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THE FORMATION
OF THE POLITICAL ELITE
IN LITHUANIA AT
THE TURN OF THE
1980s—1990s: THE ROLE
OF “MORAL POLITICIANS”

V. A. Smirnov*



This article considers the trend of structural changes in the political elite of the Republic of Lithuania in the post-Soviet period through analyzing the role of the so-called “moral politicians” — intellectuals, artists, and cultural figures, who played a decisive role in the period of the communist system disintegration and further development of the country’s policy.

The role of the political elite, which is understood according to R. Putnam and J. Higgley’s definition, is considered in the conditions of political instability and uncertainty typical of transformation processes. In this context, the role of key actors is interpreted on the basis of the methodological structure of the so-called Stanford model developed by G. Almond and P. Bourdieu’s theory of capital.

This article reconstructs the course of political changes in the Republic of Lithuania at the initial stage of its independence, in the framework of which the key role was played by «moral politicians», most of whom subsequently retired from politics.

Focusing on the situation in Lithuania, this research sets out to show the continuous dependence of today’s policies of the Baltic States on the key choices made by the authorities at the turn of 1980s—1990s.

Today, Russian political science lacks concrete regional studies into the issues of changes of elites in the context of research on the processes of postcommunist transformations. This work addresses the scientific interpretation of the content of mechanisms of «new» political elite development in postcommunist societies under the influence of endogenous and exogenous factors in the course of transformation. The stabilisation of elite formation processes in Lithuania, the assessment of patterns and trends, the identification of power centres and the character of intra-elite interaction, and a profound understanding of the functioning of Lithuanian political system in general will allow Russia to formulate a more efficient policy towards the Baltic States, which would promptly respond to emerging challenges.

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When analysing the political transformation in the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) following the collapse of the communist bloc as a provisional, instable political process and a transition of the system from one state into another, it is important to emphasize the role of political elite¹, which acts as a key agent of changes. The importance of the role played by the political elite in the transitional political processes can be explained by the distortion of the institutional process of development [4]. In the times of stability, the political process rests on institutions; however, in the periods of radical changes, the representatives of political elite, whose decisions and actions affect to a significant degree the achievement of political stability, come to the foreground. Vilfredo Pareto, one of the founders of the classical theory of elites wrote about the social equilibrium, which is to be achieved through a struggle inside the political elite (the circulation of “lions” and “foxes”), which he believed to be a driving force and an agent of the political process [16].

A society transforming from one state into another and evolving into what Karl Popper called “open society” inevitably acquires one of its main characteristics — it is an open and not a closed society, where a large number of its members can climb the social ladder and occupy higher hierarchical positions [30, p. 218]. The political elite *per se* is an open system. Potentially, any person, regardless of his/her education, occupation, and property status, (in crisis periods, even representatives of the fringes of the society) has an opportunity to join the political elite [24]. The doors of the elite open widely to let “fresh blood” in during regime changes and development crises characterized by dynamic political changes. This period is relatively short, and as soon as the regime stabilizes, the elite tries to “close the doors” again [26, p. 92]. While Karl Popper conceived the history of humanity as the history of political power interpreted from the perspective of a struggle for the open society [31, p. 320], for Vilfredo Pareto, history is a “graveyard of elites”, the finale of the struggle between groups vying for power [17].

This struggle was a serious test for “moral politicians”. The Hungarian researcher, Attila Ágh [1], and later the Polish scholar, Jacek Wasilewski [23], called the representatives of creative and academic circles one of the key actors of post-communist transformations at the initial stage of transition. It is the period of regaining independence, when the foundation for further development was provided and institutional choices were made.

An effective analysis of a politically unstable political system can be conducted with the use of the research model of development crisis proposed in the framework of the so called Stanford project by a group of scholars from the namesake university lead by G. Almond [2]. The model based on

¹ Political elite is interpreted here in accordance with the definition given by R. Putnam, J. Higley, O.V. Gaman-Golutvina, i.e. it consists of those holding strategic positions within institutions and movements of power capable of exerting regular and significant influence on national political results and possessing the necessary resource potential.

juxtaposing the periods of stable development and periods of system development crises, offers different theoretical and methodological approaches to research, and shows a greater heuristic potential for understanding political transformations and the role of agents in this process than, for example, D. Easton's model designed to describe a stable system [6]. In the framework of the "Stanford" four-phase model of a development crisis, the processes of political transformations in CEE can be presented as stages of transition from the system synchronization through desynchronizing to resynchronization, where the state of synchronization suggests a correspondence between the structures and the functions of the system. At the same time, in the period of dynamic changes, at the crossroads of internal and external impacts, the political elite served as a key actor — an agent of demand mobilization.

