

# I'm Suffocating

by Tomas Venclova

*translated by Geoff Vasil for HolocaustInTheBaltics.com*

423 years before Christ's birth, Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds* was performed in Athens during the festival at the Great Dionysia. It only won third place, Cratinus' comedy *The Bottle* (about the dramatist's own battle with alcohol) taking first place, and Ameipsias' play, about which we know almost nothing, placing second. These other comedies haven't survived, but we are still reading *The Clouds* today. In terms of literature, this is probably Aristophanes' greatest work, with a superb poetic chorus—and it's undeniably funny.

At the center of the comedy is the gardener Strepsiades, next to whose house a “thinkery” has been erected by the philosopher Socrates (he was still alive at the time and probably saw the play). Strepsiades is a patriarchal, upstanding farmer whose son, as usually happens, has taken up new fashions, and because of this has caused distress to his father. Perhaps Strepsiades is slightly comical. Still, Aristophanes says, but for him, society and the state would quickly collapse. To him the most important things are the mores and customs of his forefathers and the national holy places. He knows it is right to believe in the old gods, or more precisely, to perform rituals in their honor. Everything is clear to him, he easily differentiates between good and evil, black and white. Meanwhile, according to Aristophanes, Socrates is a skeptic and a relativist, and tries to consider things and events from different perspectives; he does not say that parents are always right. He doubts the gods, i.e. traditional values, and even dares deny them. For him, the thinking individual is more important than the collective, the community or the nation. Furthermore, his interest is not limited to Attica, to his own *deme*, as is

Strepsiades', but includes other lands, even the universe—he is clearly a globalist and cosmopolitan. Nowadays many would suspect Socrates is a Jew, or at least has a Jewish mother, or if not that, then his wife Xanthippe is probably a Jewess. But there were not Jews in Athens at that time, and it is unlikely that anyone there had heard of them, just as no one in Jerusalem had heard of Athens. It is somewhat the worse regarding homosexuality. To tell the truth, Athenians weren't horrified by it much, but Aristophanes doesn't care for it: he calls it "an obscene abomination." And Socrates, although he was married, seemingly did not turn away from adventures with the handsome young Alcibiades and others.

Strepsiades tries unsuccessfully to study at the thinkery, but quickly decides that Socrates is desecrating all that is most sacred, eroding morality, poisoning minds, molesting the youth and thus weakening the backbone of the nation, and at a dangerous time, during the Peloponnesian War. At the end of the comedy he burns the thinkery down, including Socrates and his followers inside. The last words by Socrates in the text are "I'm suffocating." The author is clearly on Strepsiades's side, and Socrates gets what he has coming. The comedy is in the final analysis a denunciation, or as we used to say during the Soviet period, a "donos." As we all know, Socrates was convicted by the Athenians and had to drink a cup of poison... True, this happened much later, but his accusers basically repeated Strepsiades's arguments.

In good drama, one side is never completely wrong. And this is true too of the Strepsiades-Socrates (more accurately Aristophanes-Socrates) conflict. It's possible to find truth in some of Strepsiades's thoughts. But whatever you might say, there is one clear difference: Socrates would not have burned Strepsiades's house down and would not have informed on him to the authorities.

As we know, Socrates won out in history. Broadly considered, we live in his world, the world of skepticism, free thought, criticism of traditional values and globalism. Of course it hasn't encompassed the entire globe—it hasn't encompassed Islamic states—but it might quickly encompass them as well. This world has been paid for dearly and payment is still being made, but this world is nicer to me, or at least more interesting, than Strepsiades's world. If Strepsiades had won, or more accurately, Strepsiades's idea, we would live even now in communities of moral, hard-working, patriarchal farmers loving their homeland and knowing nothing, not wanting to know anything, about

distant lands or the universe, and, incidentally, surrounded by hated and actually dangerous tribes of barbarians. In Socrates' world, Strepsiades and his values have survived to a degree - at least that which was truly worthwhile in them has survived. Aristophanes has remained, because he wrote well (as Auden would say, time pardoned him for writing well). And in Strepsiades' world, there would not be the slightest trace of Socrates, or even of Aristophanes.

