

Views on America

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Peter,

The local post office lady smiles at me as I hand over some magazines to be posted. She wraps them in brown paper wrapper for me, tying them tightly together. She tells me how to address the package properly, according to local custom (return and sender's addresses are in inversed position, as is the addressing itself, starting with country, city, street, name of addressee). She patiently gives me my change. When the customer in front of me asked her a question, she didn't look at him but mumbled an answer he couldn't hear. When the customer behind me was impatient, she dismissed her with a cold uncaring look. But she is nice to me. She knows who I am. I am a foreigner. I am from the West.

On the spur of the moment, in early evening, two friends and I decide to go out to dinner together. This is not such a simple thing. We try one restaurant -- it is full. We try another -- it is closed. We try a third -- there are twenty people in line in front of us. (We are by now running out of possibilities; there are only half a dozen or so restaurants in the entire city). On the fourth try, we walk into a restaurant that seems to be open, but is totally devoid of customers and it seems, waiters. We sit down. We wait five minutes, ten. We are hungry. Say something aloud in English, suggests one of my friends. I do; I wonder where all the people have gone. An angry-looking woman peeks out from the kitchen, goes away. In a few minutes, a surly looking gentleman appears, with a menu. He asks, in broken English, if he can be of any help. He ignores my friends. But he is civil to me. I am a foreigner. I am from the West.

It is late at night; a friend and I are at a party on the outskirts of town. We want to go home, but because of the blockade, there are no taxis at that late hour. One of the other guests graciously offers to give us a lift. On the way home, he asks me many typical questions that one asks of a non-native -- do I like it here, what do I think of the political situation, etc., etc. He doesn't ask my friend anything. When we arrive, he jumps out of his side of the car, runs around to open the door for me, helps me step out. He nearly closes the door on my friend, who is coming out right behind me. She must negotiate the difficult steps from car to pavement on her own, without his attentive assistance. She is not a foreigner. She is not from the West.

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

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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.

From such small slights do great resentments grow...Each polite, civil gesture to a foreigner is a bitter reminder to a native that this is treatment he will never experience. It is not simply a question of being on better behavior for guests. The post office lady will never wrap the native's packages with a smile, the waiter will never serve him promptly, the chance acquaintance will never open the car door for him. Society daily proves to him that he is not worth such considerations; he is nothing, garbage. Doesn't he realize this by now?

He does realize this, all too acutely. And he reacts in kind. If he needs anything, wants anything, he is either angry, demanding, rude, pompous -- or cajoling, flattering, manipulative. I ask people here, why isn't normal etiquette, normal politeness, valued? Everyone complains of the rotten treatment they get, yet no one breaks the circle. The victim of rudeness one moment will turn around and dish it out the next. Why?

The answer, people tell me over and over, is that it doesn't pay to be polite. In fact, it is pretty damn stupid. Civility is a privilege that only well-insulated people from the West can afford to practice. Here you have to shout. Here nice guys finish last. Nice guys in fact, are useless, ineffective. They haven't learned, in this hard system, how to defend themselves, how to get theirs. They are lambs -- and lambs are not respected, but slaughtered.

This is a society that is excruciatingly aware of its uncivil behavior to its own members, and what it perceives to be slavish fawning over Westerners. People know that they have a massive inferiority complex. They try to keep it in check. But knowing is only half of the struggle. An over-developed defensiveness, and the aggressiveness that it spawns, darts out spontaneously, in ways that no amount of self-discipline can control.

For example: I am at a dinner party at the apartment of some students from the West. When I go into the kitchen, I see a bottle of dishwashing liquid (which I haven't seen in the stores at all). I exclaim -- oh, my, what have we here? What do you think, says a young Lithuanian journalist, before he can check himself. Do you think that we are so backward that we don't have any dishwashing liquid? And an assault begins. Do you realize that we in Lithuania are not only on the receiving end of care packages? Do you realize that we also send them? To Poland, when there was no detergent in Poland. To relatives in Russia -- etc., etc.

Oh dear, I say. I hadn't meant to insinuate that at all. I know that there is dishwashing liquid in Lithuania. I'm sorry if it sounded like an insult (This is such a touchy lot, I mutter to myself. They get insulted by the weirdest things...) But, I think (more quietly now, I've learned my lesson), they DON'T have any dishwashing liquid. This stuff is from Belgium...

I am amazed at how personally someone identifies himself, injecting his own sense of pride, or lack of it, with whether the country produces one or another type of product. Is the lack of dishwashing liquid some kind of damning proof that Lithuania is incapable of running an independent economy? The thought would never have occurred to me, had that young journalist not jumped to defend a perceived slight to the national honor...