The Russian political philosopher, B. Kapustin, suggests considering politics in two ways — as small and big politics. In his opinion, small politics means maintaining the *status quo*, it does not require extraordinary efforts, the only thing required is to keep the system functioning. Big politics, in its turn, does not reproduce the existing order, but generates a new one, creating "new rules for a new game", "new beginnings" [25, p. 354]. The transformation experienced by the Lithuanian society in the transition period can be classed under "big politics".

According to Verena Fritz, who analysed the transformation processes in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Lithuania after the collapse of the communist bloc, the common starting point for ensuing transformations was the institutional erosion. Since the late 1980s, old limitations, rules, and institutions had been weakened, and new ones had not emerged yet. Such weakening of institutions strongly affected the redistribution of power among groups within the society. In Lithuania, in the process of transformation and state building, the new elite groups evolved from the national opposition [7, p. 321]. The British researcher, A. Lieven identifies three segments of this national opposition: the members of communist ex-nomenklatura, highly qualified engineers, cultural figures and experts in humanities [9, p. 225]. At the same time, one cannot ignore the role of representatives of the US Lithuanian diaspora. However, in this article, I will focus only on one segment of the political elite — the so called "moral politicians".

It is worth noting that, in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, it was "experts in humanities" who came to the foreground in the late 1980s — early 1990s. So, In Latvia, the initiative to create the Popular Front came from the chairperson of the Latvian Writer's Union, Jānis Peters, other activists included professors of the University of Latvia, journalists (Dainis Īvāns and others), etc. One of the leaders of the Popular Front of Estonia was a literature critic Rein Veidemann; activists included a theatre critic, Paul Allik, a sociologist Klara Hallik, and others. As to Poland, at the turn of the 1980s, experts in humanities played an important role in the negotiations of the so called „round table”; one of the most vivid examples is an outstanding public figure, a journalist Adam Michnik, who was active in political oppo-

sition. All in all, in CEE countries, the rise of „humanists” to power is one of the most distinctive features of the political transformation after the collapse of the communist bloc. In Hungary, a playwright and a literary translator, Árpád Göncz, was elected president; in the Czech Republic, it was a playwright, a writer, and a dissident Václav Havel; in Bulgaria, a philosopher Zh. Zhelev, etc.²

The „moral politicians” made a significant contribution to laying the foundation of a new political order. But, in most cases, they could not stay in power. The Lithuanian researcher, Marius Povilas Šaulauskas, claiming that it was the representatives of the former Soviet intelligentsia that — to a great degree — initiated and became the driving force of the first stages of transformations, emphasizes that they suffered most damage being forced to leave the leading political position. “It seems that the post-communist revolution took place not because it was good for those behind it, but it was initiated for the sake of creative joy and even corresponding aesthetic pleasure”, Šaulauskas writes [20, p. 93], proposing the “humanities-driven” understanding of Douglass North’s idea, according to which institutions are not always established to the effect of the social efficiency, but to serve the interests of those who hold positions entitling to formulating new rules [29, p. 33].

In Lithuania, mid — 1988 saw the emergence of Sajūdis³ — a mass union of citizens, which turned later into an important source of political elite recruitment in the post-Soviet Lithuania. Alongside ex-communists, the core of Sajūdis was composed of representatives of Lithuanian academic and artistic circles, the so called “moral politicians”, namely, philosophers Arvydas Juozaitis, Romualdas Ozolas, Vytautas Petkevičius, Bronius Genzelis, a historian Meilė Lukšienė, poets Sigitas Geda and Justinas Marcinkevičius, an actor Regimantas Adomaitis, a director Arūnas Žebriūnas, a musicologist Vytautas Landsbergis, journalists Algimantas Čekuolis and Ina Marčiulionytė, an author and a translator Virgilijus Čepaitis, a musician Algirdas Kaušpėdas, an architect Algimantas Nasvytis, and others.

In the conditions, when uncertainty became the basic feature of the political system, and the old institutions and actors lost their influence or were bereft of it (it relates, first of all, to the representatives of the communist nomenklatura), it was the humanists, intellectuals — formerly in opposition to the established order — who were “called” to the pinnacle of power in the period of extremely intensive changes, which affected all spheres of social

² On the earlier interaction between intellectuals and authorities in CEE see, for example: *Szelenyi I., Konrad G.* The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power. New York, 1979. P. 252 ; *Селеньи И.* Интеллигенция и власть: опыт Восточной Европы 1960—1980-е гг. // Рубеж. 1995. №6—7. С. 198—224 (Szelenyi, I. 1995, *Intelligencija i vlast': opyt Vostochnoj Evropy 1960—1980-e* [Intellectuals and power: the experience of Eastern Europe 1960—1980-s.], *Rubezh* [Frontier], no. 6—7, p. 198—224.)

