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"The Toughest Job in Moscow"

by Ina Navazelskis

Even on weekends, the phones ring constantly at number 10 Pisemsky Street, home of the Lithuanian mission in Moscow. Saturday, March 16, was no exception.

Most of Moscow had the day off. A few streets away, visitors to the Soviet capital strolled down the Arbat, one of the most picturesque pedestrian passages in the city. (And a tourist trap.) Hawkers of traditional Russian souvenirs -- including beautiful boxes with delicate hand-painted designs on a black laquered background, and kitsch paintings of Red Square and Russian Orthodox churches -- cautiously tried their few words of English on those who stopped to look, hoping to sell their wares for hard currency. Moscovites concentrated on the next street north -- Kalinin Prospect, one of the ugliest shopping boulevards in the entire Union. They hurried from one boxy glass and concrete department store to the next, packing into the specialized shops -- such as the International House of Books -- as well.

Just north of Kalinin Prospect, on a quiet narrow side street, the half dozen members of the skeleton crew at the Lithuanian mission were oblivious to the Saturday shoppers. Their world was far removed from the bustle just a few steps away. Yet they, too, were right in their element, in the middle of one of the many diplomatic islands that dot Moscow. Next door was the Mongolian embassy; around the corner on Vorovsky street was the Norwegian embassy. And the United States embassy, several streets west on Chaikovskovo Blvd, was less than a ten minute walk away.

Ina Navazelskis, a journalist, has written extensively about East European and Soviet affairs. She is the author of biographies of Leonid Brezhnev and Alexander Dubcek.

It was a busy Saturday. Two of the Lithuanian mission's six drivers had started their workday well before 8 a.m., and now waited in the garage below for their next assignment. Young aides Dalia Bankauskas and Osvaldas Markevičius -- both having arrived from Vilnius only two months before -- hurried in and out of the second floor anteroom (the hub of the mission) with faxes and documents. There, secretary Natasha Boganova, a tiny energetic woman, the "most important link in the chain of operation" as one senior staff member put it, was as usual trying to do ten things at once. And succeeding.

Two journalists (I was one) stood expectantly in front of her desk, hoping for at least a brief word with the head of the mission, Lithuania's unofficial ambassador to the Soviet Union, 35 year old Egidijus Bičkauskas. A lean man of medium stature, with chiseled features and wavy dark brown hair and mustache, Bičkauskas had already poked his head in, pausing only long enough to ask Boganova to put through a call to Vytautas Landsbergis in Vilnius. Then he ducked back inside his office to continue a discussion with 33-year-old Lithuanian Deputy Prime Minister Zigmas Vaišvila, who had flown into Moscow the night before.

It was just after 1 p.m., midway between two high-powered meetings. At 9 a.m., together with his Latvian and Estonian counterparts, Bičkauskas had met with United States Secretary of State James Baker. At 2 p.m., he was scheduled to meet with Soviet Minister of the Interior Boris Pugo. Boganova therefore made no promises about any interview, saying that if one could be arranged at all, it would be just that -- brief. She then turned to the several phones on her desk, handling them like a master -- holding one receiver in an outstretched hand, cradling another in the crook of her neck, answering a third phone with the standard greeting, "Litovskaya Pasoltsva". ("Lithuanian Representation")

For almost a year such a hectic routine has become the norm for 16 year veteran Boganova -- and everyone else -- at the Lithuanian Mission. It's quite a change from the good old days of stagnation when life at number 10 Pisemsky Street was pretty sleepy. Built about twenty years ago, the mission and the adjacent nine-story hotel was once officially attached to the Lithuanian Council of Ministers (the Soviet Socialist Lithuanian Council of Ministers, that is) and its function in Moscow had been to coordinate economic affairs between the center and the republic. Political relations had not been part of the picture. They had been handled directly -- from the offices of the Lithuanian Communist Party in Vilnius to the appropriate counterparts in Moscow.

Egidijus Bičkauskas meets with United States Secretary of State James Baker at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, March 16, 1991.

