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Intellectuals and society in post-communist Lithuania

Intellectuals have always played different functions in society – both revered and despised by society and often persecuted by the state. Almantas Samalavicius looks at the social and political standing of intellectuals during the communist regime and now.

Types of post-communist intellectuals and their genealogies

To use the term "intellectuals" in the analysis of the social transformations under post-communism has always been somewhat problematic. There are various reasons for this. Some critics who have spoken or written on this issue have even gone so far as to deny the very possibility of the existence of this social group in post-communist Lithuania. Attitudes of this kind are perhaps best represented by statements of the Lithuanian philosopher and social critic Arvydas Sliogeris who on several occasions insisted that the category applies to the French cultural context exclusively, and there are no grounds to use it to describe any local Lithuanian realities. And yet this kind of thinking about the existence (or in this case) the non-existence of intellectuals is rather futile because the negative postulate as a starting point would hardly bring us anywhere further in social analysis. But there are much more profound reasons that make this issue complicated and they supercede the boundaries of local discussions. It would be difficult to disagree with a firmly grounded opinion that the term intellectuals can be applied in a post-communist context if we take into consideration some reservations concerning the fact that configuration of social groups in a transitory society is based on variagated genealogies, conflicting notions, lack of sufficient traditions, etc. It can be concluded that the usage of the term in its classical sense should be accompanied by reservations associated with the peculiarities of a particular society and its history. Such an attitude is shared by many analysts of post-communist transformations. For example, Marian Kempny concludes that Western notions that equate *intelligentsia*, *intellectuals* and *professionals* do not reflect Polish and Central European specificity because it remained outside general Western experience.¹ The difference between two different groups: *intelligentsia* and *intellectuals*, however, is often stressed, though the definitions of these might sometimes vary. One of the less debated interpretations was provided by Alvin W. Gouldner in his classic study of intellectuals. He draws a line between members of *intelligentsia*, whose intellectual interests are usually technical, and *intellectuals* whose interests are critical, liberating, and hermeneutic (it means political).² A further distinction is offered by Eva Etzioni-Halevy who following the tradition set by Lipset, Dobson, and Brym stresses that the learned groups in society cannot be treated as intellectuals since they are not composed entirely of intellectuals, and because intellectuals should be, by definition, associated with creation, development and dissemination of theoretical knowledge. This would exclude, for example, teachers that belong to the learned communities.³ It is also rather

problematic to include technocrats among the post–communist intellectual elite, because they too do not comply with the given definition of intellectual. In societies that fell under totalitarian rule, technocrats usually conformed with the oppressive regimes and did not exercise the qualities practiced by those described as intellectuals. In a seminal study, well–known Hungarian sociologists and dissidents have emphasized the distinction between technocratic circles and humanist/artistic intelligentsia, showing that technocrats do not satisfy the profile. Conrad and Szelenyi have noted that under totalitarianism (especially Stalin's era), technocrats were closely related to the ruling elites and obediently performed the tasks and duties assigned to them by those in power: "They learned not to seek for autonomy and not to question the rationality of a political "superior" – because of this they were disliked and despised by the intelligentsia.⁴ Moreover, it is concluded that the stability of the post–Stalinist era was largely conditioned by the union between power and technocracy.⁵

I have already stressed that communities of intellectuals in a post–communist society are very different from a genealogical point of view. They are comprised of individuals whose personal histories vary from those of dissidents to conformists to former collaborators. This variegated social group includes an important sub–group whose attitudes and activities are important for the future prospects of a society in transition – so–called "critical intellectuals". They are individuals most of whom have personal experiences of captivity, oppression, and restrictions under which they sharpened skills of critical reasoning, exercised civic virtue, and opposed ideological folly and degenerating social engineering. To put it bluntly – these are non–conformists and dissidents who refused being co–opted by the structures of the communist regime and continue to resist new political and ideological manipulations by using their critical skills to analyze the socio–cultural processes going on in the present society. It should be noted though, that this group in Central and Eastern European societies was largely made up of individuals with backgrounds in the humanities. Sometimes it also included technocrats – however, their number was rather insignificant. For example, among the nonconformist humanists in communist Romania one could find a few mathematicians and engineers who resisted Ceausescu's regime, but these were neither social scientists nor economists, and this fact eventually contributed to the post–revolutionary social developments.⁶ Alina Mungiu–Pippidi claims that the Romanian Academy of Sciences can be considered as the most exemplary symbol of an abortive revolution because the majority of its members were Stalinists and collaborators with the communist regime, and none of them was expelled from the Academy.⁷ The same is true of other post–communist societies in the region. The Lithuanian Academy of Sciences was perhaps less servile in this respect, but a large number of its members in the humanities and social science sections were renowned conformists whose academic achievements were much more modest than their contribution to the dissemination of communist ideology. It should be noted that not a single member was forced to leave the Lithuanian Academy because of his/her past deeds. Even a notorious official of the LCP Central Committee who supervised the sphere of culture during the Soviet years retained his membership. It is a telling fact that since the collapse of Soviet power in Lithuania, neither separate members of the Academy nor the institution itself has made any statements concerning its past. Moreover, its members applied all their efforts to preserve their previous privileges and to the very day they receive a significant additional income paid to them for their academic status, i.e. for the mere fact of belonging to the Academy. It is also interesting to note that some of the social scientists of the Academy who had not published anything since

