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THE PROJECTION OF THE “BLOSSOMING OF THE NATION” AMONG THE LITHUANIAN CULTURAL ELITE DURING THE SOVIET PERIOD

Key words: soviet internationalism, national ideology, modernisation, cultural elite, bureaucratic practice.

Questions of the nation's role in the Soviet system were tied with Leninist national policy, which emphasized the ideas of internationalism and the benefits of socialism to national development. Although Soviet discourse produced stories of the progress of nations, the Western totalitarian perspective on Soviet studies looked at it skeptically, and this skepticism became even stronger in post-Soviet Lithuanian historiography, blaming the Soviet regime for occupation and the trampling of the honor and interest of the Lithuanian nation.

In this article I will not judge either the arguments for Leninist policy or their critiques, but try to look at the multiform of Soviet national policy grounded in the everyday level and to raise a point for broader insight into current Lithuanian historiography, exploring the issues of the national policy of the USSR.

The article mainly discusses ideological/symbolic areas of the local cultural elite in the sense of cultural production and showing the attitudes on Soviet national and cultural policies. The dominant context-shaping Soviet national policy was related with the ideas of internationalism and “blossoming of the nation”, with “blossoming” in this text becoming a powerful metaphor, eliciting several competing meanings, national aspirations and the strategies of local cultural elite.

Research materials for the study cover archives, interviews with respondents who belonged to the cultural elite, and some biographical descriptions.

The chronological boundaries embrace the 1970-1988 period, including two epochs of the Soviet system, namely the period of Brezhnev's stagnation and the period of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, launched in 1985.

PROJECTION OF BLOSSOMING

Before the revolution of October 17th, 1917, Lenin argued that nationalism went against working-class solidarity.¹ After he succeeded in coming to power, he revised his position by integrating the question of the nation into the soviet theoretical agenda, putting national policy under the scope of internationalism. In his approach the most rational way to support national values and interests would be by deepening co-operation between nations, creating and sharing common values based on communist ideology, and using the benefits of socialism. Lenin proclaimed the terms *rascvet nacji* (*blossoming of nations*), *sbližhenije* (*rapprochement between nations*) and *sliyanie* (*merging nations*). Though those concepts had a different value in different Soviet periods, the terms mostly used were the *blossoming* and *rapprochement* (*merge* becomes also valid again as a concept in late socialism under the rule of Brezhnev², when Russian language policy was pushed in the education system³).

Here I would mostly emphasize the concept of *blossoming*, which as a central projection was addressed to all nations living in USSR, and expressed the benefits of living in a friendly community of another

15 republics with different nationalities. Those benefits cover socio-economic and cultural advantages. Such a projection of *blossoming*, which widely invaded public discourse and was used by cultural elites in their activities, leads to a discussion consisting of different questions: 1) what influences it had on national identities, and 2) how it affected the mobilization of national identity in contemporary Lithuania.

Before going into the analysis, it is important to emphasize that all Soviet agendas planned and spoke about the progress which was presented as valid for all levels – state, individual and ethnic. “Blossoming” as a metaphor for progress covered industrialization and other development, making life more comfortable and secure, and all this was presented as meaningful Soviet achievements.⁴ Soviet modernization made obvious innovations in Lithuania as well. Not counting the political consequences of Soviet occupation, but looking more at the impact on everyday life, some dimensions of Soviet socio-cultural progress must be mentioned: 1) access to educational and health care systems for everyone; 2) preservation and promotion of high culture – “*kultura*” (assigning it to the property of “*narod*”) – theatres, art galleries, ballroom dances, museums; and 3) development of mass culture (“*dom kultury*”, amateur art (“*kolektyvi*”) in factories and other establishments (new lifestyle for working class). In local propaganda all these facts were presented as the achievements of “*litovskij narod*” living on Soviet system and seeking to build socialism.

