in downtown Vilnius. The Lithuanian party apparatus had been prepared for them. A press center had been set up across town in the House of Teachers; journalists even got helpful printed instructions such as tiny maps of downtown Vilnius to aid them in getting around, advice on "how to transmit live television reports" and where to find interpreters, typists, a coffee bar, medical aid. (All this is a matter of course in Western countries. But that information about such seemingly minor details was compiled and handed out here spoke of a fairly competent pre-Congress organization, something not to be taken for granted in Lithuania.) In addition, demographic statistics about the 1038 congress delegates, as well as at least 18 bulletins (in at least three languages) were handed out.

Just days before Christmas, news of the split was splashed on the front pages of newspapers around the world. Not even the other staggering news stories of the month -- Nicolai Ceaucescu's murder in Romania, and the United States invasion of Panama -- had been big enough to edge it out.

But that was only the cap in a month marked by bold moves made by the LCP. On December 6, 1989, the party had already annoyed Moscow -- and surprized the world -- with another first. The overwhelmingly Communist-controlled Lithuanian Supreme Soviet voted to abolish the Communist Party's "leading and guiding role" in Lithuanian political life, thereby ending its monopoly. The party, it seemed, was hurrying to dismantle at least some of its

authority itself before someone else would gladly do it for them.

All this had set the Kremlin in quite a tizzy. With other top Soviet officials, Mikhail Gorbachev convened a two day crisis meeting -- December 25-26 -- on how to react to the rebellious Lithuanian Communists. Even before the LCP's 20th Congress, he had ordered Brazauskas not to allow the party to split from the center. When this nevertheless happened, Gorbachev had then ominously warned that "war bloodshed and death" could result. He threw his support behind the 15% of the Lithuanian Communist Party that stayed loyal to Moscow. The move gave this rump group the green light to engage in all kinds of mischief -- such as the takeover of those buildings mentioned earlier -- in the following months.

But for all his saber-rattling, Gorbachev wasn't yet prepared to really come down hard. Rather than sending more hard-nosed messengers -- such as tanks -- he came to Lithuania himself in January 1990, his first trip here. But the Soviet leader's mission -- to convince the people of Lithuania that they should stay in the Soviet Union -- failed miserably, as it was bound to. He was unable to stop the rapid progression of events. On February 7, the Communist-controlled Lithuanian Supreme Soviet declared that the country's annexation to the Soviet Union in 1940 had not been an expression of the will of the people of Lithuania, and that it was therefore illegal and invalid. One month after that, a newly elected Parliament, now no longer Communist-dominated, declared independence. The LCP, harking to its recent radical moves, felt justified in making the claim that no less than the reform movement Sajudis, it helped pave the way for independence.

That is of course arguable. But what is not disputed is that December 1989 had been the party's one ephemeral moment of glory in the sun. For the first time in its 70 year history, the party had been truly popular. There had even been some people who, briefly enamored, had joined it.

Yet today, December, 1990, all that seems much longer than just one short year ago. Eleventh hour repentance was not enough to wipe away all black marks the party had been racking up over the decades. 1991 was the year that it finally started paying up. Not surprisingly, then, everything about this year's congress was humbler -- from the digs to the press attention. Gone was the separate press center across town. One small room at the Ministry of the Interior's auditorium -- a building far less grand than the Opera and Ballet Theater -- sufficed. It was there that the congress itself was held. That barometer for measuring how much importance the international community attaches to an event -- ie., the presence of foreign guests and foreign journalists -- was also pretty low. Only 11 foreign guests -- two leftist parliamentarians from Sweden, three social democrats from Poland,

the rest from Estonia, Latvia, Byelorussia and Russia -- were there. No Western correspondents based in Moscow made the trek. The only foreign journalists I saw were a television reporter from Finland who happened to be passing through Vilnius anyway, one Estonian -American journalist, one Estonian journalist, and yours truly. To top it off, mention of the congress in Lithuania itself was even downplayed. The announcement the day before it opened ranked fifth among news stories on the radio, read by the newscaster in a laconic oh-by-the-way kind of voice.

It was enough to make one want to weep. For the party faithful, there was certainly enough to weep about, especially if they looked at the statistics. Membership in the LCP was way down -- from 199,999 in December 1989 to 56,000 one year later. It hadn't been that low in 30 years.

No one, of course, was surprised by this -- that's the trend throughout Eastern Europe. In a way, what is remarkable about the LCP is that it managed to hang on to some threads of real power at all, as well as keep its own internal infrastructure reasonably intact. When compared to the fate of former Communist Party bosses in the former East Germany or Czechoslovakia, for example, where some even had criminal cases pending against them, the LCP's troubles seemed mild indeed. Still, considering that a major reason why Brazauskas had urged the party to split from Moscow at all was to save it from political oblivion, it smarted. Many speakers tried nevertheless to put a brave face on it all. "We may be fewer," admitted one, "but those who have remained (in the party) are more like-minded." Although I doubt the speaker meant this, that statement curiously sounded to me like emphasizing the "vanguard" of the proletariat -- that old elitist Leninist idea. If it was still intact, then party was not yet in serious danger.