the fall of Soviet power in Lithuania, have recently turned their manuscripts into books that revise and reinvent the role played in the liberation processes by Lithuania's Communist party.⁸ Many such cases can be observed by analyzing the present intellectual climate in other post-socialist countries where privileges and academic and social prestige obtained under the former regime were preserved. After a few outbursts of social hysteria directed at some state institutions like the academies, their members succeeded in safe-guarding their "symbolic capital" or exchanging it for the social equivalent. And since post-communist societies during the recent decade have experienced and continue to experience their own social problems, the need of reshaping these monsters of Soviet legacy seems less urgent than it had been during the "velvet revolutions" in Eastern and Central Europe because the emphasis has shifted to other spheres.

In addition to a group that might be categorized as ex-dissidents or present non-conformists, post-communist intellectuals also include (whether we like it or not) those who have deserted the former Soviet establishment (nomenklatura) but who previously served the regime more or less obediently, performing the roles assigned to the "engineers of souls" as intellectuals were referred to in the Soviet-dominated space. The training obtained in that period enabled them to "rewrite" their autobiographies and adapt themselves to the new situation without much traumatic experience since the habit of adaptation was mastered during the period of dependence.

Another group that is becoming more and more significant should be mentioned: while the "supra-professional" community of intellectuals becomes increasingly dispersed and differentiated, a newer specialization of professional roles becomes apparent. The ranks of intellectuals are joined by individuals who were previously considered specialists – that is, active in their respective professional sphere but hardly associated with more general social criticism.⁹ Because of changes in the social stratification of society, including professionalization and specialization as well as a number of other factors, the layer of "public intellectuals" has become thinner, even though the Soviet ideological authorities themselves had always been active in promoting the mentality of specialists instead of encouraging the cultivation of generalists. The decline in the circulation of intellectual journals and books has resulted in many former social critics being forced to retreat into academic institutions, directing their intellectual energy to teaching and research projects instead of cultivating public criticism of post-communist culture. We should not forget that academic intellectuals these days include former specialists in Marxist-Leninist ideology, "scientific" communism, and political propaganda, who shortly after the collapse of the regime requalified themselves by becoming sociologists, political scientists, economists, etc. The younger generation of university intellectuals that matured in the post-communist period has been educated as exclusively academic researchers writing for small communities of their colleagues and seldom questioning any need to address a more general audience. It seems that the over-politicization of their parent's generation has resulted in their acquiring completely different mental habits: contempt for rethinking political issues and for contributing to public social criticism. They are far more interested in developing esoteric scholarly languages of communication and mastering subtleties of sometimes almost indecipherable prof-speak than cultivating an open discourse and assigning themselves the roles of expanding the sphere of public debate. Sad as it is, the domain of the public social critique is most often handed over to a superficial journalism that focuses on the visible instead of the invisible, the trivial instead of the fundamental, the sensational instead of the socially and culturally

important. More often than not, the young social scientists uncritically borrow and apply Western categories and schemes without much consideration of their being adequate tools to analyze societies that have a lot of specific features and should be studied as having such.