SOVIETIZATION AS THE SUPPORT OF ETHNO-NATIONAL INTERESTS: THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

In Lithuanian, the dominating historiographical attitude to the Soviet past is mostly related with a totalitarian paradigm of Soviet studies. The victimization aspects, covering the harm of occupation and sovietization, repression and lack of free speech, are the main directions in exploring the Soviet system. The Lithuanian Soviet elite is mainly represented as collaborator or conformists and vassals of Moscow. Local nomenclature has been shown to have been an instrument of the system that employed all resources in achieving implementation of the ideological goals

and agendas. They talk about the Soviet system as abnormal phenomena lacking rationality.

This perspective contrasted with other observations that see enormous efforts of modernization and orientation to progress. Firstly, in a radical way this attitude can be met in official Soviet ideology and public discourse: 1) national culture was presented as the winner 2) previous national cultures were tied with a pre-modern style of life; 3) Soviet modernization was presented as a new stage in their development; and 4) internationalism was presented as a premise for their natural friendship and convergence.

Though latter perspectives came from the attempts to legitimize Soviet national policy, at a certain level it had support among the revisionist or post-revisionist scholars of Soviet studies. The support comes from the intention of hearing the voice of participants in the Soviet system and understanding the logic of their performance, while looking at everyday reality, which has the features of a performative shift.⁵ Here, “blossoming of the nation” could be understandable also as a local strategy reinterpreted from its original meaning.

There are some theoretical ideas deepening this perspective and bringing the ideas of national communism. Y. Slezkine acknowledged that the official policies fostered ethno-national identity in the Soviet Union, which was combined with the Soviet modernization process.⁶ According to him the national policy of the Soviet Union allowed the strengthening of national identity as well as provided additional opportunities for local candidates to promote ethno-national values and the ethno-national languages.⁷ R. Suny provided his contribution by arguing that ethno-national identities were strengthened by the Soviet state and related with Soviet republics. This helped dominated nations in fifteen republics to mobilize their national identity and to diminish the influence of central policy.⁸ Anthropologist K. Verdery, who studied Soviet Romania, also saw a possible response of the heads of peripheral regions to strategies of the center.⁹ The case of Romania indicated that N. Ceausescu’s regime, following policy of autonomy from Moscow, was more focused on the idea of a socialist state rather than a socialist

society as an expression of working class. Socialist nationalism was perceived as a means to unite society for progress and industrialization. An analysis of Soviet federalism has been completed by P. Roeder. He noted that the central government in the Soviet system provided opportunities to shape the ethno-federalism, which allowed the formation of ethnic elites in Soviet republics, who, by remaining loyal to the official policies, at the same time ensured the socioeconomic welfare of their own country, and such a model is particularly suitable to describe the case of the Baltic and Caucasus republics.¹⁰ W. Kemp noticed the incompatibility between the ideologies of *nationalism* and *communism*, but claimed that in domestic policies the communist *realpolitik* was often more significant than social theory. He showed that in practice the *communist* and *nationalist* position frequently coincided.¹¹ G. Smith, analyzing the case of Baltic States, put a similar approach as in the case of W. Kemp and noted that the central authorities, through the terror apparatus, tended to restrict national manifestations, which could cause more serious demands of an autonomous nature.¹²

NARRATIVES AND ATTITUDES UPON “BLOSSOMING OF THE NATION”

The narratives of different experiences acting in the Soviet system illustrate various roles of the cultural elites in Soviet Lithuania. They are represented by three persons from the Soviet cultural elite who had different relations with the system. One of them belongs to the former Soviet Lithuanian Minister of Culture, who later became a party secretary responsible for ideology. The second case is related with a famous writer, who during soviet time held a position in the union of writers, and the last example is related with a well-known critic and scholar of literature, who during Soviet times had very ambiguous relations with the system. Those narratives on Soviet cultural development are constructed by their own experiences expressed in their autobiographies, diaries or interviews.

In his book Lionginas Šepetys talks about the conditions for cultural development and emphasizes only positive processes (sometimes competing with the technical elite for resources).¹³

“The halls of theatres, cinemas and exhibitions were crowded. There were the longest queues in bookstores. Much longer than queues for Czech beer. People believed in culture and art more than their environment and everyday life.

