

Sticks and Stones

◆ By Darius J. Ross



In the 1990s, one Lithuanian daily, *Respublika*, helped to turn the tide against crime syndicates that owned the streets and despoiled the country. Some of its reporters were killed in the line of duty. The paper had a different, often dissenting, perspective.

Under the same publisher since its inception, it's still a dissenting voice, but now it's spewing muck, not raking it. It has turned into a fount of bigotry.

Here is an excerpt from publisher Vitas Tomkus's gonna-get-medieval-on-your-ass Easter greeting to his readers (any errors in translation are mine):

I know that authority comes from God.

I know that on Sunday, Jesus will celebrate his second birthday. His first birth, if I'm not mistaken, took place 2,009 years ago, in the land of Joseph and Mary; the second time, if I remember now, Jesus was reborn at Easter – this day is exactly 1,976 years since that event, one of importance to all Catholics, upon which occasion I send greetings to all of Lithuania's believers.

P.S. Just please, never ask me why Jesus, the magnificent heavenly spiritual guide and prophet, was obliged to be reborn a second time [sic]. I don't want to know nor do I want to hear how he died or who was responsible. I know the names but I've forgotten their nationality. After all, one can't accuse an entire nation on the basis of a few criminals. Is this not so, nation of Jew-killers?

Dubious pieties and the pointed ironic inversion in the last line aside, Tomkus leaves himself open to accusations of, at best, gross oversimplification of Holocaust history and of invoking the ludicrous Jewish deicide canard (which even the Vatican repudiated, although not until the 1960s), at worst – of crackpot anti-Jewish slurs.

Anti-Semitism did not fall out of fashion because some found it distasteful; it landed on the scrap heap of history – like slavery, Stalinism, and witch burning – for its rank stupidity, despite the best efforts of religious elites to keep it in the fore.

Lithuania's intellectuals and powers-that-be, often labeled "Jew-Masons" by Tomkus, are stumped by the man's enfant terrible antics.

Counter his views and he'll gleefully assassinate your character with his poisoned pen, splashing ugly shots of you on his front page. Others dismiss him as the bad apple in every family and ignore him.

He claims a readership of 1.5 million (all his media outlets together) – a bit over the top, but his constituency is too big to be discounted as merely a pesky lunatic fringe;

it's one that won't stand much more ignoring, as January rioting in Vilnius showed.

Tomkus is a canny reader of the temperature of Petras P. Petraitis. He strikes a chord with disgruntled have-nots, who are understandably wearied by the frenetic upheavals of today's world, selling them his editorial line: Jews, gays, foreign banks, the U.S., the EU, and George Soros are the source of Lithuania's ills. The West is viewed as a vast conspiracy that has pillaged the country.

His attacks on gays are frequent and withering – at times they are all incipient pedophiles; at others he grants them life so long as they live in silence and in the shadows. The majority rules; minorities and naysayers have the right to shut up and be cowed.

As far as I know, no Lithuanian newspaper ever takes a serious in-depth look at, say, the scourge of alcoholism that's shearing apart the much-cherished traditional family, or drinks producers' tricks to get young people hooked on booze. Why would they? They'd lose juicy ad accounts.

Tomkus, by the way, owns a stake in a big brewery, Gubernija, which is what Lithuania once was – a "gubernija," a colony of Czarist Russia where alcohol was used to keep the people down.

He recently spent a reported 3 million litas to rescue the storied Zalgiris basketball club from bankruptcy, engaging in much patriotic breast-beating on this score.

Basketball, it is frequently said, is Lithuania's secular religion. Booze, basketball, and tabloid blather – the triune cash cow at whose feet the faithful worship.

Beyond the hubris, what really matters is that Tomkus has captured the imagination of a not-small chunk of the Lithuanian public that champions returning to a sequestered backwater existence that's neither here nor there. A Baltic Serbia. A "globalist-free" ethnic reservation lodged between Mammon and Moscow; one with exclusive and murky "we know who we are" membership rules.

It's a utopian (dystopian from where I sit) blood-and-soil fantasy land that would only result in a hub for money launderers, drug runners, smugglers, and spies; and it would be mopped off the map of Europe posthaste.