That all changed when Bičkauskas arrived here just under a year ago, in mid-April, 1990. One of the 141 newly elected members of the Lithuanian parliament -- he had been backed by the reform movement Sajudis -- Bičkauskas had specifically asked for the Moscow post. With everyone else's sights in Lithuania turned westward -- many believed recognition of her declaration of independence was only a matter of days, weeks at most -- there hadn't been too many other contenders. Bičkauskas easily got the job. Recalling the prevailing mood at the time, he recently said, "It seemed to many people that everything that happened beyond Lithuania's eastern borders was of little interest to us." Few viewpoints, according to Bičkauskas, could hardly have been more mistaken.

Bičkauskas was no stranger to Moscow politics. In March 1989, he had been one of the 42 members from Lithuania elected to the all-Union Congress of People's Deputies. So he was not a complete novice. Still, in what is probably one of the toughest jobs in the Soviet capital today, Bičkauskas has the thankless task of representing Lithuania's interests in an environment that is openly hostile to them. More than any other official of the Lithuanian government, he has borne the brunt of Soviet displeasure to political moves made in Vilnius. He has been ignored, lectured, hung up on, booed, hissed, threatened , even cursed. It was Bičkauskas who had the sorry job of trying to reach Gorbachev the night of January 13th, when the attempted coup by the Soviet military took place in Vilnius. (He was unable to.)

Despite Soviet aggressiveness, Bičkauskas needs no convincing that it is in Lithuania's vital interest to keep the door to the East open. It is a view that many other freshmen politicians in Vilnius do not necessarily share. "I believe that (they are) influenced by a falsely understood...(sense of) patriotism," he says, adding that "we don't have the right to spit on every Russian ". At the same time, Bičkauskas admits relations with the Kremlin are probably as bad as they have ever been -- and since last year have gotten worse.

Few assignments could have gotten off to a worse start. From the day he arrived, Bičkauskas had trouble -- beginning at the Lithuanian mission itself. For several days, the former director refused to vacate his office. Bičkauskas could not even set foot inside. Aides now tell me that after the stand-off ended, as it was bound to, the former director has not been seen in the mission since, too embarrassed to come near it.

Despite such a non-welcome, Bičkauskas has nevertheless managed to rack up quite a few successes in his short tenure. He has made friends in Moscow, particularly with Russian democratic forces. And aide Dalia Bankauskas adds, "His authority among foreign diplomats is high." Even Bičkauskas himself, not given to boasting, admits that "there isn't a major political figure on the Moscow scene that I haven't met at least once."

Although he does not keep a particularly high profile, Bičkauskas nevertheless has made his presence felt. Regularly, there are interviews with him published in the democratic Russian press. In the aftermath of January 13th, his profile increased. Together with several Russian democrats such as Yuri Afanasiev, for example, this February Bičkauskas appeared on the prestigious current affairs program, Vzgliad, discussing the crisis in Lithuania. He was the only Lithuanian on the panel.

(The program, however, was never broadcast over the official Moscow television station. In fact, the Lithuanian program was the final nail in the coffin for Vzgliad, which had already gotten into trouble last December when a special program had been put together about Eduard Scheverdnadze's resignation as Soviet Foreign Minister. The hour and a half Vzgliad program on Lithuania was broadcast several weeks later over Leningrad television and over Lithuanian television from a pirated video cassette.)

Bičkauskas lost little time in entering Moscow's diplomatic world. When I first spoke with him at length last July -- he had been on the job for all of three months -- he said that he maintained very close contacts with the American embassy, "almost daily", adding that of all the foreign diplomats, the Americans seemed to understand the situation in the Baltics best. And when February 16 rolled around this year -- marking the 73rd anniversary of Lithuania's first declaration of independence back in 1918 -- the Moscow foreign diplomatic community and Russia's democratic political elite showed up to honor it. Over 150 people came to Pisemsky street that night. Guests included U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock, Iceland's ambassador, O. Egilsson -- the first foreign government to recognize Lithuania -- even Polish and Czech representatives, who were more vulnerable to retaliation by a displeased Kremlin than their Western counterparts. It was the first such event at the Lithuanian mission in the entire post-war period. One foreign guest told a Lithuanian reporter that as far as measuring the meaning of diplomatic gestures go, one could say that "the evening was a success".