True, Strepsiades couldn't win. If a thinkery—a place of thinkers—arises once, it will never disappear, even if you burn it down hundreds of times. Eventually it will always resurface.

Our Socrates was Vytautas Kavolis. None of us are Plato, Aristotle or even Xenophon. But perhaps I won't be immodest if I say that we must be Lithuanian Phaedos, Phaedons or Critos—students responsible for spreading the thoughts of their teacher and perpetuating his memory.

Unfortunately, in Lithuania today, as during the Soviet period, I have this itching desire to repeat Socrates' words from Aristophanes' comedy: "I'm suffocating." Vytautas Kavolis himself would likely also repeat them. Almost all of our famous intellectuals today have turned onto or are turning onto Strepsiades' path rather than Socrates', even if for these two thousand five hundred years leading up to now, Socrates' path has been considered the more fitting for the intellectual. There is talk of traditional Lithuanian values, as opposed and anathema to the dubious values of Europe and globalization. Globalism is allegedly a mere cover and pseudonym for robber-baron capitalism, and the only one who benefits from robber-baron capitalism are the dark international forces—usually it is not said out loud, just in case, but it is fairly clearly understood that these powers are Jews (for example, George Soros). These powers intentionally destroy nations, and first of all the Lithuanian nation, which they hate more than all others. The more tolerance, the less Lithuania—so says philosopher Arvydas Juozaitis: if we are tolerant, we will be drowned by foreign cultures and races, all manner of invaders will crowd our sacred amber beaches, against whom we have desperately defended ourselves and more or less have succeeded in defending ourselves (although, of course, not completely) during the Soviet period. Philosopher Vytautas Radzvilas speaks of globalist indoctrination, brain-washing and Euro-collaboration. For many this “Euro-collaboration” differs not from collaboration with the Soviets, except that it is perhaps even worse, because the nation is now disappearing at a faster pace. Philosopher

Romualdas Ozolas gives his blessings to the groups of xenophobes. These groups aren't satisfied dividing the country's inhabitants up into Lithuanians and non-Lithuanians, they further divide Lithuanians into good and bad, authentic and cosmopolitans, even "genetic patriots" and "genetic traitors." A true Lithuanian is exclusively he who does not like, and better yet hates, Russians, Poles, Jews, and also Westerners, and perhaps only likes Palestinians (by the way, it isn't difficult to imagine what our patriots would begin saying about Palestinians if they were to encounter them routinely, as they have encountered Chechens). The parliament, turning itself into the laughing-stock of Europe, and just as often giving rise to European horror, adopts laws on banning the letter W in passports and a ban on spreading information about sex, while people who consider themselves freedom fighters throw rocks at a gay pride march (but, dear Lord don't let it happen, never at a march of Nazi sympathizers). Just wait a little bit and there will probably appear members of parliament engaged in burning down thinkeries.

I have read—not in the Lithuanian press—an interview with a girl from Europe who answered a question about the difference between the political scene of Eastern Europe and Western Europe. "You see, you have no Left," the European said. "Those whom you call leftists, we call rightists. And those you call rightists, we call lunatics."

Leonidas Donskis, one of our few intellectuals who has not broken the Socratic oath, openly asks: what happened to us? Unfortunately, nothing special happened: similar trends emerged back during the Sajudis [Lithuanian independence movement in the Soviet Union] period, although at the time the aspiration to freedom was so all-consuming and alluring that one rather tried not to notice them. The Soviet system was rejected primarily or even exclusively because, in the opinion of the majority, it posed a mortal danger to the nation. In reality it wasn't that simple. The Soviet system needed to be rejected for three reasons. First, it was economically dysfunctional; it was pushing the empire, and thus Lithuania too, into an impoverished and hopeless backwardness. Second, it shamefully repressed speech, thought and conscience and encouraged lies and conformity. Third, it isolated us from the world, and so from new ideas and scientific and consumer breakthroughs. At the same time, there wasn't any great danger to the nation as such, at least not after the Stain era, and that is incontrovertibly proved by the fact that the nation and the language have not gone extinct, and didn't even shrink during the period of over fifty years. In the Stalin period the Soviets didn't think in categories of ethnicity but rather class, and

later, after Stalin, in completely pragmatic categories: if you don't oppose our rule, you will not be destroyed and may pursue a career, regardless of your ethnicity. Your mentality and morality is another matter: we will move them in a direction useful to us.