For a considerably short time, the first decade of the post–communist transformations, the roles performed by intellectuals changed as well as their position in and relationship to society. It is true that these intellectuals performed important vanguard roles helping to assure the periods of radical political or social changes(and this applies to the Lithuania of 1990, when they contributed greatly to awakening feelings of national consciousness, dignity, and collective historical memories). But it is also true that in most cases they did not manage to maintain such a status in the post–revolutionary periods.¹⁰ One could also agree with a diagnosis provided by a well–known researcher into post–communism, Vladimir Tismaneanu, who concluded that intellectuals lost their war throughout Eastern Europe.¹¹ This timely remark soon proved to be extremely accurate, though in some societies like Lithuania, the intellectuals maintained their relative social importance for a somewhat longer time. However, eventually they were swept out of power and politics in general, disregarding a few exceptions that only confirm the validity of the rule. And yet this conclusion requires a short postscript.. Despite the fact that these intellectuals, within their social group or vanguard community, proved to be extremely powerful in their affect on the national consciousness of their societies during the demolition of the Iron Curtain, later they were forced to limit themselves to performing more modest roles. And it is obvious that some heroes of the revolution did not manage to recover from the shock experienced when before they had written for hundreds of thousands of readers and addressed dozens of thousands of excited fellow–compatriots during mass rallies, and later were finally forced to accept the fact that circulation of their books and essays had shrunk to a few thousand or even hundreds of copies (what's more, most of these were published by state subsidies that made them possible). However it should be noted that some of the intellectuals after a certain period of time were somewhat successful if not in reconquering the public space (that proved to be impossible), at least in profiting from their former status. Those marginal intellectuals who previously were affiliated with the Party and State establishment, used their lobbying skills to assure that some social benefits should be granted to intellectuals, writers and artists. Especially so when the social boomerang brought back to power old Communists in the guise of the labour or social–democratic parties. Of course these can be classified under the file, semi–intellectuals, keeping in mind their social genealogy or at least their ambivalent position during Soviet times. Meanwhile the situation of "authentic intellectuals" has remained complicated, naturally for different reasons. These days they have to struggle for their place in a public space that is more and more colonized by the mass entertainment industry and a media that has no interest in supporting free, critical, and dissenting voices. Only a handful of cultural journals and weekly publications and, perhaps more recently, a few academic periodicals have remained open and receptive to public social criticism and the individuals who still choose to practice it. But even if the configuration of the present situation of intellectuals in Lithuania remains at risk, it would be wrong to conclude that as a community or social group they have lost all of their previous relevance. As the society changes, intellectuals are redefining their position in it, learning how to act and have influence under new social conditions. Moreover, considering the fact that the role of the intellectual elites in Eastern Europe has been important, it is possible to cherish a modest hope that while democracy develops and has an impact on the formation of civic society (albeit more a figment of the

imagination of political scientists than the actual social reality), it will also regain at least a part of its former significance.

2.Features of Mentalities: Habits, Attitudes, Postures

As all analysts of post–communist societies agree, these societies have their own specific features that are due to the mental legacy of totalitarianism as well as the dynamics of the social changes in respective countries. However, I shall limit myself to some of the negative features of the mentality particularly characteristic of Lithuanian intellectuals. I have elaborated on this subject elsewhere.¹² However, I will take as a starting point the Polish anthropologist Hanna Swida–Zemba who has outlined a set of features peculiar to post–communist mentality that can be applied as a useful tool when trying to find out what is common and what differs in neighboring societies that share a common historical fate despite some local particularities. According to her, these features share:

- the wide–spread habit to treat "verbal reality" as an entity, though it differs from true reality and is a specific replacement for the latter; – the usage of verbal constructs that act not as terms, but emotionally colored signals (such as "the left", "populism", "politics of hatred", "xenophobia", "Christian values", "personal freedom", etc.;
 - the contents of discourses are uncritically internalized by recipients; – politicians and intellectuals are not inclined to create symbols, national categories, intellectual constructions and rules of conduct adequate to present situations; instead the constructs that emerged in different social and cultural contexts are borrowed;
- permanent complaining about their personal situation and an inability to act in order to solve it.¹³

These features also to a greater or lesser degree apply to the mentalities of Lithuanian intellectuals, especially during the first decade of post–dependence. But one should bear in mind that certain imprints were left by long–term social practices developed under dependence as well as the traumatic experience of post–communism. To the list compiled by the Polish analyst one more aspect of intellectuals should be added. Decades of oppression have left a definite mark in the consciousness, creating a characteristic servility that was eventually used by the new power elite that came into being. Though some Lithuanian intellectuals succeeded in drawing a line to keep them from being used and manipulated by the power structures, many of them proved to be vulnerable, and subjected themselves to political and social manipulation. Current intellectuals often face the same kind of dilemma of turning themselves into the loudspeakers of contemporary political propaganda as they did during the Soviet period – obediently serving the new conjuncture without exercising critical qualities – or performing their true obligation to their society by impartially watching social developments, analyzing and reasonably criticizing the actions of the power elites, and presenting their opinions on the most urgent and important issues. And yet many intellectuals so far have failed to perform the roles of mindful and sober social critics able to resist the subtle pressure of political interest groups and the market forces offering them another cameo – the role of public relations actors and assistants to the managers of mass media and the entertainment industry. Some of them gave themselves up to the seduction of various state honors, prizes, grants, and other social advantages, in their own turn "repaying" their new masters by keeping silence during burning discussions on social issues. Many of them proved to be easily co–opted by newly formed intellectual cliques that fight for state funding and employment by the powers that be. Political scientists were