After I started the duties of minister, I first tended to represent the interests of culture, and only afterwards I would represent the interests of government in the cultural sphere. When I explained this position in the cultural ministry in Moscow, I got a lesson: governmental policy goes first.

I guess that from my long-term experience I could define what was the cultural policy of government. It is belief in the power and duty of culture: education, nurture, propaganda, being prestigious, etc. In the cultural policies regarding national Soviet republics, a large role is designated to the national self-conscious and strengthening their memories.”

Deputy chairman of the Union of writers in the 1980s and 1990s Vytautas Bubnys, during an interview remembered recognition of his working area, but simultaneously pointed out a pressure for flexibility and adoption to the informal rules.¹⁴ He described that rational strategy as to accept the formal and informal rules and then to reach goals. He also recognized that the planning system helped to promote the authors who were officially loyal to the system, and to put culture on the public stage.

“Our prose was spread widely, not only in the Soviet republic, but also in other Soviet republics and other foreign countries. [...] My book was published in 1959 and was warmly welcomed in the press. There were panegyrics concerning the style, sentences and so on. I felt that these compliments were organized specially as a response to previous pressure. As other writers I also was broken, but when my spine became stronger, I knew how to survive and deal with such pressure.”

Literary reviewer Vytautas Kubilius, who was recognized by his talent and adherence to the field of

literature, but inauspicious in his incomplete adoption of the establishment, in his diary described his continuously ambivalent relation with the system. Describing the situation when his article in the magazine *Nemunas* was published and after this fact he was widely assaulted in party structures for his critical position regarding famous poet and the trends of contemporary literature, he wondered that his colleagues actively opposed him, supporting the position of party officials. His activities were suspended for some time and his notes reveal the fear and despair of the administration of culture.¹⁵

“I see clearly that I am finishing my career. Finishing not because of old age, weariness or creative emptiness, but in struggle. It’s accordingly my style. The cruelty of those communist-writers goes so far, that nobody doubts that it’s normal to throw stones at me. It happened after I tried to be the advocate of their creative uncertainty and searches in the eyes of government. There is gossip that the Union of Writers even asked to halt publication of my book.”

These stories cover three competing lines among the cultural elite, naming that 1) “blossoming” was intensive and directly influenced by ideology, official planning and resources; 2) “blossoming” was intensive, but mainly influenced by assigned resources, the strategies of the members and *know how* to reach the goals; and 3) “blossoming” was more harmful than useful, there were too many restrictions and too little room for creativity in the Soviet field of “culture”. The differences between the lines lead to an examination of the structure of the cultural elite in Soviet Lithuania.

The cultural elite could be described as recognized agents in the cultural-scientific space, who disseminate knowledge, competence and cultural values and maintain a privileged position in shaping and publicizing various ideological discourses. A typical group of them would be the line of executives of the non-production sphere covering heads working at the Ministries of Education, Culture or specialized committees, and party officials who directly worked with this sphere. *Culturalists* include the intellectuals and cultural administrators acting in the governing

structures. Not surprisingly they emerge between political interest and creative ideas, which did not always coincide. Looking at the relations with the Soviet system, there could be identified different groups of *culturalists*¹⁶ similar to three attitudes mentioned in the narratives, and having different authority in the system.¹⁷

Ideologists. They were close to Moscow policy and the propaganda mechanism; they were the supervisors of Soviet Panoptikon. Ideologists were people who taught ideological disciplines (Marxism, political economy, etc.), people responsible for propaganda, and people holding party positions or managerial positions at the republican press, television editorial offices, artists associations or publishing houses. In the late 1960s and 1970s such figures played a substantial role in restricting activities of other *culturalists*, who wanted to move away from the communist ideology. They were intended to boost the authority of the Soviet culture by demonstrating achievements, mostly targeted at support of the mass culture and complying with the established socialist standards.