P.S. To my inevitable ultra-nationalist detractors: I walk alone. I don't take dictation. I'm not American, although I'm a fan of the Spirit of '76. I'm not gay or Jewish, though I have friends who happen to belong to those groups. I don't work for any foreign government or lobby, in any capacity, or for Soros, from whom I've never received a penny. I don't believe in the existence of "Jew-Masons" or in the tooth fairy. (And I've called George Bush a trigger-happy cowboy on Lithuanian TV – twice). □

Looking to the future



PHOTO COURTESY OF ITELLA

Aldis Greitans is the board chairman of Itella Information. His expertise includes Itella's direct areas of operations as well as issues relating to the postal services and Latvijas Pasts. He is also the board chairman of a union bringing together non-governmental players in the postal sector. He regularly writes opinion articles for the Latvian-language daily *Diena*. He sat down with *The Baltic Times* to talk about the economy, the crisis and how to push on through.

First of all, the mandatory question, how has the crisis affected your company's work and what are your views on the crisis?

Actually, there is not such a big effect now on our businesses. There are several reasons for that. People are nervous about hitting the worst and everyone will have problems, so we are all praying for better developments.

After Latvia joined the EU there were many jobs created, so do you think this downsizing is something that would have happened anyway or did something go wrong?

My personal point of view is that the Kalvitis and Godmanis governments calculated that this real estate bubble and that GDP would drop from 10 percent to let's say 5 percent. They expected internal devaluation, where you don't devalue currency but salaries are decreased. The downfall came because neither they nor anyone could forecast what really happened in the global collapse. They calculated that loans would be as accessible as they were and

there wouldn't be problems when development is reduced.

How do you explain your success when so many businesses are struggling and Itella maintained a 48 percent profit?

I think it's because of the industry which is business process outsources. This is a high volume, low market industry. This means that from the very beginning of 1998 we were used to running fast for little money. That is generally a sign of crisis, so really we have been used to a crisis since the beginning. Another thing is the complete dependence on a small pool of customers; we have to listen to the customers' wishes more carefully than other businesses. We are more customer friendly. These allowed us to stay profitable and even make some profit. Actually, the difference from the good times is that now customers are listening to us when we tell them they can save 1 santim here or there.

What kind of plans do you have for the future, taking into account what you know now?

Actually, we started as a company that prints invoices manually, and now we cannot survive today without the electronic side of things. Thanks to Latvian Post, the electronic side of things is growing. So we are going to improve existing electronic services and move more towards upstream diversification. The idea is to take over the whole billing process for customers. Because our calculations show that there is an obvious scale effect. To do in one place the billing of many companies it will be cheaper than if they did it alone.

Also we're going in the opposite direction and developing purchasing invoices from here and all Baltic countries. We call this Itella workflow, which is about digitizing incoming invoices and processing them internally into the company accounting system

electronically. And it will save more money. Now the time needed to process an incoming invoice is about 26 minutes. With our help that could be done in five. If you calculate this into savings, it's possible for companies to save 3-5 times more than before.

These are things we think fit the crisis very well.

In general terms, what do you think is the main thing that should be done to boost the economy?

Well, the joke is that we should fire half the bureaucrats and paint the Saima [Latvian parliament] house blue. But what we can do is sit and wait. We are a small country and if we're talking microeconomics in Latvia, then we should talk about the same in Paris, whose population is that of Latvia's. The only difference is that our agriculture does better than that of Champs d'Elysee's. Basically these economic comparisons don't work in this country, because most industries are represented by a maximum of 10 enterprises and so we can't do big scale economy. There is also the joke that Latvia is the most independent country in the world because nothing depends on it. That's pretty much the truth. Basically if we talk about the economy it's true.

[...] I've written in my blog in *Diena* about the government's plan to improve the environment written in December of 2008, and I had planned to write an update, but I haven't been able to find any information and I'm almost certain nothing has been done. I think in fearing the IMF, the government decided they will improve, and now the fear is over and again we are back where we were. On the other hand Latvian businessmen and managers are used to this existence and it's a paradox but that's how this country has lived up until now for almost 20 years. □

Interview by Monika Hanley

Have an opinion?

Send us a letter!

letters@baltictimes.com

Be sure to include your name and the city you're writing from. Please note that by submitting your letter to this address, you're agreeing to allow us to publish it.