especially weak in resisting the temptation of providing services to the political elites and thus turning themselves into "all the king's men", to use an allusion to a well-known novel. Independent position and opinion is often exchanged for minor privileges, guarantees of social stability that are provided by their affiliation to state institutions and informal structures associated with political power. The latter problem can be treated as rather universal, manifesting itself in various post-communist societies. The case of China is perhaps somewhat unexpected. According to authors analyzing contemporary intellectual life in China, local intellectuals make conscious efforts to distance themselves from the state power. Thus in order to achieve maximum independence, they took individual measures to avoid being co-opted: many Chinese intellectuals gave up their jobs in the state-controlled sectors and chose to pursue their careers as freelance writers, artists, journalists, and TV and radio producers and directors.¹⁴ In this society that was devastated by the communist regimes far more than East European societies, intellectuals seek to be autonomous of the supervision and control of state power that so often proves to be exceptionally dangerous to freedom of expression. It is perhaps worth noting that the attempts of Chinese intellectuals to be autonomous, to resist total control by the state authorities, as well as their striving towards a unique voice in a multicultural world using their own concepts and culture models instead of following the stale ideology of Western modernization and so-called development, make a promising paradigm. Moreover so, since the models of development suggested by the West to the countries of the "Third World" have on many occasions proved to bear disastrous social consequences. Refusal to take the position in a discourse dominated by the West with the roles drafted by the West for the "underdeveloped" partners, and to instead pursue a more exclusively Chinese model of modernity, made out of a "synthesis of national cultural identity and Western rationalism", can be interpreted as an act of resistance to Western hegemony.

Of course the situation of Lithuanian intellectuals is somewhat different taking into consideration that they belonged (or at least believed they belonged) to the Western discourse. However, uncritical borrowing and adoption of concepts and categories that circulate in Western discourse and often disregard the local traditions, complex experiences, and mental habits, make them rather uncertain about their identities as social critics. We should also have in mind that Lithuanians, like inhabitants of many other Soviet-dominated societies were forced to master the Orwellian "double-speak" that simply could not be rejected under oppression. This particular experience shows up in present intellectual activities: gestures and posing do not necessarily express one's own opinions or articulation of truth – these can also be simulations and falsifications that pass for a sincere practice of Western liberalism. Taking this warning into consideration, it would not be illogical to conclude that the relationship between intellectuals and society under post-communism remains complicated and not always easy to diagnose.

¹ Marian Kempny, *Between Tradition and Politics: Intellectuals after Communism*, In: *Intellectuals in Central Europe*, ed. by Andras Bozoki, Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999, p.153.

² Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of New Class*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1979, p.48.

³ Eva Etzioni-Halevy, *The Knowledge Elite and the Failure of Prophecys*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985, p.9.

- ⁴ George Konrad, Ivan Szelenyi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Power*, transl.A.Arato and R.E.Allen, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1979, p.211.
- ⁵ Op cit., p.207.
- ⁶ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, Romanian Political Intellectuals Before and After the Revolution, In: *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe ...*, p.86.
- ⁷ Op cit., p.97.
- ⁸ The best example that comes to mind is the revisionist volume by Konstantinas Navickas – one of the most ideological Soviet historians, and also a member of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences – published last year under the title of *The Experience of Self-Defence of the Lithuanian Nation*.
- ⁹ Ivan Bernik, From Imagined to Actually Existing Democracy: Intellectuals in Slovenia, In: *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe ...*, p.113.
- ¹⁰ Ivan Szelenyi, The Intellectuals in Power? In: *After the Fall*, ed. Robin Blackburn, London: Verso, 1991, p.271.
- ¹¹ Vladimir Tismaneanu, Fighting for the Public Sphere: Democratic Intellectuals under Postcommunism, In: *Between Past and Future*, ed. Sorin Abtohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000, p.158.
- ¹² Almantas Samalavicius, Intellectuals in Postcommunist/Postcolonial Spaces, forthcoming in *Baltic Postcolonialism: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Violeta Kelertas for Editions Rodopi.
- ¹³ Editions Rodopi. 13 Hanna Swida-Zemba, The Post-communist Mentality, In: *Cultural Dilemmas of Pos-communist Societies*, ed. Aldona Pawlowska and Marian Kempny, Warsaw: IFIS, 1994, p.228–38. –
- ¹⁴ Min Li with Maria Galikowski, *The Search for Modernity: Chinese Intellectuals and Cultural Discourse in the Post-Mao Era*, New York: St.Martin's Press, 1999, p.35.

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