Conservatists, those who were mainly involved in local affairs, indifferent to central projection, and especially attach themselves to “native land, ethno-history and nature”, but knew the rules. They were the most dominant group among the cultural elite. During real socialism their role grew. The core of them was a group of recognized *authorities*. They were the persons distinguished in a field of science or culture and awarded for their activities, who at the same time held top positions at scientific or cultural institutions (e.g., academicians A. Žukauskas and K. Meškauskas, rector J. Kubilius, writers A. Maldonis, V. Bubnys, etc.). Creating their value by knowledge they were characterized by a “reserved” position, i.e. managing to get along with the party authorities, participating in production decisions, but also supporting interest in the *native country*, promoting dissemination of national symbols and activities which fostered the national identity (e.g., the 400th jubilee of Vilnius State University, historical dramas by J. Marcinkevičius). Many of them played a significant role during the national revival in 1988-1989.

Voices of protest – people who were secretly or openly

against the values of the system, producing the ideas of human rights (*contra elite*). Some of them were part of the establishment, but later suspended for some reasons (Tomas Venclova and Vytautas Kubilius). They had symbolic support in different social groups, but were strictly controlled and excluded from decision-making and privileged status in the sense of consumption and official promotion.

BUREAUCRATIC CONTAINMENT AND LOCAL INTEREST IN "CULTURE"

The Soviet system could be presented as a bureaucratic Leviathan¹⁸, covering all spheres from the management of Soviet industries to sport and culture. The analysis of planning and implementation performance in Soviet Lithuania illustrates that alongside the multitude of formal rules there were informal rules, depending on social networks and existing daily practices. I would call them the bureaucratic routines. They had a metaphorical feature such as "*to find a form*"; "*paper must lie on the table a little bit*"; "*blat*", and pointed to the ability of bureaucrats to pursue personal or group strategies, to change or develop the primary idea of planning intention, and, sometimes, to put more local affairs into the central projections. All this reveals the ability of experienced *homo sovieticus*, and as V. Bubnys mentioned in his story, a need to know how to maneuver in the system.

For instance, "*to find a form*" meant the voluntary ability to implement and formalize the actions, even if they did not fit the official requirement. Playing with the rules and interpreting them show the ingenuity of some bureaucrats to diminish the risk that external controllers could find legal violations. "*Paper must lie*" is another routine showing that in the process of document flow (planning, reporting, etc.) it was important and timely to send, stop or sign the document flow. By knowing all the circumstances in the institutions, social networks and issued projects, there were opportunities to make rational choices or avoid threats. Other routines were also similar and revealed the culture of Soviet bureaucracy. There were private interests and the routines not only diminished the impact of central plans, but also created room for local interests.

I would call this "bureaucratic containment", which helps to filter the impact of the center. By looking at the 1970s and 1980s and analyzing the case of the cultural field in Soviet Lithuania, we observe that some situations of "bureaucratic containment" illustrated that sovietization projects: 1) were not always implemented in the way the central institution projected them; 2) were negotiated in daily life; and 3) bureaucratic performance in Soviet Lithuanian created the filters protecting local interests.

The first case is related with language policy in the USSR. When Russian language strengthening policy (*sbližhenya* of Soviet nations) was proclaimed during the Tashkent conferences in 1975 and 1979, and the USSR Education Ministry launched the activities of its implementation, native Soviet officials in Lithuania rapidly adopted the central policy into the republic's law and decisions level. Activities supporting Russian language learning in the education system were issued by the USSR Education Ministry, but analogical means were approved at the institutional level in Soviet Lithuania. During the period from 1983 to 1988 the main means of strengthening Russian language learning were spread in the Lithuanian education system; for instance, new course books and handbooks were prepared, the quantity of language lessons per week were prolonged, etc. Nevertheless, looking at bureaucratic performance shows that this policy did not have as high a priority in the educational establishments of the republic as was announced in official documents. Firstly, there was strong support for the Lithuanian language, and this protection helped the Lithuanian language retain a dominant position in the teaching process even during the strengthening policy of Russian language. Support for Lithuanian lessons and teaching programs were expressed not only by native bureaucrats, but also by permanent negotiation about it with central officials. Secondly, implementation of Russian language policy was bound by control and the shortage of motivation to learn, teach and control strengthening of Russian language, and this was the result of bureaucratic resistance to language policy. However, evaluating the huge demand from the centre to enhance the role of Russian language in Soviet society and the amount of this policy's activities, it must be concluded that such

containment could slacken Russification processes, but not stop them.

