

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Peter,

I begin this letter to you on May 7th, the nineteenth day of the Soviet blockade of Lithuania. Yet where I am having lunch today -- at Stikliai, a cooperative restaurant in the heart of Vilnius's Old Town -- you would hardly know that there is one.

Little of the blockade, in fact, is reflected in what I see in the streets of Vilnius every day. It has, of course, hit Lithuania's industry hard; it is estimated that Lithuania's economy loses over 2 million rubles every day. And naturally people are tense -- but strangely enough, not panicked. Except for sporadic activity by pro-Soviet groups, there are no anti-government demonstrations, no calls for strikes, no civil disorder. (And the pro-Soviet groups are not nearly as threatening in Lithuania as they are in Latvia and Estonia.) With few exceptions, everyday life proceeds much as it always has; the blockade is accepted as one more frustration in a life full of frustrations. A phrase thrown around here these days is "Nera tokio blogio kuris nepavirsto i gera", a variation of "In every cloud there is a silver lining." So I often hear people say that if there are fewer cars and trolleys on the road because of the petrol shortage, then the air is finally cleaner; we should now ride bikes, improve our fitness. (Never mind that it is near impossible to find a bike to buy; they cost up to 500 rubles on the black market). If newspapers can only be published three times a week because of the paper shortage -- well, what a relief, no one had the time to read them all anyway. If industry, so dependent on raw materials from the Soviet Union, no longer gets them, who says this means it will be crippled? On the contrary, now it has a powerful incentive -- yea, opportunity -- to reorient itself immediately to free market conditions. (How to do this is another matter.) Deputy Prime Minister Ozolas even said last month, "Whoever in the Kremlin ordered the economic blockade should be awarded a high Lithuanian medal."

And so on. Of course, these are still the early days; and while under siege, Lithuania is neither starving nor freezing. Not yet. But such calm makes me suspicious. Does it reflect an inner strength -- the kind born when you have nothing left to lose -- or an unwillingness to face calamity? Or maybe both? Because this is not how I imagine a blockade should be, I am nervous. (There are, of course, many others who are nervous right along with me. But their alarm is viewed as almost unpatriotic, and so they keep quiet about it.)

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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.

When the blockade was first imposed, I somehow expected somebody to announce some sort of plans. After all, the possibility of an economic siege had been much-discussed and long anticipated. What should people do? How should they prepare? But there were no answers to these questions. Even at the Second Sajudis Congress, held the weekend of April 21-22 to debate the future of the movement, the blockade was virtually ignored. The Congress was held just a few days after the fuel stopped flowing; petrol rationing was already in force. With over 800 delegates from across Lithuania gathered in one place, it was the perfect opportunity to prepare counter-measures. A few brave voices even suggested as much. But the Congress organizers stuck to their original agenda of trying to figure out what Sajudis' role should be in a future it might not even have.

The new leadership's actions were no more satisfying, tending towards the reactive, rather than proactive. But perhaps it is unfair to expect much from it. Running government -- and one in crisis from the first moment of its existence -- requires a set of skills that the new leaders haven't yet had the chance to acquire. And they have been given no honeymoon period.

Still, I wonder whether the blockade is not, in fact, like a python, which lulls its prey into a false sense of security because it tightens its grip only gradually, still allowing the witless victim to breathe a bit.

So while we still have it, let me tell you a little about this breathing space. Because in my mind the word blockade is synonymous with very dire things indeed -- images of the Berlin Airlift and the siege of Leningrad flit by -- earthly rather than spiritual matters have dominated my thinking in the past few weeks. I have, in other words, had food on the brain.

I return to Stikliai, where every item on the short two page menu -- except for the cakes, cookies, and oh yes, the champagne soup -- is actually available. This already distinguishes Stikliai, which first opened its doors in August, 1987, from the handful of other restaurants in Vilnius. These, following standard Soviet practice, offer multi-page menus but very little to actually choose from. With their stone-faced personnel, gymnasium sized dining rooms and 60's style boxy furniture, these places are run by the twin maxims of "bigger is better" in decor while "less is more" in service and food.

Not so at Stikliai -- arguably the most visibly successful effort in semi-private enterprise in Vilnius to date. In addition to the two-story restaurant's three dining rooms, there is also a separate Stikliai cafe and bar around the corner, and until recently, two kiosk stands selling baked goods near the central train station. Owned and run by three partners, Stikliai employs some 60 people. According to one partner, the energetic 44 year old Romas Zakarevicius, Stikliai has a turnover of about 1 million rubles a year. (Zakarevicius declines, however, to say how much of

that is pure profit, stating only that he plows all profits back into buying things. Things, he says, have value; paper rubles do not. What things? He does not say. But when one takes a look around the restaurant, one gets an idea.)

The food at Stikliai is not exactly blockade fare. Appetizers include red caviar (served, if you like, with Russian blini), squid salad, chicken and fish in aspic, and chicken liver pate. Main courses include chicken prepared three different ways, and a veal and pork selection each. Forest mushrooms and marinated vegetables are standard accompaniments. Two spaghetti dishes -- one meat, the other mushroom -- are recent additions, the result of a culinary trip to Italy last month by Stikliai chefs, when they brought home a spaghetti-making machine. Even without the cakes and cookies -- early blockade victims -- there are many other deserts, including a raisin-nut-honey confection topped with whipped cream, various gelatins, and Italian-style sorbet ices. True, all around the food tends to be on the heavy side, what with the dollops of cream and a pronounced tendency towards heavy cheese sauces. But I will not quibble...