But it soon could be. Another speaker, Central Committee secretary Gediminas Kirkilas, warned that "if, during such a difficult time in Lithuania, the main stabilizing political force in the Republic will splinter, that will further complicate the constantly changed Lithuanian political spectrum, giving rise to new contradictions."

It was the description of the party as still "this main stabilizing political force" that I found interesting. What about that force? What did the bruised and abused 550 delegates -- half as many as one year ago -- stand for? Well, they were not all that sure. There were several items on the agenda that the delegates were to consider, including new party statutes and a new party program, and last but not least, a new party name. But the essence of the congress was to try to find some way out of the identity crisis in which the participants now found themselves.

That crisis was made up of two components -- what was the party's relationship to its political past, and what should its role in the present be.

A first crack at reevaluating its past had been made last year, at the 20th Party Congress. A declaration had been passed which in part stated:

"The truth, first of all, is that our predecessor -- the CPSU organization in Lithuania--had throughout its entire 70 years too often been too skeptical or even opposed to the vital interests of the Lithuanian nation, of which the most important was the striving to have its own state...We often hear: is it true that we, today's Communists, are responsible for crimes committed by Stalinists? Many Communists, as individuals, had nothing to do with the LCP past. However, the organization is responsible. Ask any lawyer and he will tell you that an inheritor inherits not only capital, but also debts..."

And that, thought many, should have been that. Admission made, guilt acknowledged, let's get on with things. But for the new political leaders, as well as for society at large, as the party faithful were to bitterly experience, such repentance was not enough. At this year's congress, in his major address to the delegates, Algirdas Brazauskas complained,

"We are charged with non-existent sins, the seeds of suspicion are being sown in society... (They) forced (us) to repent and retract, but we did not break. Those who have gathered here are those who understand the meaning of our reforms, who are prepared to realize their service to Lithuania through political activity...We understand perfectly well that picking through the CPSU past is a pretext to set society against the LCP. We boldly broke of the bonds of the past in the name of a democratic Lithuanian future...The carcass of the governing bodies of the CPSU has already rolled to the bottom during the 20th Party Congress. The true purpose for pressure exerted by the right wing parties is that our party is still considerably influential."

As respected academician Jokubas Minkevičius -- also one of the few party members elected to Parliament -- succinctly put it, "When we reject Communism, it means that we reject dogma, schemes, illusions, myths -- but not rational thought. And that is what is now under attack..."

So one year after its first tentative moves towards repentance, the party was no longer prepared to accept all the guilt being assigned to it. Some of this was understandable, even justified. Still, one result was that the party's assessment of its own recent role in society was well, a little shaky. A booklet called "Going towards Lithuania 1986 - 1990" was a case in point. The booklet chronicled, in chronology form, the party's

activities ever since perestroika, Lithuanian-style, took root here. Sajudis was hardly mentioned at all; instead, the party's decisions in what has come to be called Lithuania's rebirth were highlighted. There was no intimation that many of them had been taken only because Sajudis had succeeded in pushing the party up against a wall. In a tidy bit of dissembling, the chronology also emphasized the role that many Communists played in founding Sajudis, and implicitly tried to bask in their refracted glory. In reality, most Sajudis activists who were also party members had acted not out of their party affiliation, but in spite of it. These nuances made the entire chronology a curious document indeed. It read like the party, despite repenting for past sins, decided nevertheless to write itself a "leading role" in bringing the nation to freedom.

Still, reality, bitter as it was, had sunk in. If the party could soothe itself with thoughts that its activities in recent years had been honorable, it nevertheless had to face that fact that by the last month of 1990, there was no more "leading role." So what should it now be? Before the congress convened, one newspaper commentator wrote that if the party was really sincere about wanting to change, it should disband, and form anew.

But that was not the idea that party leaders had--Starting with Brazauskas' keynote address, in speech after speech, the party's social democratic leanings were emphasized instead. The party's role was now to help "create a democratic society in an independent Lithuania." Brazauskas told the delegates, "This year a complicated, often painful and contradictory process took place in the LCP. From an amorphous, like-minded mass, a social democratically oriented political party was formed." That, said Brazauskas, was the crux of the party's transformation. That was what its identity crisis was all about. The time had come, he went on, to have the party's name reflect its current reality. It was no longer the Communist Party of old. It had already shed its old ties in spirit, now it should do so in name.

That is what he recommended that the Lithuanian Communist Party do. There were, to be sure, some protests. Česlovas Juršėnas, for example, said there was no need. "First," said Juršėnas, as a party member "I haven't committed any crime against the Lithuanian nation. Is it only because someone attacks this party that I have to run to the bushes? Second, we can change our name, but (I guarantee) that Terleckas (a radical anti-Communist activist) recognizes us all perfectly well.."

But Juršėnas was in a minority. By a vote of 432 to 76 with four abstentions, as of December 9, the independent Lithuanian Communist Party was no more. The Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party had taken its place.

The question raised by this move is really quite simple. Will this party, having now shed its odious Communist appellation, succeed in smelling at all sweeter?

All the best,

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The 21st Congress of the Lithuanian Communist Party. The party leadership: Brazauskas is fourth from the left.



Delegates to the 21st Congress of the Lithuanian Communist Party.