Ah, it is not the same as it was in the good old days. There was a time when golden words uttered by a Westerner were savored, pondered. (It is another question entirely whether those words were believed. But so what. The rapt attention, when a Westerner pronounced his views on world politics, on religion, on relations between the sexes, on anything, was sweet enough.) Not so any more. The more Westerners Lithuanians meet, the less they put them on pedestals. "We used to carry you in our arms" is how one native describes the way visitors used to be greeted and feted here. That has changed somewhat, as Lithuanians realize that not everything and everyone is worth fussing over. Yet, the double standard is still ingrained. Visitors from the West still make the evening news program, simply for the fact that they have come here. Be they lawyers from Michigan who have magic solutions to Lithuania's economy up their sleeves, students from Scandinavia on a religious bicycle tour through the Baltics, or the first major tourist group to make it through the blockade.

Does this all have a backlash? You bet it does. And not only against the prevailing double standard. Of course, the logical solution -- to be nice to everybody -- is too easy. It is much more satisfying to target those who are treated so much better -- or to put it more accurately, are treated with normal consideration. What really is so special about all these Westerners after all? They come here with their airs and their confidence, with their sense of worth backed by their dollars. They don't know what it is like to be humiliated every day, around every corner. They think they are better than we are, that we are just so many backward monkeys.

These feelings are such second nature to Lithuanians that they often don't even realize that they have them. Or, more likely, they realize this only on an intellectual level. (That same journalist of the dish-washing saga, who is really quite nice and shy, turned red, laughed self-consciously when I repeated his words, complete with intonation, back to him a little while later. He would never dream of deliberately reacting that way. He simply hadn't heard himself.) Lithuanians will almost always sheepishly say, by way of apology, "We know we are uncivilized. But what can you do? We don't know any other way."

This psychological dilemma is not new. I would even argue that it is are not entirely Soviet. In this part of the world, the West was always something envied as well as admired. If one person said that the West was somehow better, then another would retort, so what's so damn good about it? In the past, Soviet propaganda succeeded well in tapping into this feeling. And if the propaganda

war that the Soviet Union waged against the decadent West was not enough, then one hundred years of consistent, voluntary emigration westwards is sufficient to give any society a complex. Lithuania has it in a big way. Like a spurned lover who sees his beloved go off with another, Lithuanians scratch their heads, look at Westerners and wonder "What does he/she have that I haven't got? Why should their lives be any better than mine? It's not fair!"

Naturally, there is more to East-West relations than that. But this too is a part of it all. This is not a kind, gentle society. It has not been treated kindly or gently either. I am reminded daily that repression does not produce saints. Repression produces angry, bitter people who are heartsick about their condition, who want to change, but too often are victims of their own bitterness..

It is in this context that Lithuanian attitudes to the West must be understood. Despite the surface good will and the privileged treatment that Westerners here enjoy, I feel that the undercurrenting resentment is deeper, more powerful. Sometimes that resentment is justified, or at least understandable -- such as disappointment that the West did not support Lithuania in the stand-off with Moscow -- sometimes not.

So, herewith are a few fragments of what thoughts about the West, in particular about the United States, are being aired in Lithuania these days.

#### Oscar Milosz

Oscar Milosz has been dead for 51 years. The son of Polish gentry and the uncle of the 1980 Nobel Prize Winner for literature, Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, Oscar spent the better part of his life in Paris. He was a poet, diplomat, Catholic mystic. Although the first time he visited Lithuania was when he was 20 years old and although he never spoke Lithuanian, (he wrote in French), Oscar Milosz identified himself as a Lithuanian patriot. During the inter-war years, his was a strong voice in the West, defending Lithuania's interests.

That makes him a hero today. Collections of his poetry had been translated and published here already, before the age of glasnost. He was therefore known to Lithuanian readers. But as with many historical figures, a part of his life was simply ignored, inconvenient to the Soviet authorities. That is the part that the public has been learning about now. Excerpts about his life and work have appeared in a literary weekly newspaper this past spring. Recollections of some of his thoughts -- he did not write them down himself, they were recorded by others -- were published in two issues of monthly cultural magazine for youth.

These writings have created a sensation. Why? Oscar Milosz was a visionary; a predictor of the Apocalypse. Just before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 -- and a few months before his own death -- he related some of his visions to personnel at the Lithuanian embassy in Paris. History showed that his predictions were chillingly accurate. He predicted German aggression against Poland, the wholesale slaughter of European Jews, the deportations eastwards of hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians. He predicted that the U.S. would come to the aid of the Soviet Union in that war, that later Germany would be divided, that a strange, disquieting kind of peace would settle on Europe. He also predicted many things that have not yet happened. And that, as they say, is where our story begins.

