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What Happened to Us?

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By Leonidas Donskis

During a recent conference on human rights and values in Lithuania and in the EU, the question was asked whether our values in Lithuania are the same as those in the EU. This is hardly an irrelevant question keeping in mind what happened in Vilnius on March 11. A group of young people was marching in the city center celebrating the Independence Day of Lithuania with the sinister slogan "Lithuania for Lithuanians."

Regrettably, this happens not for the first time, that the Independence Day is used by some of the far right youths to express their xenophobic views and feelings. Just a couple of years ago a similar group shouted anti-Semitic slogans; this year they "softened" their collective voice, confining their discontents, frustration, bitterness, and anger to the anonymous monster of non-Lithuanians, with no ethnicity, race, or the first and last names indicated. Yet it is little consolation, as the meaning of an ugly message remains the same.

Whereas not a single MP in Lithuania has raised their voice against this slogan and against the continuous desecration of Independence Day, more than fifty of our MP's found themselves deeply offended and challenged by the Baltic Gay Pride parade scheduled for May 8, 2010. The municipality of Vilnius found it necessary to allow the young radical nationalists to march across the city center, yet the Baltic Pride, after long and painful deliberations, was relegated to the margins of the center.

Well, homophobic politicians do not appear out of the blue. They do not come from the void, as they represent a certain segment of their society, which happens to be profoundly biased against gays and lesbians. Whatever the case, let us put aside this issue which I have discussed earlier. After the adoption of the ludicrous and disgraceful Law on the Protection of Minors from the Detrimental Effect of Public Information, Lithuania was severely criticized by the European Parliament, NGO's like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and also by Lithuania's human rights activists.

Yet this story exposed the emerging pattern of political thought and behavior, which covers an immense territory of the unholy trinity of our liquid modernity and globalization, as Zygmunt Bauman would have it. The unholy trinity of our troubled times embraces uncertainty, lack of safety, and insecurity. It calls for scapegoating, symbolic compensation, and political action. In this case, it offers the imagined way out of the predicaments and painful dilemmas of economic crisis and social unrest: namely, political support for the young radicals and hate groups.

Otherwise, it would be rather difficult to explain why and how our MP's, that is, mainstream politicians, instead of some marginal figures, and even the former heroes of Lithuania's National Liberation Movement Sajudis had gone so far as to orchestrate the aforementioned march of radical nationalists with some neo-Nazis among them.

Suffice it to mention that Kazimieras Uoka, an MP and a signatory of the March 11, 1990, Independence Restoration Pact, solicited the permission for them to march in the city center, which was granted by the municipality of Vilnius. By no manner of means was it all accidental, then, that Romualdas Ozolas, another signatory of Independence and a hero of Sajudis, saluted them and was marching with them. He did so for the second time. Therefore, we have a tendency, if not a trend, here, rather than a momentary lapse of reason.

Small wonder that the Norwegian Ambassador to Lithuania, Steinar Gil, made himself quite clear on this issue regarding the mortal silence of the Lithuanian political elite, and the total absence of official reaction from the authorities. He confessed to have been shocked by the absolute disrespect for human rights and

civil liberties, accompanied by the all-permissiveness and complacency of Lithuanian politicians and authorities concerning xenophobic and anti-Semitic reactions in Lithuania.

What happened to us? Did we decide to use the package of democracy in a nonchalant way, selectively treating some parts that suit us, while discarding what we dislike? The enthusiastic 'yes' to the simplistic notion of democracy as a 50 + 1 methodology, yet the strong 'no' to minorities? Yes to the right to practice our mainstream Lithuanian culture, national identity, and Roman Catholic faith, yet the resolute no to gay and lesbian rights? If so, not a single chance exists that such a selective and arbitrary concept of democracy will be ever accepted in the EU. And rightly so.

It turned out difficult to be independent and responsible for the social and moral order that allows every citizen to experience their sense of pride and dignity. It is hard to extend our modern political and moral sensibilities to the extent of every human being, regardless of his or her creed, faith, or gender. The simplest things, as we thought of them in the 1990s, turned out to be the most challenging ones.

A valuable lesson of democracy.

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