



Weekly Briefing

Lithuania Social briefing:

Lithuania rediscovers and embraces its culture in a global context

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Lithuania rediscovers and embraces its culture in a global context

Culture has never been high on the agenda of the government until recently. The cultural events had played a historical role becoming the rallying points for the emergence of the popular movements in the 1980s which resulted in the restoration of independence in 1990. Yet during the transformation period that followed culture was largely perceived as the domain of a little political importance and, consequently, became an appendage rather than the centrepiece of national politics.

The low points of this development were reached when for a brief period (2008-2010) an actor famous for his theatrical and TV performances became the Minister of Culture only to be succeeded a few years later by an economist (with no relation to culture) who served in this post under the previous government. This only indicates how irrelevant culture was for politics.

The situation has dramatically changed after the new government was sworn on 13 December 2016. The leader of the governing party Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union Mr Ramūnas Karbauskis made an unprecedented step by choosing to become the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Culture rather than taking up any other position at the time when culture was seen as insignificant politically. The Committee for Culture was largely the prerogative of those who had either a track record or ambition of working as leaders of cultural policy institutions. Mr Karbauskis' political move to lead the Committee for Culture (which was occasioned by different political calculations) suddenly elevated the culture to the new status almost overnight.

This reflected also in the Cabinet. The Government appointed as the Minister of Culture a very skilful and highly networked official with a well-established track record of working as a cultural attaché abroad. Right from the start the new Minister initiated a number of reforms aimed to make culture important and relevant again. The ministerial oversight was strengthened as

concerning the governance of the public cultural institutions and in one instance ended in dismissing the high-profile director of the Lithuanian National Theatre of Ballet and Opera due to the allegations of corruption. The Ministry reshuffled the culture-funding body, increased transparency and organized funding and support from the government for cultural projects on the occasion of the Centennial Celebrations of Independence.

The following three trends could be identified against the backdrop of the ongoing cultural policies.

First, the use of the rising popularity of national culture by mainstream politics to rally the population around the governmental policies and reforms. Second, the use and the promotion of national culture by the government as a soft power in bilateral relations regionally and in Europe. Third, the use of national culture among the diaspora to create or indeed re-create a new identity of global Lithuania.

These developments are briefly analysed below.

The use of national culture in mainstream politics

The rising importance of culture in mainstream politics in Lithuania (and perhaps elsewhere in the region) has coincided with the demise of the traditional media. In Lithuania the print media exist only in a limited form usually in the regions (serving the needs of the local communities), while the role of the national broadsheets have been superseded by the news portals owned by the international media groups. The news portals are driven by the pay-per-click advertisement model and as such they provide only a limited direct channel for politicians trying to reach their electorate. The news are generated often indirectly (with support of media planners) which tailor and connect stories to the customers according to the advertisement needs of the sponsors looking for larger audiences. Since the country is small, sports and culture are becoming the domains where the events taking place on a wider scale could attract more pay-per-clicks. Hence, the renewed interest in communicating the political ideas via

sports or culture as the channels for masses. Therefore, the national culture, which has long been largely relegated to the domain of cultural heritage, has taken on a new life becoming the new source and the means for connecting the shared ideas about the nation with a wider audience.

The government has made a good use of communicating its policies through culture which is broadly understood as the social behavior and norms found in human societies. Several initiatives attest to that. The first one was the ban on alcohol sales after 8 pm during the weekdays and after 3 pm on Sundays, the increase of the legal drinking age until 20 years and the total ban on advertisement of alcohol and tobacco. This was motivated by the increased effort to introduce the new patterns of a more responsible behaviour while tackling a problem of excessive drinking in society. The second initiative was related to the campaign to introduce a national costume as a dress code suitable for official events by officials and at schools. Though the attempt to organize a mass production of national costumes backfired, the year of 2018 was declared the Year of the National Costume and the ministers of Culture and Education and Science indeed wore the national costumes during the Centennial celebrations, and contributed to the public acceptance of this norm. The third initiative which attempted to create new norms was related to the organization of the Song Festival as part of the Centennial celebrations and the introduction of the habit of singing the national anthem in public.

The Song Festival has been a tradition going back to 1924. It could be found also in Latvia and Estonia where such traditions go back in history even longer (the first such festival in Latvia took place as early as in 1873). Originally the song festivals were aimed to celebrate the Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian languages (which had been disallowed from the public and official use for long periods in history) and the ethnic culture which was used for the development of the national identities of the Baltic countries. During the Soviet period the song festivals not only survived but were even further developed – they were organized every 5 years. These festivals were seen by the authorities then as the

popular expression of the people's culture and helped indirectly to strengthen the ethnic identity of Lithuanians, while providing the platform for the Soviet government to use culture to mould society in its own image. The main requirement for these events was to organize them in the socialist spirit but in a national form. After the restoration of the independence these events have been further continued and were held once in 4 years. They did not change in form, only were renamed as the National Song Festivals with a focus on the patriotic and the national repertoire. However, only with the Centennial Song Festival the new impetus was found for the festival – to become a rallying ground for the cultural politics based on the following tenets: the freedom of the Lithuanian nation, the independence of the restored Republic of Lithuania, and the national unity of the people of Lithuania.