Stikliai is Vilnius' fanciest restaurant, and it shows. The three dining rooms -- one devoted just to special banquets -- are small, furnished with plushly upholstered chairs whose wooden frames are intricately carved. Original paintings hang on the walls, background music is either classical or jazz, place settings are formal. While somber -- or are they merely snooty, as in every self-respecting restaurant the world over? -- the tuxedo-clad maitre d' and the uniformed waiters, (white shirts, black bow ties, black trousers) are attentive and efficient. From the stained-glass windows, to the brass candlesticks and tiny bouquets of fresh flowers on each table, the effect is one of cultured bourgeois comfort, well insulated from the shabby, the uncouth -- the Soviet.

Stikliai's prices are high -- most entrees alone run at about five or six rubles. But there is never a shortage of customers. With Master-and Euro Card stickers strategically pasted on a window pane in the front door and a tri-lingual color brochure (English, German, Lithuanian), Stikliai is clearly geared to foreigners. Still, it is open to anyone who can afford to pay; this policy earns it an added respect on my part. (The waiters, however, tend to divide people into two separate classes, handing out specially prepared menus according to who you are, or who they think you are. And with little wonder. The English and German menus list prices in hard currency at several times the rate of exchange, while the Lithuanian - Russian menu lists them in rubles. The first time I dined at Stikliai I engaged in a not-too-decorous conversation with the maitre d'. I was handed the English language menu. I didn't want it, and said so, adding that my passport and citizenship should have nothing to do with which menu I wished to select from. The maitre d' thought otherwise. We went back and forth. But in the end, I won, proof that bitter as it sometimes is, Stikliai has been forced to adopt an annoying American tenet: The customer is always right. These days, there is at least one American customer at

Stikliai who pays in rubles...)

But at Lapute ("Little Fox" in Lithuanian), a solidly built brick guest house/ hotel located just a few miles outside Vilnius, that couldn't happen. Also geared to foreigners, only guests paying hard currency are accepted there. Like Stikliai, Lapute's owners have managed to create a well-heeled world completely out of tune - - but very much in touch; where else would they get the scarce products they offer? -- with the one around it. But even more than Stikliai, Lapute unabashedly trumpets this redefined East European two class system. Instead of haves and have-nots being split according to Communist Party and non-Communist Party status, now first class citizens are those who have access to hard currency and to the comforts real money can buy, and second-class citizens are those who do not.

A cooperative-run hotel (the only one of its kind so far in Lithuania) Lapute is everything Soviet hotels usually are not -- comfortable, tastefully furnished, small. The floors are all a shining parquet; the walls and ceilings are wood-pannelled in geometric patterns, the bathrooms -- each of the seven guest rooms has its own -- are tiled. There is a billiard room, sauna and swimming pool in the basement, and a formal dining room, complete with bar and fireplace, on the ground floor. Unlike Intourist hotels, which tend to take your money and sneer, Lapute's owners deliver -- whether it is personal service or just plain hot water. An American photographer told me how he arrived from Riga, Latvia at 3 a.m. one recent morning, his rented car mud-and insect-spattered. When he got up the next morning, the whole car was washed and vaccuumed. With the current visa as well as economic blockade, Lapute now stands almost completely empty, but at a competitive (even if outrageous) \$85.00 per night (the same amount the 22 story Lietuva Intourist hotel in town charges) I am sure it will not stay empty for long.

Lapute was first discovered by French journalists and has been operating only for a few months. For all those who might now or ever be interested, Lapute's number is: 22-63-13, or 22-64-48, Address: Vilnius, Buivydiskes, Zujunai, Pergales 15. Owners: Danute Venslauskaitė, Visvaldas Dubauskas.

My own reactions to Lapute are mixed. Part of me applauds the co-owners' initiative to take on such a venture despite very frustrating Soviet circumstances. But my basic instinct is less generous. I am more interested to learn who had to be bribed, was anyone exploited, what was outright stolen, how the levers of this corrupt system were played in order for Lapute to open its doors. I wonder if I have not, in fact, partially adopted a deeply ingrained attitude here -- whether it is more Soviet or more Lithuanian I have not yet figured out -- which equates any sign of wealth in a land of such scarcity with corruption. This kind of thinking often masks simple, pure envy. And yet, it would take a lot to convince me that Lapute came to be simply as the result of honest to goodness hard work. And I just don't like the

implications of Lapute's hard currency only policy. Natives are given to understand that they are only worth as much as their money -- and that their money isn't worth anything at all.

But back again to Stikliai, where humble professors from nearby Vilnius University who earn rubles have the right to dine next to foreign journalists or even royal people (Princess Caroline of Monaco here last year). After lunch, as Vivaldi's Four Seasons played in the background, I chatted with Romas Zakarevicius about the blockade.

It has given Zakarevicius one headache after another. Already a factory in Byelorussia which supplies Stikliai's glassware refused to sell any more. "We visited them, and as always, brought a cake and a bottle of champagne" Zakarevicius recalls. But the formerly friendly relations had soured. Ever since the declaration of independence on March 11 "we became villains, bad people", says Zakarevicius. Where, he wonders, will he now find those same gilded-rimmed, golden-spotted stem glasses?