Another case of bureaucratic containment is related with the routines establishing order among writers, whose activities had to strictly fit into the frames of social realism. The restrictions increased again in the early 1970s, when during Brezhnev's period the ideology was tightened again. Writers whose position was more liberal were subjected to sanctions thereby indicating clear boundaries of creative administration. Such a situation differed from the *cultural warming* initiated during Khrushchev's era. However, even with the tightened conditions in the writers' circles the leaders of *conservatist* writers were not only along with ideologists and the party authorities, but also more dominant than *ideological* writers. Their behavior was not intended to oppose the regime openly but rather to support the spread of national values. They supported the principle of autonomy – to be semi-independent, but always to observe the tightened ideological frames defined in the central model. Under such circumstances the creative area was marked by tendencies of Aesop's language that allowed, through symbols and hidden meaning¹⁹, implication of more than officially permitted. Socially shared *know how* helped to understand such texts and, in some segments of writers and readers, to extend the boundaries of social realism, and to put some input into mobilizing national ideology (J. Marcinkevičius), but not the principles of internationalism.

Although people who did not comply with the requirements were subject to sanctions, their social relations partially buffered the requirements and slackened the tensions. Some transgressions, if they were not openly ideological in nature and did not clearly threaten the interest of officials from the centre, were quietly swallowed, especially if the “cult-prit” had influential relations or had accumulated symbolic capital.

CONCLUSION: MULTI-EDGE ATTITUDE LOOKING AT THE “BLOSSOMING OF THE NATION”

Cultural policy in the USSR was clearly related with the national ideology. By using the idea of internationalism and a planning system, the national

issue was at the stage of party rhetoric. Tied with the projection of the “blossoming of nations” it had to show the advantages of the system for national development. All context of Soviet modernization was conducive for this projection. In the cultural sphere there was plenty of evidence: development of education, spread of “collectives of *kultur*” in different establishments, huge state support for writers and other artists, etc.

Otherwise, by looking at the everyday level and analyzing networks of culturalists and their bureaucratic practices, there could be seen a performative shift supporting local interests who did not always comply with the central projection and mobilized national identity. All this illustrates the multi-edge perspective of “blossoming” by understanding the central attempts and the context of industrialization, and also naming the bureaucratic/social ability to maneuver and overpass the principles of Soviet policies by filling their content with local affairs (it clearly constructed different ideas of Lithuania), which symbolically become very important in the late 1980s as the input of intellectuals initiated a national revival.

Notes

¹ Jeff Richards, ‘Old Wine in New Bottles: the Resurgence of Nationalism in the New Europe’ in: Christopher Williams, Thanasis D. Sfikas (eds.), *Ethnicity and Nationalism in Russia, the CIS and the Baltic States*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, p. 29.

² Vilius Ivanauskas, ‘Rusų kalbos vaidmuo stiprinant sovietinį tapatumą ir nacionalinę politiką sovietinėje sistemoje 8-9 dešimtmečiuose’ (‘The Role of Russian Language Strengthening Soviet Identity and Soviet National Policy in 70-80s’) in: Egidijus Aleksandravičius et al. (eds.), *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis*, No. 2, Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos instituto leidykla, 2007.

³ Speech of the vice-president academician P. Fedosov of USSR Science academy in Tashkent conference in 1979, Rusijos federacijos valstybinis archyvas (State Archive of Russian Federation), FR9563, O-1, E-3660, L-54-58.

⁴ Many of these achievements were presented not only during Soviet times, but also in the biographies of former Soviet officials, who had made decisions on them.