What the Soviets were truly concerned with doing, they succeeded in doing: they severely demoralized those they ruled over, without regard to the language they spoke or what they considered themselves to be. Moreover, the Soviets inculcated in them a narrow and primitive mentality, a part of which included xenophobia and hatred for all kinds of "cosmopolitans." In essence they perfectly preserved exactly the sort of Lithuanian nation which our pseudo-intellectuals so love.

During the Sajudis period, the easiest way to mobilize the masses was to stress a turning-point in the life of the nation, since this didn't require any deeper reflection: the majority of people respond automatically or semi-automatically to nationalist appeals, national honor is in itself a noble calling. The enthusiasm of that time was wonderful and the sacrifices made then worthy of great respect. But today we see the other side of the coin of nationalist slogans. For at least fifty years, and maybe longer (if we take into consideration the authoritarian period of Smetona) Lithuania has lacked a normal, "Socratic" intellectual culture. Our people are accustomed to thinking exclusively in ethnic categories and have lost the desire and ability to realize there are other categories and other kinds of values, sometimes even more important ones. A primitive, unreflecting nationalism has come to the fore, I would call it a "Strepsiadesian" cult of one's own *deme*, the desire to immortalize isolation and provinciality. The fact that Lithuania has always been—although it is no longer—an agrarian society of small farmers lends support to and strengthens this kind of nationalism. New historical phenomena also strengthen it: growing inequality, strong-willed corruption, the global economic crisis and the consequent frustration of consumer aspirations (it was exactly because of these things that Nazism arose, and, incidentally, Communism as well). One wouldn't really like to say it, but there is perhaps no doubt anymore, that many of our intellectuals who have now turned down the Strepsiades path were never real intellectuals to begin with; they were more likely careerists who failed to find a place meeting their expectations in society, and whose frustration perfectly corresponds to the frustration of larger groups of the population.

It's easy to see that we aren't alone in this predicament. Aggressive xenophobia, isolationism and an extremely benighted clericalism are clearly visible in Poland, perhaps even more so than in Lithuania (our Church is not that influential, but also has not deviated so far to the right). It is true Poland has a more vital protest against these phenomena—there is a strong and even powerful group of intellectuals from Adam Michnik to Andrzej Wajda who do wonderful analysis and are putting a halt to it. It's probably worse in Hungary and Slovakia where fascistoid tendencies have penetrated deep into the power structure and there isn't much opposition to them. One could mention some problems concerning our Baltic neighbors as well. But let's confine ourselves to the Lithuanian world.

It's right to love homeland, nation and Lithuanian identity. I will add that for me personally, the flourishing of the Lithuanian nation and language are extraordinarily important because I am not just a writer who works on popular themes, but primarily a poet: the fate of the Lithuanian word matters to me. I simply want to have a reader, not just for today but in the future. Still, I do not agree that it's right to love only that specific homeland, nation and Lithuanian identity which many of our philosophers and non-philosophers imagine: as if you love it and you're done, and never reflect upon them. The nation, according to these philosophers and non-philosophers, is incredibly weak and helpless: if you don't mend its fence, and ideally using barbed wire, it will immediately collapse. Furthermore, it must have an enemy. The doctrine of a thinker close to the Nazis, Carl Schmidt, is popular in Lithuania, although its proponents do not necessarily know this name. According to this doctrine, it is only the image of an enemy that integrates and holds the nation and society together. The Soviets were star-pupils of Schmidt's, although they hadn't always heard of him either. We, too, often cannot believe that Lithuania can survive under conditions of freedom without having or without manufacturing enemies. We cannot wrap our heads around the idea that the world might not be so evil, or that global politics might not necessarily be to our detriment.