The promotion of national culture abroad

The promotion of national culture as supported by the government aims to answer the following aims: first, the promotion of culture aims to establish Lithuania as a state which supports the value-based diplomacy both regionally, in Europe, and globally, second, the national culture helps to open the doors for strengthening bilateral relations, third, cultural activities increase the value of the country origin of Lithuanian products and thus indirectly contribute to export promotion. The promotion of culture is organized by targeting the key cultural markets in Europe and elsewhere and by organizing the roadshows of Lithuanian culture at museums or other cultural institutions which have support at a governmental level of the given country and which could receive sufficient media coverage. The strengthening of relations through culture could be exemplified by the signing of the tripartite agreement between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (on 13 July) on establishing the cultural fund of the Baltic States which will be used to finance the cultural cooperation programmes of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and the commonly held international cultural events. The fund will sponsor projects in the areas of architecture, visual arts, design,

literature, music, theatrics, libraries, museums and archives. The Baltic Cultural Fund will be managed in turn by the Cultural Endowment of Estonia (Eesti Kultuurikapital), the Latvian State Culture Capital Foundation (Valsts kulturkapitāla fonds) and the Lithuanian Council for Culture (Lietuvos kultūros taryba) for the period of three years each.

“If we are working together, we are learning from each other, sharing good practice, strengthening the Baltic region, common field of culture and art. We are more visible together on the world's cultural map and we have more opportunities to develop and induce our national culture and art. These agreements will help to reinforce the partnerships of cultural organizations even more,” said Ruokytė-Jonsson, thus emphasizing a new role of culture in regional cooperation and globally.

In addition to that, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are planning to coordinate the Song Festivals through the joint committee formed from the members of the organizing bodies of Song Festivals, the officials from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, and the national UNESCO commission of the respective countries. On the occasion of signing of the agreement, Minister of Culture of the Republic Lithuania Liajan Ruokytė-Jonsson was quoted in media by saying that: “Traditions of festivals of dances and songs and their symbols are exceptionally important not only in our countries – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. They are part of world cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO. Therefore, we have to strengthen partnership in this area, to preserve and present the cultural riches of our nations to the international community”.

In addition to the Ministry of Culture, the promotion of Lithuanian culture as a place brand name has been largely carried by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Embassies were given the task to organize the public events in the countries of their residence, to facilitate the involvement of officials and to increase the country's visibility. This brief has been accomplished by diplomats with a great success.

The programme of Global Lithuania

The programme of Global Lithuania was conceived and started under the previous government (in 2012) but was given a new impetus under the new government in the preparations for the Centennial celebrations in 2018. Altogether 14 governmental institutions (ministries and agencies) have been given the task to implement the programme. Initially the programme had two aims: first, to strengthen the relations with professionals (Lithuanian nationals) working abroad who are recognized and who could contribute to the wellbeing of Lithuanian society with some specific projects related to public governance, and, second, to strengthen the Lithuanian diasporas abroad in order to support the realization of the projects important to the state (e.g. the maintenance of Lithuanian heritage, language and culture).

With the arrival of the new government which made culture an important vehicle for communicating their values, the initial idea of global Lithuania has transformed into the idea of bringing together the dispersed nation under the idea of globally united nationhood. This has been realised through two types of activities. First, the local municipalities have been encouraged and have come up with the ideas to organize the meetings of local people with the Lithuanians abroad who originated from those communities – to this end the local gatherings of compatriots were organized in different localities across Lithuania. Second, the government organized a mass singing of the national anthem on the eve of 6 July celebrated as Statehood Day inviting all Lithuanians around the world to sing the anthem at 9 pm Lithuanian time on that day. The singing was organized by involving and connecting real-time the diaspora communities from around the world with the audiences at home during the Song Festival ceremony in Vilnius which was broadcasted by the national television and also on a global Lithuanian TV channel. 100 spots related to the archaeological sites from the historic pre-statehood period have been identified and used to gather people to sing the national anthem on that occasion. The impetus was such that even the football commentary of the World Football Championship game which was

broadcasted on the second national TV channel at that time was interrupted for a few minutes to allow the viewers to tune in on the national TV channel and sing the national anthem along with the nation.

These mass-staged activities have galvanized the nation; society has clearly embraced the redefined national culture as a shared set of values and attributes which underpin the modern nationhood. But, more importantly, it helped to create a new understanding of the national identity by uniquely borrowing insights from globalization. Since the European integration has made it impossible to create the Lithuanian identity in opposition to some other country in Europe (as it used to be the case in the past), the only way to further foster the national identity is through creating a global Lithuanian identity as a mixture of the global and the local. While the new cultural programme might resemble a localized version of the ethnically-based culture, yet at its core its message is unmistakably global.