Oscar Milosz did not like the United States. For him the United States was a "monster". In a recent issue of the youth magazine, Nemunas, his views were reprinted. I quote them here in part. This is how he described the U.S.:

"...In the United States, a variety of materialists, positivists stunt any kind of idealistic sensibilities. It is inexplicable to me why Catholics are enchanted by this evil country...This is a country which contradicts the spirit of the Gospel...In a two-faced manner, freedom is glorified at every step, and at every step, in calculated, cold, determined and cheating ways, the spirit of Christianity is being rooted out...Matters of the spirit are of no concern in the U.S. People are forced into such conditions where there is only one slogan: "Time - Money!" Every inhabitant of the United States -- if he doesn't want to be ground down -- is forced to hurry from morning to evening, to immorally speculate, to cheat...there is not even a moment left over to think about the meaning of life, and about the great riddle -- death..."

Milosz also predicted that the end of the world would begin in the United States.

"...the war of 1939 will long be over. New disasters will scourge the earth; spiritual, ecological, economic. In places the earth will tremble, in places water will flow, winds will blow, volcanoes will erupt, rare comets will appear. People will begin to talk of the end of the earth... In the difficult hour turn your eyes towards the U.S. It is here that the first signs of the end of the earth will appear. A terrible revolution will erupt in the U.S. The earth will not have seen a revolution like it. The revolution of 1917 will look like the play of innocent children. The enslaved, exploited masses in the U.S. will arise; they will be led by a gang of iron gangsters, at first supported by billionaires themselves....Gangsters, open bloody murderers, having raised a demonic flag, will take over and solidify their power...Words escape me here. I don't even know what concepts to use, because they are not yet in the current dictionaries. A great, powerful, totally destructive weapon will fall into

the hands of these gangsters. It will be enough to use only a handful of this weapon, and cities will turn to ash, governments will fall, iron will melt into wax, stone will catch fire as if it were paper....With this weapon, the US gangsters will arrogantly threaten the whole world...all while demanding great payment and talking about securing peace. But at some point they will themselves perish in the fires they have started..."

This was just a small fragment; there was much more of the same in the article. As I read it over, I had to remind myself that I was in Lithuania, not Iran. What intrigued me was not so much the piece itself, but why it appeared now, what did it say to Lithuanians, why was it important to them. None of the articles about Milosz's predictions were published in some quack magazines, but in respected, intellectual cultural publications. Several people mentioned them to me, without great comment, but with the a certain calmness that seemed to say "America will get hers someday. It's in the stars." This particular excerpt appeared in May, the month after President Bush said that the United States would not impose trade sanctions against the Soviet Union for the blockade of Lithuania. I asked my friends here -- couldn't such a piece, at this time, be a unique form of U.S. bashing? Nonsense, they said. You forget that we are still in a Soviet system. Manuscripts for monthly magazines have to be turned almost half a year advance; this issue was put together sometime in early winter.

I grudgingly accepted the explanation. Still, I don't think that I like Oscar Milosz.

### The Cradle of the Revolution

I move on from apocalyptic visions to political theater. In May, the second in a series of two plays, *Cradle of the Revolution*, had its premiere in Vilnius University. (The first, called *Nostalgia for the Revolution*, appeared over a year ago. It outlined the birth of Sajudis.)

Like the first production, the *Cradle of the Revolution* is a puppet show, complete with a cast of well-known political figures. There are puppets of Lenin, Gorbachev, Raisa (these were all new; a year ago, it was still too risky to poke fun at them), Stalin, Marx, George Bush, a Lithuanian Voice of America journalist, Romas Sadolskis, Vytautas Landsbergis, Kazimiera Prunskiene -- the list goes on. The play, beginning with the birth of Communism, outlines Soviet attempts to keep Lithuania in the Union. There is considerable dramatic license, as the story line begins something like this:

"In the beginning there was Marx, who begat Lenin, who was lonely. So Marx took out one of his own ribs and gave Lenin a companion, who ate forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden. After that, they were both banished to Russia, where they had to make a revolution."

There are some hilarious moments, as when Vytautas Landsbergis has a dream where Russia asks to be included into the mighty Lithuanian state, and the citizens of Moscow beg to learn Lithuanian and Landsbergis toys with the idea of renaming the Soviet capital "Gediminskas" after a famous medieval Lithuanian knight.