⁵ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

⁶ Yuri Slezkine, ‘The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism’ in: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 1994, pp. 414-452.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993.

⁹ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, Berkeley: University of California, 1991, pp. 74-77.

¹⁰ Philip G. Roeder, 'Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization' in: *World Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1991, pp. 196-233.

¹¹ Walter A. Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

¹² Graham Smith, 'The Resurgence of Nationalism' in: Graham Smith (ed.), *The Baltic States: the National Self-Determination of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*, London: Macmillan, 1996.

¹³ Lionginas Šepetyš, *Neprarastoji karta. Siluetai ir spal-*

vos (Not-lost Generation. Silhouettes and Colors), Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2005.

¹⁴ Interview with Lithuanian writer V. Bubnys, October 2007.

¹⁵ Vytautas Kubilius, *Dienoraščiai 1945-1977 (Diaries 1945-1977)*, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2006.

¹⁶ This regimentation was first made by identifying similar attributes, then by using interview methods evaluating "us" and "them" self-identification and observing participation in different social networks.

¹⁷ Vilius Ivanauskas, *Lithuanian Nomenclatura. Between Stagnation and Dynamics (1970-1988)*, Doctoral dissertation, Vilnius, 2008.

¹⁸ Maria Hirsowicz, *The Bureaucratic Leviathan. A Study in the Sociology of Communism*, Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1980, p. 208.

¹⁹ It was also based on the logic "to find a form".

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Sovietinių metų lietuvių kultūrinio elito samprata apie tautų klestėjimo projekciją

Reikšminiai žodžiai: sovietinis internacionalizmas, nacionalinė ideologija, modernizacija, kultūrinis elitas, biurokratinė praktika.

Santrauka

Nacionalinis klausimas visuomet buvo aktualus oficialiajame TSRS kultūros politikos kontekste. Skleidžiant internacionalizmo ir tautų draugystės idėjas, tautinis (ar nacionalinis) aspektas tapo neatsiejama partinės retorikos dalimi, nuolatos pabrėžiant didėjančias TSRS tautų galimybes. Ši projekcija pirmiausiai buvo susieta su tautų suartėjimo ir tautų klestėjimo vaizdiniais, parodant tiek TSRS gyvenančių tautų panašėjimą, tiek komunistinės santvarkos pranašumus tautos vystymuisi. Dauguma sovietinės modernizacijos projektų, socialinės ekonomikos sferos (socialinė apsauga, bedarbystė, švietimas ir pan.) vystymas oficialiojoje retorikoje pirmiausiai liudijo apie šią sovietinio progreso sėkmę. Sistema buvo pristatoma kaip ypač palanki kultūrinei sferai, tai liudijo parama įvairiems meno kolektyvams, didelis dėmesys menininkų sąjungoms ir jos narių veiklai, mokslo reikšmingumo išskėlimui. Vertinant tautiniu aspektu, sistema derėjo su liaudiniu patriotizmu, kuris kultūrinėje veikloje turėjo atitikti sovietinės indoktrinacijos tikslus, tačiau kurio pagrindu kai kurie kultūros veikėjai savo veikloje sukurdavo įvairesnes prasmes nei komunistinė ideologija skelbė.

Sovietinės kasdienybės požiūriu vertinant sovietinės Lietuvos kultūrininkų tinklus ir jų biurokratinę praktiką, galima pastebėti didėjančią paramą vietiniams interesams, kuri ne visada sutapo su centro Maskvoje tikslais ir padėjo mobilizuoti nacionalinį identitetą. Visa tai atskleidžia daugialypį „tautos klestėjimo“ vaizdinį sovietiniais metais. Net oficialiai pripažintiems kultūros veikėjams tai padėdavo plėtoti ne vien formalią paramą sovietinei politikai, tačiau per biurokratinį manevravimą ir neformalumą (pvz. ezopinė kalba) stiprinti paramą lietuviškumo palaikymo klausimams, juolab ši kryptis devintojo dešimtmečio antroje pusėje įgijo kylančio nacionalinio atgimimo simbolinę reikšmę.

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