Then there is the silverware. Every half year, he explains, Stikliai holds an inventory. The last one in January revealed 120 fewer teaspoons, 82 fewer forks, 40 fewer knives. Putting the discrepancy down to "souvenir-lovers" who want something by which to remember their dining experience, Zakarevicius admits that such thievery is perhaps a normal loss for a normal restaurant. But neither Stikliai nor the world it inhabits is normal. Zakarevicius now racks his brains with how to find replacements. No silverware is to be had anywhere, period, never mind the silver-plated fancy schmancy variety that Stikliai uses.

And of course, there is the food. Stikliai currently has food reserves for four months. But because of the blockade, only one out of the four bakers is working; Zakarevicius also had to close a Stikliai baked goods stand near the railway station. The restaurant's network for food supplies is daunting. It buys some 200 kilograms of nuts twice a year and some 300 - 400 kilograms of honey and raisins three times a year from Moldavia, caviar from Sachalin, saffron from Azerbaijan and sweet pepper and chile from the Ukraine. Ever since late 1989, when the Soviet Union forbade cooperatives such as Stikliai to use middlemen to buy goods, Zakarevicius has had to scramble to find regular suppliers. Now with the blockade, there is the additional problem of transport -- rail lines are blocked, trucks use precious fuel. Within Lithuania itself, the petrol problem has become acute -- particularly for the Stikliai beer bar, around the corner from the restaurant. Beer is normally trucked into Vilnius three times a month from Birzai, near the Latvian border, some 214 kilometers to the north. Each journey requires about 100 liters of petrol, and Zakarevicius is forced to pay black market prices for it.

As we end our conversation, I comment that it seems the solution to Stikliai's problems will be lifting the blockade. But Zakarevicius only partially agrees. A better solution, he says,

would be the possibility of buying supplies from nearby Poland, rather than spreading out to the far corners of the Soviet Union...

I have written about the most opulent oases that I know of in Vilnius -- oases accessible to the public, that is -- to balance out the image that perhaps the blockade has reduced everyone to eating raw potato scraps. Not yet; not if these places are still operating. But neither does this mean the blockade has no teeth. It does, and they have been bared.

They have also bitten. Invisible as it is on an individual level, on a national level, the blockade is the major disaster it was meant to be. Consider what has happened in a few short weeks alone. On April 18, with five minutes notice, the Soviet Union suspended the flow of crude oil to Lithuania. The following day, she cut the amount of natural gas to 3.5 million cubic meters per day -- sixteen percent of the amount that Lithuania usually uses. Later, she blocked the rail and sea transport of foodstuffs such as fish and sugar beet, and of medical supplies and raw materials.

The squeeze was on. Petrol began to be rationed the weekend of April 20 - 21 (30 liters per driver until May 20), followed by certain food staples such as flour, grains, pasta on May 1. In order to conserve electricity, Lithuanian television cancelled most of its weekday morning and afternoon programming, limiting itself to one half hour early morning broadcast and no more than six hours in the evening. Hospitals cut down on operations. Scarce medicines became even scarcer. The aggravated paper shortage -- Lithuania depended almost entirely on the Soviet Union for the supply of newsprint and printing ink -- had an immediate impact. During the first week of May(?), daily newspapers began publishing only three times a week; weekly newspapers reduced their pages by almost half.

Work stoppages mounted as one plant after another ran out of raw materials, or fuel, or both. Some workers were reassigned to carry out renovations and repairs. Others were asked to take unpaid vacations for one month, sometimes two, sometimes more. Unemployment climbed daily. According to information from the Lithuanian Parliament, by May 7 over 23,000 people not doing their regular jobs.

The Lithuanian authorities decided early on to blunt the impact of the blockade on daily life in Lithuania as much as possible, and that is why it is less visible than I thought it would be. Residents have not yet been restricted in their usage of either gas or electricity. The authorities were also handed one lucky coincidence. Heating in residential buildings is turned off every spring at about this time; this year the turn-off date, April 20 coincided with the second day of the blockade. So this energy-saving step jarred noone. But as fuel supplies dwindle, there is now talk of hot water being turned off before the end of May.

At a press conference in late April, Deputy Prime Minister Brazauskas announced that Lithuania had enough petrol to last until

about the beginning of June, but refused to elaborate just how much that actually amounted to. Petrol now ends up in the tanks of Lithuania's cars in roundabout ways, mostly trucked in illegally from other republics. Despite reports that cars with Lithuanian plates in Byelorussia are refused service, this seems to be limited to daylight hours. The Byelorussian pumps, it is said, are busy centers at night. Petrol is also siphoned off by Soviet soldiers from military bases here. They are raking in a tidy profit, selling petrol at black market rates of up to 2 rubles per liter. (The state-set price is 30-40 kopecks.)

There are fewer cars on the road, but the streets are not empty. (Contrary to what seems to be the international perception, there has been no rise in the number of horses or horse-drawn carts in the capital -- though who knows what will happen in June, when almost all the reserves will have run out.)

Some people, of course, didn't wait until the blockade to begin preparing for it. "The day after independence I went out and bought petrol," Lithuanian parliamentarian Kazimieras Antanavicius confided to me in late April, adding that even way back then in early March "I was surprized to find that we still had any." (This was a thinly disguised salvo aimed at the new leadership. The leader of the Social Democrats, and a Sajudis member, Antanavicius has been a maverick in the Lithuanian Parliament, constantly criticizing its work. He believes that the sooner Lithuania makes concessions to the Soviet Union -- even to the point of freezing the declaration of independence for up to five years -- the better. He mutters heretical things like had only the independent Lithuanian Communist Party been allowed to run the government, Lithuania would not be in the pickle she is today. His is truly a minority voice amongst the Sajudis deputies, and he is not, as you can imagine, Vytautas Landsbergis' favorite person.)