My favorite scene was the rendition of the Bush-Gorbachev meeting in Malta last December. The Bush and Gorbachev puppets are perched on a ship that rocks back and forth. Gorbachev, holding his stomach, spits into the water.

Bush: I say, Misha, why are you spitting into the water?  
 Gorbachev doesn't answer, spits once more.  
 Bush looks at him again, and repeats: I say, Misha, why are spitting into the water? It's not polite to spit, you know.  
 Gorbachev doesn't answer, spits some more.  
 Bush: Is something bothering you?  
 Gorbachev: Yes!  
 Bush: Well, what is it?  
 Gorbachev: It's those damn Lithuanians...  
 Bush: Oh, I see. (He says nothing, pauses, then spits into the water himself.)

The audience roared.

#### The statistics

That scene captured exactly how Lithuanians think the leading statesman of the Western world sees them...But what do Lithuanians think about his policies? For an answer to this question, I no longer dabble in mystics or theater, but go straight to the sociologists.

In early June, the Public Opinion Research Center at the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences conducted an opinion poll on the current political situation in the country. I included two questions in the survey. The first simply gauged how much direct contact respondents had had with an American. This was to get some sense, if only roughly, how isolated the society really is. The second was to get an idea of how people felt about American policies regarding Lithuania. The survey was fielded between June 7 and June 11, almost immediately after the Bush-Gorbachev summit meeting in the United States. There were 1351 respondents; the entire interview, conducted personally, took about an hour.

The question about views on American policies was formulated together with some of the sociologists at the center. That exercise was almost as telling as the results themselves.

-----We decided that it would be a multiple choice, closed-end question. That was simple and straightforward enough. But when we came to formulate the alternative responses from which people could choose, we hit a snag. The negative variations, such as "I believe that America could have helped us more" or "America helped about as much as I thought that she would. What more can you expect?" (in Lithuanian, this formulation carried a very sarcastic tone) were all easy to come up with. But we had difficulties in trying to frame positive responses, ones that reflected support of American policies. The researchers offered a simple variation, "America helped as much as she could". It was acceptable as one alternative, but I thought that an additional one was needed. I wanted a statement that reflected the point of view that regardless of whether the US could or could not help Lithuania, the respondent believed that she was not obligated to. Here the researchers were stumped. No matter how many variations we all came up with, they all had a negative tone to them. If the US could help Lithuania, but didn't, how could one express that in a neutral, never mind positive, way? After half an hour, we agreed on "It goes without saying that America could not sacrifice her own interests." It wasn't exactly what I wanted, but it was close enough.

The results, I think, harbor both good news and bad news. The good news -- an unexpected result -- was that the overwhelming majority of respondents, 56%, believed that they had to find the solutions to their problems themselves. I was pleased and surprised by this finding, because I had been under the impression that Lithuania had become a very passive society, used to having things "given" or "commanded" from above, and unused to taking responsibility for its own future. This finding contradicted that impression.

The bad news was that the United States is not very popular. Only 7% of the all the respondents thought that "It goes without saying that America had to defend her own interests". Many more -- 29% -- felt she could have done more to help Lithuania. (I combine both negative statements "America could have done more" and "What can you expect" for this figure.)

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These few glimpses offer only scattered impressions of how the West, particularly the US, is perceived in Lithuania. From these impressions one can already sense that the news is not good. It could, of course, be a lot worse. There is no overt, belligerent anti-Americanism here. These resentments, like so many others, are kept well under wraps. Soviet belligerence this past spring showed that Lithuanians have an enormous capacity to keep their cool in the face of open provocations.

But I believe there are storms brewing inside. I wonder what will happen when all the wraps will finally come off.

Best wishes,



## PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH CENTER

Vilnius Academy of Sciences

Questions from a survey conducted June 7 - 14, 1990

Table 1. Question: Did you ever have the opportunity to talk to an American?

	Total	Lithuanian	Non-Lithuanian
	%	%	%
Yes	21	23	14
No	77	76	81
No Answer	1	1	4

Table 2. Question: How do Evaluate America's Policies Regarding Lithuania?

	Total	Lithuanian	Non-Lithuanian
	%	%	%
America helped a great deal	1	1	0
I think that America could have helped us more	21	24	9
America helped about as much as I thought she would. What more can you expect?	8	9	5
It goes without saying that America could not sacrifice her own interests	7	6	13
We must concentrate in our own efforts more and look less to the West	56	54	64
Other Opinion	1	1	2
No Opinion	4	3	6

- End of Report -

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