Bičkauskas himself, however, cautions that attention from the foreign diplomatic community, which grew considerably after January 13th -- calls to the mission numbered two or three per day to "express sympathy, offer support" -- should not be overrated, as many Lithuanians unschooled in international polticalese are prone to do. "When speaking about such attention," he said in an interview in early February, "we should not draw mistaken conclusions. We should not think that we are recipients...only because of what happens in Lithuania. That attention is also an expression of concern for oneself, for one's own future. Relations with the Soviet Union determine the destiny of the whole world."

Still, times have changed -- and it seems, in Lithuania's favor. Laughing, today Bičkauskas recalls that "it used to be that diplomats would leave their cars a few streets away and come to us by foot. I remember how happy we were the first time someone dared to drive up to our door!" Some credit for this must go to Bičkauskas.

There is a certain irony to Bičkauskas' current role. In the early days of March, 1990, he was one of the few in Lithuania who publicly urged that the declaration reinstating independence be postponed. I first saw him in one of the many caucuses held just days prior to March 11. In a small auditorium located behind Parliament, packed with Sajudis deputies, I remember Bičkauskas saying, "Let's not take this step now. Let's not play into the hands of the dark forces in the Soviet Union. Let's not hand them a card to use against us." But then Kazimiera Prunskiene spoke up, and instead urged the deputies to be brave, to make the necessary move and declare to the world, once and for all, what Lithuania stands for and what she wants. Prunskiene was hailed as "the bravest man in the auditorium" and Bičkauskas was drowned out, a clear minority among his own Sajudis colleagues.

At the time, all I knew about Bičkauskas was that he had entered political life with a skeleton in his closet. A lawyer by profession, for ten years Bičkauskas had been an interrogator for the Republic of Lithuania's Procurator's office before taking up the Sajudis banner in 1988.

His skeleton involved an infamous trial held in the early 1980's. He had been part of the prosecution team of one of Lithuania's most prominent dissidents, a Roman Catholic priest, Alfonsas Svarinskas. Bičkauskas had interrogated Svarinskas with questions prepared by the KGB and had relayed the answers back to them. The trial, of course, had only one logical outcome. The middle-aged priest was found guilty of "anti-Soviet propaganda" and sentenced to several years in prison, but was released in a general amnesty in 1988. When Bičkauskas ran under the Sajudis banner for a seat in the all-Union Council of People's Deputies in 1989, the trial promised to become a major campaign issue. At the time, Svarinskas was on a trip to Australia. A Voice of America reporter tracked him down there, and in a phone interview, asked Svarinskas what he thought about his former interrogator. The priest did not outright support Bičkauskas, but neither did he outright condemn him. I remember hearing that interview -- I was in Lithuania at the time. It did much to put out the fires (stirred up by the Communist party itself; it hoped to discredit a Sajudis-backed candidate even if it meant tacitly admitting the party's own culpability) surrounding Bičkauskas' campaign.

I recently asked Svarinskas, now back in Kaunas and a prominent activist for reestablishing religious influence in secular life, what he thought of Bičkauskas. "He was a cog in the machine," replied the priest. "At least he called up later and apologized for his actions. Many of the judges who sentenced me did not. Now they have become ardent patriots, but they still have not said they were sorry."

Bičkauskas did more than apologize. "The first thing I did when I was elected was to demand that the decision in Svarinskas' case be nullified." But he didn't go around advertising this, adding that he was still unaware whether Svarinskas had heard about it.

Until 1989, Bičkauskas was a member of the Communist Party. That year the procurator's office was depoliticized; that year he also left the party. Now, although he leans towards the (Lithuanian) Parliament's Center Fraction, made up of Sajudis deputies with moderate views, Bičkauskas has no formal party affiliations and "I am very happy that I don't!"