Vytautas Radzvilas talks about Lithuania's loss of statehood, denationalization and the deconstruction of state and national consciousness within the European Union. It might seem strange, but I partly agree with him. Yes, the anachronistic state and national consciousness of the 19th century and the Smetona period conserved by the Soviets is being deconstructed, and it should have been deconstructed a long time ago. A new state and national consciousness needs to appear, such as that of the

Germans, English or French, rather than that of Radio Maryja in Poland or Dugin or Prokhanov in Russia. “My address is not a house or a street, my address is the European Union,” Radzvilas says ironically. That’s right, my address is not some petty, isolated Lithuania full of hate and fear for all around, but Lithuania in Europe, Lithuania in the world. Connecting with the global network of communications is in the interest of the Lithuanian state—by the way, our traditional enemies are gradually connecting with it as well—rather than locking ourselves away from it. The European Union, no matter what it is, whatever crises it experiences, is changing and growing, it is on the side of Socrates, not Strepsiades. Comparing it with the USSR is malign demagoguery—one way or the other, every Lithuanian knows how Kolyma differs from Dublin or London.

We live in a historical period when the very concept of nation is beginning to change. First, in the era of internet and airplanes, the connection between nation and territory is weakening. Today one can be a Lithuanian and fruitfully take part in the life of Lithuania even when one’s main residence is on another continent. Of course, that requires solving rationally the issue of Lithuanian citizenship. Second, nation is becoming less a matter of the origins of forefathers and more one of free choice. Many are overcome straightaway by the bugbear of racism when they consider that a person from Viet Nam or with a dark complexion could be considered a Lithuanian if he or she lives in Lithuania, has citizenship, does his/her civic duties and speaks Lithuanian—even more, his/her children could be (and have to be) considered Lithuanians. But this is the only humanitarian and modern attitude, and thus the only acceptable one. By the way, none of this is some kind of newsflash. The majority of Jews as well as Irish live in the diaspora, and this in no way harms Israel or Ireland. The Italian, Greek and other diasporas are also large, but neither Italy nor Greece has perished because of it. Also, European states have traditionally and continue to take in many immigrants. Whatever the problems in connection with this, and despite attempts by racists to exaggerate these problems, no nation of the European Union has shown any symptoms of losing their ethnicity. Further, many of them would have been economically ruined a long time ago if not for the immigrants, and thus ruined as states and ethnicities.

There is also a psychological complex, which I would call “independence fetishism.” Self-sufficient and unrestricted statehood is considered the absolute and primary value, incomparably more important than democracy, human decency and common sense. There is an attempt to support this

attitude using emotions and ecstatic liturgies. Attempts to modify or question it are defined as high treason, punishable by the harshest punishments up to and including summary execution. Such attempts are supposed to desecrate the centuries-long heroic acts and sufferings of the nation.

But independence is not an end in itself; it's a way to ensure the welfare of the nation. Clearly, this is the most appropriate way, and that's why for the duration of my conscious life I have spoken out in favor of an independent Lithuania. But independence without any limits is practically impossible, and if it were possible, it would be harmful. It is an anachronistic mental construct inherited from the dreamers of the 19th century. Further, in the future (in the far future, actually) it is possible a global union would substitute for independent states; a world order whose features are already visible; this in no way means that ethnic differences, languages and traditions will disappear. There are no completely independent countries today, except perhaps North Korea. All other countries, including the USA and Russia, to a greater or lesser degree limit their own freedom of action, in consideration of the interests of others (it does happen that consideration is not made, but then they are harshly criticized, and rightly so). If someone wants to live in perfectly independent North Korea, let them live there, but please don't recommend this for the Lithuanian nation.

It is an unacceptable practice in general to make a fetish or an idol out of the state, because it violates the first commandment of God, as well as common sense and rationality. Emotions and ecstatic rituals are rather a dangerous thing; these are the methods used by Nazism and Stalinism. Today states base their right to exist not on the heroic acts and suffering of ancient forefathers, but on how their economy, law, administration and cities function. In this area, unfortunately, we still can't be proud of much.