Antanavicius was one of the first to stockpile petrol. But the idea eventually caught on. Lines at gas pumps were already 50 cars deep in some places on Easter Weekend, the last weekend before the spigots were turned off.

Just after the blockade began, the authorities reassured the population that there was no food shortage; even less so after Lithuania cut the amount she usually ships to the Soviet Union. Food rationing was introduced primarily to control the purchasing frenzy unleashed during the first full week of the blockade, as people (yours truly included) disregarded such assurances and stockpiled anyway. (I visited four grocery stores on Monday morning, April 23, in search of oatmeal; when I finally landed some, I took no risks. My own inventory now consists of ten boxes of the stuff along with forty cans of condensed milk.)

The run on the state-controlled grocery stores resulted in the bins holding macaroni, flour and grains emptying out within a day or two. They have stayed empty. During that first week, I spot-checked a number of food stores both in the city center and in a

few residential neighborhoods. The worst was one small store just outside Vilnius's Old Town. It had only candy and detergent paste on the shelves -- and the latter only available with a ration ticket. It was a sorry sight.

But even in normal times, state-controlled grocery stores in Vilnius are sorry sights. They seem to be covered with an eternal coat of dust, much like a small run-down hardware store. Sometimes they even smell like a hardware store. Only the most basic food staples are available. But -- and this is the first irony of the blockade -- there is food. The Lithuanian authorities are not lying.

For example, amongst dairy products, there are eggs, bottled milk, cream, sour cream, butter, margarine, (which is rationed) and the yoghurt-like drink kefir. In larger stores, there are also two or three varieties of hard cheeses, which have a similar flavor to Gouda, Edam or Havarti. In total, this is hardly enough to maintain a well stocked store. But -- and this is the second irony of the blockade -- there is more food here in blockaded Lithuania than in Moscow.

Refrigeration is minimal. Unwrapped meat cuts are laid out in enameled trays, under glass counters where even in winter a fly or two feasts away. The smell from the few varieties of fish available -- usually smoked -- is pungent. All this would be reason enough to give a hygienist apoplexy, were it not that there is very little beef or pork to be had. At the state-controlled stores -- as opposed to the farmer's markets -- I see more pork snouts and feet than anything else. Chickens are almost always scrawny. What other meat is available is at least 75% fat. (One Lithuanian delicacy that I have not been able to bring myself to even try is an open sandwich of black bread topped with a thick slice of bacon fat -- no bacon -- and slices of raw onion.)

Throughout the winter, the vegetable sections of state-controlled stores sold only cabbages, potatoes and carrots -- the latter two always covered with dirt. In recent weeks, I have regularly found fresh cucumbers, and on occasion, fresh dill, parsley, green onions and lettuce.

Non-perishable food products are often stacked in three feet high square metal bins -- the kind you would normally expect to hold hammers and paint cans and lawn hoses. It was in such bins that plain brown paper bags of flour and grains were stacked in pre-blockade days. (Nowadays there are only empty spaces where these products used to be.) Other bins hold such foods as canned beets or canned celery, or single kilogram bags of sugar and small boxes of loose Georgian tea, (both rationed long before the blockade).

Every once in a while, there are a few spices and flavorings such as garlic salt, pickling spice, and so on. ( But never anything as exotic as cinnamon or ginger.) Condiments such as



horseradish or mustard appear only rarely. For some reason, there always seems to be several varieties of candy. But some basic staples have disappeared altogether; friends tell me that vinegar, for example, has not been available for a couple of years. There are occasionally surprises, such as bottled Coca-cola or Pepsi. The labels sport the familiar logos, sometimes with Cyrillic lettering, sometimes with a Latin alphabet. But at current prices -- Pepsi costs 45 kopecks a bottle, Coke 59 kopecks -- these soft drinks are luxury items, and so the bins remain stocked a while longer than most. On an average salary of 200 rubles a month, most people can't afford to taste the real thing.

On that kind of salary, one would assume most people could not afford to shop anywhere except the state-run stores I just described. Certainly not at one of Vilnius' three outdoor farmer's markets, where prices are set according to what the market will bear. But one would be wrong. The outdoor markets are always crowded, with heaviest traffic on Saturdays and Sundays.

Last Sunday, a warm day when lilacs were in full bloom -- not at all blockade weather -- I headed towards Kalvariju (Calvary) Street, where the largest of the three markets is located. As I entered the back of the market, I passed by a gas station, where at least 60 cars stood in line waiting to pump in their 30 liter limit of gas. (A little side note -- Two years ago Calvary Street was still called Dzerzhinsky Street, in honor of Felix Dzerzhinsky, that nice man who set up the Cheka, precursor of today's KGB.)

At the Calvary Street market, local -- and some not so local -- cooperative farmers sell their produce directly to the consumer, bypassing the state-run network of food stores. (There are, however, some state run stores within the market compound.) Three large buildings flank a dozen or so long outdoor stands. The building at the back entrance sells seafood -- most of it frozen or canned. One building at the front entrance of the market is where beef, pork, chicken, and all the edible and inedible parts thereof are sold. The meat is displayed at two large rectangular marble counters, and customers inspect various cuts buy lifting them up with long two-pronged metal forks. Whole sides of beef, half a pork head, and sometimes even some very live chickens (I always feel sorry for them) are on sale. There is no refrigeration or any kind of sterilized plastic wrapping or packaging. But the variety and quality of meat is much better than in state-controlled stores. Nevertheless, friends advise me to boil whatever I buy here for at least two hours before preparing it any other way.)