But neutrality notwithstanding, he nevertheless has his share of detractors in Vilnius, especially among the more nationalist deputies, who find his brand of patriotism -- well, lacking. When I first spoke to him at length last summer, I asked him who he felt was his main support in Lithuania. "My voters," he said without hesitation. I found that answer more interesting for what it did not say than for what it did. It did not refer to any political grouping, nor President Landsbergis, nor Prime Minister Prunskiene. Today, Bičkauskas says his relations with the government of Prime Minister Prunskiene were much more satisfactory than with that of the current Prime Minister, Gediminas Vagnorius. "I can't say that they (relations) are very warm," he says of the current administrative branch of Lithuania's government. "My recommendations are taken into account very little. At least I felt that they (Prunskiene's government) would hear me out. Contacts with the current government are almost nil." Bičkauskas puts such lack of communication down to an attitude from which many new politicians in Lithuania suffer -- they are convinced they already know everything there is to know.

The situation with Parliament is a bit different. Although Bičkauskas has no complaints (at least none that he voiced to me) about his working relationship with Vytautas Landsbergis -- they speak on the phone a minimum of two to three times a week -- his style is entirely different from the President of the Lithuanian Parliament. In marked contrast to Landsbergis' often abrasive public statements, especially regarding Mikhail Gorbachev, Bičkauskas is the epitome of moderation. He has often been called upon to soften the blunt edges of the often categorical declarations, resolutions and appeals made in Vilnius as much as to represent them. "I had to tell Landsbergis that Gorbachev does not control the situation in Moscow, and I had to tell Gorbachev that Landsbergis does not control the situation in Vilnius" he told me last July.

Egidijus Bičkauskas with Vytautas Landsbergis in Parliament in Vilnius, March 1990.

In a recent interview, Bičkauskas said, "Maybe standing on the sidelines, it seems that this exchange of writings of an ultimatum nature -- which started last year -- is effective policy. But policies based on ultimatums are not the very best. Political relations and ties are formed and broadened not by loud slogans (although sometimes these are unavoidable) but by quiet, condidential diplomacy."

Walking a political tightrope between Vilnius and Moscow, however, is only one of Bičkauskas's challenges. On hardly any budget at all, he has undertaken the formidable task of turning the lethargic Lithuanian mission into a nascent embassy, a prospect that he foresees taking two to three years at least. We can't afford to fool ourselves, he says, "independence is still a long way off." In the meantime, however, "we have a responsibility before the world," and that translates into being pro-active, rather than just reactive. It means that Lithuania must begin to take an interest in those parts of the world far removed from her own immediate sphere. (During the recent Gulf War, for example, Bičkauskas visited both the Kuwaiti and Iraq embassies.) It means that not only does Bičkauskas mingle with foreign diplomats, but he also establishes ties, regularly collects and analyses information from the missions of other republics, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan. It means, finally, that Bičkauskas takes his identity as an unofficial ambassador seriously.

Few official ambassadors, however, had to start their education in diplomacy from scratch, as did Bičkauskas. When he arrived in Moscow, he was literally thrown into the deep end of the pool. It was schooling largely by trial and error, he told me last July, his only textbook often limited to his own common sense. What were his language skills? He speaks Russian and Lithuanian and a smattering of French. "We are all dilletantes," he complained to me then, a note of despair creeping into his voice. "We don't even know how to address letters properly."

First, he had to overcome fears from the staff at the mission. There were worries that he was a broom, ready to sweep them out. "I am not one of those who thinks that everything should be simply destroyed. I think that things should be changed by degrees," Bičkauskas said, explaining why he did not fire the old-guard en masse. (Only one or two people left voluntarily after he arrived.) Instead, he moved some people around. Robertas Verbickas, for example, a 20 year veteran at the mission, today is in charge of administrative affairs. Natasha Boganova has evolved into a super-secretary, a very rare breed in this part of the world.(She is there from early in the morning to late at night, she keeps the mission running.)

Secretary Natasha Boganova

Still, for several months, Bickauškas was ambassador-analyst-chief administrator all rolled into one. When I first visited him last July, an extraordinary Communist Party Congress was in session -- and all of Moscow was attending it. While I spoke with Bičkauskas, a young Sajudis activist walked in to report the latest developments there. It was a two-sentence verbal summary. Who does your political analysis of the situation here? I asked Bičkauskas after he left. "You just saw him," he replied with a sheepish grin.

That has since changed. Bičkauskas has brought in a handful of young people from Vilnius over the past few months who have begun laying the groundwork for various departments. As no extra budget has been allocated for this growth, Bičkauskas solved his financial problems by having half of the salaries of many of his new staff people paid by quasi-governmental associations -- such as the Commerce association -- back in Lithuania.