Xenophobia and isolationism are clearly affecting our relations with neighboring countries. I have spoken many times about the dangerous "Lithuanian triangle" (or I should say the Lithuanian Bermuda Triangle): disagreements with the Russians, Poles and Jews, or with Russia, Poland and Israel. During the Sajudis and early independence period, it sometimes seemed as if these disagreements were gradually but successfully sorting themselves out. Sadly, this isn't so, and today they are clearly becoming exacerbated. I will be answered with: "We aren't the only ones at fault here." I agree, but the tendency to speak, and even shout, about the others' faults (although this is an understandable psychological reaction) only makes

the problem worse. Speaking about one's own failings (which requires an inner maturity and a certain amount of effort) can make it somewhat better.

A tragic feedback mechanism has begun operating in relations with Vilnius Poles: the inflexibility of one side is strengthening the inflexibility of the other. This feedback has probably been going on since 1939. When Vilnius was returned to Lithuania, many of the residents there could still go over to the Lithuanian side rather easily. More than one of them agreed and even wanted to be called Lithuanians, albeit a different kind, Polish-speaking and maintaining ties with Polish culture. This was simply a more complex form of ethnic identity, characteristic of people such as Mykolas Riomeris (Michal Romer).. Others, as we know, had no clear ethnic identity at all. Another group were non-local Poles, but that doesn't mean it was acceptable to discriminate against them. But in 1939 the ruthless and resolute Lithuanianization of the area began, without regard to its special features or its complex or not-so-complex forms of self-identity. This was continued as circumstances allowed under Nazi occupation as well. This, in turn, led to unfavorable attitude towards Lithuania; local people were angered and chose Polish identity over Lithuanian one. There were other reasons, but I believe there isn't any doubt that our pinheaded patriots were in large part responsible for the spread of this phenomenon. It is now probably much harder to extinguish the animosity than it was back then. The only thing I can suggest is not to pour gasoline on the fire. A number of our politicians consider Poles and other ethnic minorities disloyal *ex definitione*, not to mention the leaders of the communities of ethnic minorities, who are supposedly just a fifth column. Even if we subscribe to this position, which seems to me mistaken, the interest of the state is not to increase the ranks of the fifth column, but to decrease them, not to push other ethnicities away, not to attack them constantly, stress their animosity and unmask their alleged plots and conspiracies, but to do exactly the opposite – that is, bringing them closer through different rational methods, including making concessions.

There is no movement visible in Lithuanian-Jewish relations. Anger against Efraim Zuroff and attempts to lay the foundations for the "double-genocide" theory continue, while demanding: "Don't you dare call us a nation of Jew-shooters." Obviously, Lithuanians are not a nation of Jew-shooters. But, unfortunately, actions in the recent past do provide a basis for calling Lithuanians a nation of apologists for Jew-shooters. Whatever you might think about Efraim Zuroff, he is right when he says that Lithuanians, unlike Croatians, have not punished a single murderer of Jews. On the contrary,

although this hasn't been articulated by society or the courts, there is clearly a feeling at large that the right thing to do is to silently sabotage all such legal cases. We are not mature enough to understand that it is not permissible to justify or support a criminal merely because he is an ethnic Lithuanian (who considers himself a patriot) and his victims or plaintiffs are not Lithuanians.

I have said more than once and will continue to say that two large mistakes were made in this area which will have to be corrected sooner or later. The first mistake concerns the Provisional Government of 1941. It needs to be said, without any qualifiers, that the new Lithuania categorically rejects including this episode among its list of laudable and honored traditions. The Provisional Government wasn't essentially different from the Tiso regime in Slovakia or the Pavelic government in Croatia, neither of which any serious historian would consider to be on the right side. We call members of the Lithuanian Provisional Government patriots—subjectively they were—but we cannot honor patriots who cause such great damage to their country, that even now we are powerless to clean up the mess. They damaged Lithuania's prestige more than some enemies of Lithuania. If an "alternative history" thought-experiment is allowable, let's imagine the Western allies had liberated Lithuania in 1944 and Stasys Lozoraitis, then the nominal head of state, had returned. Without a doubt, there would then have to have been (however unwillingly) a trial of the Provisional Government just as the Pétaine process took place in France. Pétaine was also a patriot who had achieved merit for France on the battlefield, and he did his best to preserve France's independence, but at the cost of an alliance with Hitler. Some of the members of the Provisional Government might have been acquitted, but certainly not one of them would have received a state order of merit, and none of them would have been called a patriarch of the nation. It might be useful to remind one of the fact that after the war Lozoraitis and for some time VLIK [the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania] rather clearly rejected any ties with the Provisional Government.