In a third building, also configured with two marble rectangular counters -- cakes, cookies, fresh cottage cheese, honey, cream, medicinal herbs, pickled garlic heads, pickled pickles, and sauerkraut (doled out straight from huge wooden barrels into plastic bags; or better yet, into one's own empty jars) are for sale. For some foods -- such as fresh sour cream straight from the farm, it is best to come before 9 A.M., as the farmers tend to sell out their supplies early. (I learned that the

hard way, when one time I tried (unsuccessfully) to buy some sour cream at the very late hour of 10.30 A.M. There was half a pail left, and I only wanted half a liter. But the seller -- a hefty middle-aged farm woman with rough swollen fingers, a row of gold teeth, wrinkled face and flowered kerchief -- maintained she had no sour cream left at all. I pointed to the pail half hidden under the counter. What pail? she said. I was licked. She was keeping what was left for her regular, favored customers.)

Outside, on the long tables, the spring crop of fresh vegetables -- lettuce, radishes, cucumbers and tomatoes -- already were available. So, too, were more exotic items such as fresh oranges and lemons. Here is a brief rundown of my grocery purchases for May 6, 1990:

A kilogram of honey,	16 rubles;
a kilogram of oranges (about 4)	10 rubles;
lemons,	1 1/2 - 3 rubles per piece;
100 grams of fresh dill,	1 ruble;
a kilogram of homegrown cucumbers	5 rubles;
a kilogram of fresh tomatoes	12 rubles;
a kilogram of radishes	3 rubles.

At the state-run fruit and vegetable store inside the market area, I bought a kilogram of dried apricots for 10 rubles.

Naturally, with the average monthly wage at about 200 rubles for Soviet workers, these prices are exorbitant. Even if one earns over 500 rubles a month, as do university professors and those newly elected members of Parliament who have no other source of income, one thinks twice before plunking down 3 rubles for a lemon (which, along with the oranges, are trucked in from Georgia or Azerbaijan and were available all winter).

Such is the food situation during the first month of the blockade in Lithuania. A friend from Moscow confirms that in the Soviet capital the situation is much worse. What food there is -- such as tomatoes at the cooperative farmer's market, -- often sells at twice the price as in Vilnius. An acquaintance from Kazakhstan paints an even more frustrating picture. There is food in Kazakhstan, he says, but no petrol to distribute it to food stores. So it stands at train stations and rots.

This could be the situation in Lithuania in only a matter of weeks. But even then, things would not be as bad as in the Soviet Union as a whole. A Russian taxi driver summed it up well to my Moscow friend, "At least in Lithuania, people have a reason for putting up with the blockade. But what reason do we have?"

I don't have an answer to that question. I don't think Mikhail Gorbachev has one either. But that is why he is in such trouble.

In the meantime, with my forty cans of condensed milk and ten boxes of oatmeal -- well, alright, and a few salamis from the

dollar store -- I am doing quite nicely. But if perhaps any members of the Institute felt like sending say, some take-out Chinese this way (sesame noodles, fried dumplings, orange-flavored beef) well, I wouldn't say no...

Best wishes --



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(And now, for something a bit on the silly side. Alastair Cooke's "Letter from America" about the broccoli scandal, broadcast on the BBC in early April, was the inspiration for this musing.)

#### THE LIMITS OF DEMOCRACY

by Ina Navazelskis

Recently, United States President George Bush got into trouble for mixing up freedom of speech with his role as leader of the world's most powerful democracy. He should have known better.

Freedom of speech is a basic principle that democratic governments automatically defend, but that doesn't mean their leaders should actually go around practicing it themselves. This Mr. Bush, normally the consummate professional, momentarily forgot.

The issue seemed safe enough. During a White House press conference in March, President Bush allowed himself a little free speech about the meals served him in the White House. He was not entirely happy, he admitted, that broccoli was on the menu so often. "I am the President of the United States," he said. "And I don't like broccoli."

The powerful American broccoli lobby was, to put it mildly, not pleased. Protests from around the country started pouring into the White House the next day. Why was the president picking on broccoli, irate farmers wanted to know? How could he so carelessly -- yea, flippantly -- deride a product that helped the economies of so many important agricultural states? Didn't he realize this could have dangerous repercussions on those economies?

The President clearly had been indiscreet. After decades of government service during which he learned the value of caution over frankness, Mr. Bush had actually said what he thought -- just like that! With no advice from political consultants, no careful weighing of how his words would play in Peoria. No wonder it gave vegetable lovers -- never mind Americans everywhere -- the vapors. (Remember we are talking here about the same person who, asked his reaction to the fall of the Berlin Wall, said that it was "an interesting development.")

There is a lesson in all this -- especially for recently elected leaders of new democratic countries. Here in Lithuania, that lesson is particularly apt. Since becoming president of the Lithuanian parliament on March 11, Vytautas Landsbergis has been saying what he thinks at very regular intervals -- sometimes even daily. (Things like Lithuania being an independent country, and the Soviet Union having no right to interfere in her domestic affairs, etc., etc.) What nerve, you might say. What naivete. More to the point -- what a gross misunderstanding of what democracy is all about.

Not that Mr. Landsbergis' views are at all undemocratic, or even incendiary. (Although certain Soviet officials have been rumored to suffer heartburn because of them.) A slight man with a soft, almost sing-song voice, Mr. Landsbergis himself projects the calm he urges the harassed people of Lithuania to maintain in response to recent Soviet nastiness. His style leans more towards irony, occasionally laced with a touch of sarcasm or a slightly upturned smile.