In short, in the political analysis department, for example, one person is responsible for gathering information about internal Soviet affairs, as well as information about all German-speaking countries. Another is responsible for information about foreign countries -- minus German-speaking countries. A third is an information officer. "Now I no longer will meet with a second or third secretary (of an embassy)," Bičkauskas says, "they will. This looks more solid."

There is also an economic department, also made up of two or three people, one who handles relations with foreign companies. There is a cultural section, whose current project is to put together what Bičkauskas hopes will be the most extensive Baltic affairs library in Moscow. Bičkauskas has nothing but praise for his new crew. They are smart and enthusiastic, he says, and do wonders on "400-ruble-a-month" salaries, which in Moscow is really just "kopeks." (Or in American terms, is about $15 to $20 per month.)

If Bičkauskas is loyal about his staff, they more than gush back. "I see him at work when I arrive in the morning, and I see him at work when I leave at night," says Robertas Verbickas. (Bičkauskas has not had a vacation in three and a half years.) Secretary Boganova constantly fusses that he doesn't get enough rest. I see her protectively flick away a piece of lint from his shoulder, straighten his tie after he emerges from his office.

Bičkauskas allows himself a critical point of view regarding the prevailing policies set in Vilnius. "There is no doubt in my mind that Lithuanians want independence," he says. "People only have doubts on how to achieve it." The Lithuanian leadership, says Bičkauskas, has made its share of tactical mistakes. "For example, I was convinced that neither we, nor the Latvians nor

Estonians, will be able to avoid a referendum (on independence)...(Such a referendum) would only strengthen our position. And during the time that the referendum would be in its planning stages, we could thus avoid economic blackmail or the use of military force."

That, of course, didn't happen. Referendums were indeed held -- in Lithuania in February (after almost a year of economic blackmail and the failed military coup the month before) and in Estonia and Latvia in early March -- but Bičkauskas' argument was that there had been no reason to wait that long.

And he has some sharp criticisms of a mindset that has gained much acceptance in Lithuania -- at least in political circles. "We are not the bellybutton of the world," says Bičkauskas, "and we must begin to realize that no matter how much it hurts, (the occupation of) our television tower and television studios, no matter how unjust this is, just doesn't compare to the hundreds of thousands of deaths in other parts of the world. We have to make our case so that others have an interest to support us, rather than we simply demand that they do."

Egidijus Bičkauskas with (then) Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene, President Vytautas Landsbergis at the Lithuanian Mission in Moscow, 1990.

I have heard various -- all unofficial -- reactions in Vilnius to Egidijus Bičkauskas. While most people I talk to find him competent, there are some who argue that he steps out of line with such views. His role is not to set policy, but to represent it. Others say he that
he is unprofessional -- a proper diplomat should maintain a poker face. Still others say that his views are a luxury that an embattled country like Lithuania cannot afford -- she is, after all, in a defensive position, and could easily lose out if she starts placing the interests of her larger neighbors above her own, as she has been forced to do for most of this century, with tragic consequences.

But as I watch Bičkauskas climb into a black Cadillac, (gift of a New York businessman to the Lithuanian mission) on his way to his meeting with Soviet Interior Minister Boris Pugo -- I do not have such doubts. This chain-smoking, soft-spoken man, tense like a spring most of the time, inspires my confidence. I don't think he ever forgets that he is the chief representative of a nation under siege, living -- pardon the cliche -- in the belly of the beast. (His meeting with Pugo is a case in point. It does not promise to be an easy one, as Pugo is an old hard-line holdover from Brezhnev's days. Bičkauskas' purpose in seeing him is to complain about continuing low-level aggression by Soviet Interior Ministry forces in Lithuania.)

And I like his brand of patriotism. "I carry it in my heart, not on my sleeve," he tells me, adding, as a parting thought, a quote he read recently from former Soviet Minister of the Interior Vadim Bakatin (who got it from Tolstoy who got it from Samuel Johnson) that "Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels."

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* Photos are all from Lithuania's news agency, ELTA.

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