The second mistake was the expansion of the concept of genocide, erasing the differences between the Holocaust and other totalitarian crimes (sadly, Lithuanian émigrés encouraged this sort of conceptual expansion even before independence was restored). The museum in the center of Vilnius should be called, for example, the museum of Communist crimes, rather than the genocide museum. Otherwise it will always be a source of tension

and conflict, in opposition to common sense and against the interest of the Lithuanian state.

The issue of relations with Russia is the most complicated, because Russia today provides many reasons for distrust. But there's no need to exaggerate, and it's worth remembering that affairs could turn in an entirely new direction. Dozens of our political scientists and journalists have made it their job to unmask Russia (and also unmasking Vilnius Poles and "false Jewish claims"). Under the way of thinking they propagate, Russia's interests are always inimical to Lithuania's interests, and things cannot be otherwise; the Russians are in no way the victims of Stalinism but rather fully cognizant proponents and maintainers of it (at the same time these scientists and journalists let their audience know that Stalinism is a hundred times worse than Nazism). Whatever Russia's actions, according to this point of view, Russia's intentions are always evil. Every enemy of Russia, no matter whether irresponsible, incompetent or not especially civilized, is automatically Lithuania's friend. If Russia succeeds, this is horrible, and if Russia experiences setbacks, this is a great boon. A flourishing Russia, which would experience an economic and cultural rebirth, would be the worst of all possible things to happen to Russia's neighbors and the world. Naïve or greedy Westerners, who have almost reached an agreement with Russia, thus dooming us to an unknown but undoubtedly ugly fate, don't understand this. All this recalls a cartoon I saw recently in a Polish magazine. Two farmers are sitting on the roof of a house in the middle of a flood. One says: "Jeez, what will that Putin think of next?"

My prognosis is different. I would rather agree with Zbigniew Brzezinski, that economic and demographic factors will force and are already forcing Russia to de-Stalinize, although Russians are meeting some difficult bends along that road and will meet with more. One can expect, and not without foundation, that Russia will find a solution much like that which Mustafa Kemal's Turkey chose during his time. In general, Turkey no longer dreams of empire and is a mortal danger to no one - neither to Bulgaria, Serbia nor Greece, nor even Armenia. Moreover, Turkey is a NATO member, together with Greece, with whom, not so very long ago, it fought, and still has disagreements over Cyprus (as Russia has territorial quarrels with Georgia).. Russia, which would be similar to Kemal's Turkey, would fit our interests, although not the interests of our eternally confronting politicians who don't know how to do anything else. We shouldn't allow our continual lack of trust and long-term claims hinder the arrival of such a Russia. Besides which,

the endless settling of scores and demonstration of old wounds with Russia has probably become annoying and boring to the majority of Lithuanian people.

Let's return to Aristophanes. What remains for us to do in this current, not too happy situation? Expressing and defending our opinion, even if the majority of the nation or the nation's intellectuals are against it. We should have small but stubborn little groups, small but moral "thinkeries." It's quite possible the reply to that will be: "You demand tolerance, but you are intolerant of us, the true patriots of Lithuania." This is not so: we merely forbid forbidding, we forbid compulsion. We are in favor of normal democratic practices. You may not agree with gays, or you may not even like them, but you may not abuse them or throw rocks at them. You may speak out against immigration, but you may not verbally abuse, beat or brutally deport immigrants. You may have your own policies, but you may not call opponents of those policies traitors night and day or say they have no place in Lithuania. You may discuss (and we will not hide that we think your opinion is wrong and anachronistic) but you may not discriminate. And if you try to introduce a semi-Fascist, neo-totalitarian order, you will have to deal not just with Brussels' dissatisfaction, but also with civil disobedience and resistance. *Summa summarum* I remain an optimist: after regaining independence, after economic and political transformations, there will come a time as well for mental transformation. But this needs to be encouraged and fostered, rather than simply resigning ourselves to those who attempt to immortalize an antediluvian way of thinking.