Still, in the less than two months that he has been in office, Mr. Landsbergis has managed to be indiscreet lots and lots of times.

There was, for instance, his early correspondence with Mikhail Gorbachev. He addressed the leader of workers the world over as "Your Excellency". It was rumored that the good comrade was more incensed by this than by Lithuania's declaration of independence itself, and let Mr. Landsbergis know that he better cut it out.

Then there was the business of Mr. Gorbachev's first ultimatum to the Lithuanian leadership on March 31, when he demanded that it stop all this nonsense and come back to the fold -- or else. Before you knew it, the same day Lithuanian television -- which has learned quickly about how a free press operates -- stuck a mike in Mr. Landsbergis' face and asked him how he felt. Interrupted in the middle of a working session of the Presidium, his shirtsleeves rolled up -- but with upturned smile in place -- Mr. Landsbergis answered that he had other, more pressing matters on his mind at the moment, thank you very much. Of course, he also could have told Lithuanian television, in true democratic fashion, to get lost. But that will come, that will come...

While Mr. Landsbergis' many statements may not make good policy, they do make good copy. And they indicate a politician who still uses his words to primarily express the feelings of his people rather than to wrap those feelings in language palatable to leaders of other countries. Mr. Landsbergis has not yet learned the code words of this language. It is not surprizing, therefore, that his statements jar the ears of world leaders more fluent in the banter of international politicalese. It is not surprizing that they earned the reflective Mr. Landsbergis a reputation for sometimes sticking his foot in his mouth.

But democracy in this early stage -- before diplomatic niceties and ordinary grubby politics severely ration freedom of speech for her guardians -- is exhilarating. So it is also not surprising that Mr. Landsbergis goes down well with Lithuania's voters, who themselves have been saying what they really think only for a very short while. It is all very contagious; the newly elected deputies in the Lithuanian Parliament now also say -- more than they ever did before -- what they really think. No doubt, all this has led to myriad problems, never mind apoplexy, for the much overworked KGB. The comrades at this venerable institution must be scrambling to record all these utterances for the bright day sometime in the future when they, too, hope to once again say what they really think.

So Mr. Landsbergis and Lithuania's other newly minted politicians must therefore -- and as quickly as possible -- learn the fine democratic art of talking a lot and saying nothing. Here they could take a hint from United States Vice President Daniel Quayle. Since becoming vice president, Mr. Quayle has also said many things, but neither he nor anyone else has figured out what they mean yet. That's one reason why democracy is still safe in America.

But true mature democracy takes time to develop, and it is the rare individual who can learn from the mistakes of others. I suspect that if I were to ask Mr. Landsbergis what he thinks of broccoli -- and I fully intend to at the first opportunity -- in his inexperience, he would probably tell me. Then again, unlike President Bush, Mr. Landsbergis would risk little by doing so. There is no broccoli grower's lobby in Lithuania to haunt him forever after. There is, of course, also no broccoli.

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#### CHRONOLOGY: APRIL 11 - MAY 12, 1990

- April 11 Lithuanian leadership pledges oath of allegiance to the Lithuanian Republic
- April 12 Lithuanian Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene, Latvian PM Vilis Bresis and Estonian PM Edgar Savisaar sign joint treaty, valid until the year 2000, which calls for a the creation of a Baltic market, with a common trade council and commission to be set up

President George Bush and Secretary of State James Baker meet with representatives of Baltic American organizations for one hour and ten minutes in Washington. The Baltic Americans ask that the US 1) de facto recognize the Landsbergis government 2) officially and immediately endorse Czech president Vaclav Havel's

proposal to hold negotiations between Lithuania and the Soviet Union in Prague 3) offer no trade or economic concessions to the Soviet Union until she shows good will to negotiate to the Balts. Bush replies that although the US never recognized the incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union, he does not plan to recognize the Vilnius government de facto any time soon, and will continue to support both M Gorbachev's democratic reforms and the right of the Baltic people to independence

April 13 Good Friday. President Gorbachev and Soviet Prime Minister Ryzhkov issue second ultimatum in two weeks to the Lithuanian Parliament, warning that "If, within two days the Supreme Soviet and the Council of Ministers of the Lithuanian SSR do not revoke their aforementioned decisions, orders will be given to suspend delivery to the Lithuanian SSR from other Soviet republics the type of production that is sold on the foreign market for hard currency." They add that "we expect the Supreme Soviet and the Council of Ministers of the Lithuanian SSR to adopt resolutions that would re-establish the situation of the republic as of March 10, 1990."

In a press conference the same day, President Landsbergis responds "If Moscow will demand hard currency for those products, that will mean Moscow considers us a foreign state." And over Lithuanian television that evening, Prime Minister Prunskiene comments "We don't see in what way our actions are threatening to the Soviet Union and its republics" and urges people to have a happy Easter anyway.

April 16 Prime Minister Prunskiene sends telegram Gorbachev and Ryzhkov stating that several issues, including the status of drafting Lithuanian youth into the Soviet army and the rights of Soviet citizens in Lithuania, are possibly negotiable, and adds that the Lithuanian government does not "see reasons that would justify worsening economic relations between one another". She also says that the Lithuanian government has authorized "enterprises to continue executing terms of contracts with partners in the USSR."

April 18 Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene and Foreign Minister Saudargas leave on a five day trip to Scandinavia to visit government and business representatives in Norway, Sweden, Denmark

Lithuanian Parliament passes a resolution "not to adopt new political legislative acts during the period of preliminary parliamentary consultations between Lithuania and the USSR, if they were to begin, until May 1, 1990." The resolution, with accompanying letter, is sent to

President Gorbachev and Prime Minister Ryzhkov.

The flow of crude oil to the Mazeikiai oil refinery plant in northern Lithuania is cut off at 9.30 p.m., after five minutes notice. Lithuanian Energy Minister Leonas Asmontas later estimates that this will cost the Soviet Union \$100,000 per day in lost hard currency export revenues. Within days, Mazeikiai's 3,000 workers are laid off. With the oil cut-off, the Soviet economic blockade of Lithuania begins.

April 19 At 12 noon, natural gas to Lithuania is reduced from 18.5 million to 3.5 million cubic meters per day, 16% of Lithuania's usual supply. According to Lithuanian government's information bureau, the cut-off was authorized by the USSR Council of Ministers.

An anti-blockade commission, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Brazauskas, is set up. In reallocating energy resources, Mr. Brazauskas announces the following day that petrol will be rationed, street lighting will be reduced by 50%, agriculture will receive 60-70% of its usual fuel supply, public transportation -- 70%, food transportation vehicles -- 90%, and garbage collection -- 80%. In an hour and a half report to the Lithuanian Parliament, Brazauskas says Lithuania needs approximately \$5 million per day in hard currency to purchase the fuel it needs, and adds that Lithuania has "practically no hard currency."

April 20 At 12:40 p.m., 53 armed Soviet soldiers storm and occupy the Vilnele printing plant on Maironis Street in Vilnius' Old Town, where most of Lithuania's monthly periodicals are published. About 20 civilian security guards are beaten; 12 are later hospitalized, including Zigmas Vaisvila, a Lithuanian Parliament deputy.

At 2 p.m., petrol rationing begins -- 30 liters per driver until May 20th. Driver's licenses are stamped at the gas pump to show purchase.

April 21-

April 22 About 800 delegates and almost 3,000 guests attend Sajudis' second congress in Vilnius to decide the movement's future direction. It is decided that Sajudis will not evolve into a political party, but will remain an independent grass roots movement. The word "perestroika" is dropped from Sajudis' official name

The Lithuanian Communist Party faction loyal to Moscow (LCP/CPSU Platform) holds what it calls its XXI congress, attended by 768 delegates, in the Higher Party School in Vilnius. (It was at the XX Party congress in December, 1989 that this faction split from the independent LCP).

Addressing the Congress, the First Secretary, Marxist-Leninist historian Mykolas Burokevicius, says, "We are categorically opposed to the liquidation of the socialist economy and the re-establishment of capitalism in Lithuania...The continuity of the Soviet Union and the preservation of its present and internationally recognized borders is the only guarantee of the continued existence of the Lithuanian state and its continued positive influence in the international arena."

April 23 Prime Minister Prunskiene returns in the late evening from her Scandinavian trip; reports that a bank account has been opened in Stockholm for Lithuania. Initial deposit: \$100,000.

An anti-blockade account is opened in Vilnius

April 24 Lithuanian Parliament sets up a second anti-blockade commission, headed by Prime Minister Prunskiene and Parliament's Vice President Ceslovas Stankevicius.

President Bush announces that the US will not impose sanctions against the Soviet Union because of the blockade of Lithuania. "I'm concerned that we not inadvertently do something that compels the Soviet Union to take action that would set back the cause of freedom around the world," Bush says after meeting with congressional leaders. Vytautas Landsbergis responds the same day, "We were afraid that America might sell us. Let the people themselves decide whether this has already happened...Can the freedom of one group of people be sold for another? Of what value, then, is the idea of freedom itself?"

46 enterprises in Lithuania are working at decreased capacity; 6,400 bus runs are suspended in Lithuania.

April 25 A delegation of Lithuanians leaves for Moscow to seek talks with high Soviet officials. Deputy Prime Minister Brazauskas announces that 7,500 industrial workers are now unemployed as a result of the blockade; estimates the number will rise to 35,000 by May 1.

April 26 A 52-year old former driver from Kaunas, Stanislovas Zemaitis, immolates himself in Moscow's Revolution Square. Zemaitis dies in a Moscow hospital shortly after 8 p.m. In a letter to his wife, he confesses that he "could no longer live, when occupiers turned off the spigots, paratroopers were on a rampage, and people are left without work".

In a joint letter to President Landsbergis, French President Francois Mitterand and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl suggest a "temporary suspension of the



effects" of the March 11 declaration of independence

April 27 In an action organized by the pro-Moscow LCP/ CPSU platform, drivers of 95 trucks and cars block several main intersections into Vilnius during the early morning rush hour.

Minister of Health Juozas Olekas reports that the blockade has resulted in hospitals cutting down on all the the most necessary operations; the supply of medicines, glass vials, needles is being blocked by the Soviet rail from reaching Lithuania. He projects a rise in infectious diseases

April 28 During a press conference in Moscow, Arkady Maslennikov, an aide to Gorbachev, says that Gorbachev might be prepared to begin a dialogue with the Lithuanians if they simply "freeze" rather than revoke the March 11 declaration of independence. This signals a possible shift in Gorbachev's position

The Lithuanian government announces the rationing of certain foodstuffs starting May 1st: such as flour, grains, pasta, sugar, salt, margarine.

Long lines form at savings banks; each depositor is allowed to withdraw a maximum of 500 rubles from their savings account per month

A newly-formed "Association of the Citizens of Soviet Lithuania", a pro-Moscow group, holds its first conference in Vilnius

April 29 Tiesa (Truth), the CP newspaper, reports that, according to the Lithuanian Ministry of Internal Affairs, a rise in the number of crimes associated with stealing petrol occurred during the past seven days. Examples cited include 1500 litres of petrol stolen from one village collective farm, 1480 from another, and ration tickets for 10,430 litres stolen from the Budimeks construction company in Klaipeda. On the black market, petrol now sells for one to two rubles per liter. (Normal price: 30 - 40 kopecks.)

In show of support for Vytautas Landsbergis, 20,000 people gather in Gediminas Square to hear Vilnius Symphony Orchestra play veethoven's Ninth Symphony. (Landsbergis had told a reporter about a week earlier that for him, this symphony symbolized Lithuania's faith and hope in her struggle for independence.)

Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene leaves on a trip to Canada and the United States

April 30 Prime Minister Prunskiene meets with Candian Foreign Minister Joe Clark in Ottawa for one hour; the latter pledges humanitarian aid for Lithuania

May 1 Gorbachev abruptly leaves annual May Day parade celebrations after demonstrators pass by reviewing stand on top of Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow with signs saying "Out with the CPSU!" and "Gorbachev, keep your hands off Lithuania!"

In Vilnius, pro-Soviet groups demonstrate in Kalnu Parkas

Lithuanian television announces that Prime Minister Prunskiene will meet with US President George Bush on Thursday, in her capacity as a deputy to the Lithuanian parliament

May 2 President Landsbergis answers the Kohl/Mitterand letter, saying that the Lithuanian government is willing to consider temporarily halting the realization of some of the laws passed after the March 11 declaration of independence

May 3 Prime Minister Prunskiene meets with U.S. President Bush for 45 minutes at the White House. After the meeting, President Bush says, "I am personally, and the United States government is, committed to the self-determination of the people of Lithuania." Referring to the struggle between Vilnius and Moscow, Mrs. Prunskiene later tells reporters that "I got the impression that the president is not going to divorce himself from this process, that he is not going to ignore it."

A new government newspaper, "Echo of Lithuania" is founded, revamping the existing "News from the Leadership": a weekly periodical "The Communist" is renamed "Politics"

Vytautas Landsbergis travels to Riga to address Latvia's first post-election parliamentary session

The Lithuanian government issues a communique stating that three-quarters of the petrol set aside for individual drivers has been sold.

May 4 Latvian Parliament declares its independence from the Soviet Union; in a milder variation from the more radical Lithuanian version, announces a transition period until independence can be fully realized

May 6 Mother's Day is celebrated in Lithuania for the second time after WWII (it now challenges March 8, International Women's Day, which has fallen into disfavor because of its socialist origins)

- May 7      The government announces that since the beginning of the blockade, over 12,000 people are out of work. (The numbers are highly conflicting; some government figures released the same day state 23,203 people are actually unemployed: 50% from industry, 28% from agriculture, 14% from transportation, 8 % from construction. The confusion arises in part by the definition of "unemployed". Many are not doing their regular jobs, but have been shifted to other tasks; others are on paid vacation, still others on unpaid leave.)
- The Lithuanian State Blockade Commission announces a 10% reduction in the meat and milk products Lithuania normally supplies to the Soviet Union (including the 4000 tons of meat to Leningrad and 8000 tons of meat to Moscow per month)
- May 8      Prime Minister Prunskiene meets with Britain's Prime Minister Maggie Thatcher for one hour and 20 minutes in London; Prunskiene later comments that the first twenty minutes of their talk were very difficult, but that as it progressed, Mrs. Thatcher was more understanding of Lithuania's position.
- The Lithuanian government issues an appeal, signed by Vytautas Landsbergis, which condemns the genocide of Jews in Lithuania during WWII. The appeal "notes with sorrow, that among the executioners serving the occupants, there were Lithuanian citizens. For the crimes committed against the Jewish nation in Lithuania, and outside its borders, there is not and cannot be any justification or any statute of limitations on criminal prosecution."
- May 9      Several thousand pro-Soviet sympathizers participate in the Soviet military parade in downtown Vilnius marking the 45th anniversary of the end of WWII and the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany. The Lithuanian government announces the day to be a state holiday to commemorate the defeat of fascism, but in a television address the previous evening, President Landsbergis urges people to stay home
- May 10     Prime Minister Prunskiene meets with French premier Mitterand in Paris
- Deputy Prime Minister Brazauskas and LCP Central Committee Secretary J. Paleckis leave for Switzerland. Brazauskas meets with Swiss Foreign Minister the following day; later travels to West Germany.
- May 11     Prime Minister Prunskiene meets with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in Bonn, requests humanitarian aid for Lithuania.

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- May 11      Lithuanian sculptor Rimantas Daugintis tries to immolate himself while on vacation in Nyredhazo, Hungary. He suffers burns over 60-70% of his body, is brought to Budapest hospital where he is hooked up to an artificial respirator.
- May 12      At a joint meeting with Latvian and Estonian counterparts in Tallinn, Vytautas Landsbergis signs letter to Gorbachev requesting that negotiations between the Baltic States and the Soviet Union begin as soon as possible. Two days later, Gorbachev issues two proclamations which state that both the Estonian March 30 and Latvian May 4 declarations of independence are invalid.

-End of Report-

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