³ At first, it was called the Reform Movement of Lithuania. *Sajudis* means “movement” in Lithuanian.

life. “Moral politicians”, if we apply “Stanford” terminology, acted not only as agents of demand mobilisation, but as “crisis accelerators”, who brought mass sentiments to life⁴.

At first, Sajūdis was dominated by Vilnius residents, the metropolitan humanities elite, which was quite “cosmopolitan” and had important connections both within the party nomenklatura and in the West. Its members enjoyed a high social status and did not consider Sajūdis a career lift. But gradually, residents of Kaunas — predominantly engineers, for whom Sajūdis was not only an instrument of implementing political ideas, but also a means to get to the top of a career ladder — started to play an increasingly important role in the movement. The Kaunas residents are more radical and orientated towards old, pre-Soviet Lithuania, rather than the West [32, p. 53].

This division between the two capitals — Vilnius and Kaunas — is integral to Lithuania. Most influential Lithuanians were born in either Vilnius or Kaunas; the cities are home to the main national academic centres competing for intellectual leadership — Kaunas and Vilnius Universities.

The leaders of the Lithuanian post-communist transformation are not professional politicians, but rather critically thinking members of the intellectual elite (poets, philosophers, musicians, actors, etc.) [20, p. 81]. Algis Krupavičius calls them “alternative elite”, composed of the representatives of local educated classes looking for new career opportunities and orientated towards patriotic values [8].

The first free elections to the Supreme council of 1990 resulted in a landslide victory of Sajūdis. Sajūdis membership is a common line in CVs of many of those who joined new Lithuanian political elite not only in the first years of independence, but also later. One of them is Vytautas Landsbergis, who might be called the most vivid example of a Lithuanian “moral politician” — Kaunas-born, a former teacher at Vilnius Conservatory, never a member of the Communist Party, a pianist, music scholar, professor, the author of several books on Lithuanian composers, the chairperson of the Supreme Council of Lithuania in 1990—1992, the speaker of the Seimas in 1996—2000, one of the founders and a long-standing leader of the Homeland Union party, a member of the European Parliament.

According to Alfred Senn, through his rhetorical style, Landsbergis created the image of a “philosopher king”, a lonely figure fighting for the implementation of the will of people [21, p. 310]. A. Lieven writes that there is no doubt that Prof. Landsbergis saw himself as a political successor to Antanas Smetona⁵. He mentioned Smetona with admiration in his speeches and partially borrowed his symbols. Landsbergis was not interested in administrative, financial, and legislative issues, preferring visits abroad, symbols, and Lithuanian culture, which he loved deeply [9, p. 68].

⁴ In the case of the Baltics, a good example of such mass sentiments is the so called “Baltic way”: during protests against the actions taken by the USSR leadership, almost 2 ml of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian residents joined hands and formed a “live chain” of a length of almost 600 km.

⁵ Antanas Smetona was a Lithuanian political figure, who established an authoritative regime in the country as a result of a coup; in 1940, he fled to Germany.

Having achieved their main political goal, the leaders of the period of early independence, the period of “big politics” were not ready to solve the problems of the peacetime — building of a new state. Most of them held a degree in humanities, they did not have any administrative experience, and were interested in the issues of state building and economic management much less than in those of culture, symbols and historical past [35, p. 90].

In this sense, it is constant references to the past in search of a new foundation for formulating a post-Soviet political agenda that can explain Landsbergis’s attempt to create a strong institution of presidency (at the expense of development of parliamentarianism and a multi-party system) with an intention to occupy this position himself and turn Sajūdis into his support base — a “messianic party of national interest” [15]. The attempt failed, followed by a schism of Lithuanian “moral politicians”, who were earlier united by the idea of independent Lithuania. Intellectuals did not act unanimously as before; the National future forum was established (K. Prunskienė and A. Juozaitis are among its members) to fight against the threat of Landsbergis’s dictatorship.

In the context of referring to the past in search of foundations for new political agenda, one cannot but mention D. Lerner’s idea of the social mobilisation (it was used in the framework of Stanford project), which, as I. Okunev cleverly put it, “creates modernity by not exactly modern means” [30, p. 137]. For those, who led the Lithuanian “moral politicians”, the past, the old pre-Soviet public practices, the then rules of the game seemed to be a desirable future, the goal they tried to reach despite internal and external complications. And sometimes, in their attempts to reform the modernity using the template of the past, they acted too radically and ignored the key for any politician quality — the propensity to a compromise. As a result, in the course of the ensuing institutionalisation of Lithuanian political life and the formation of a coalition of “moral politicians”, who became the voice of the Singing Revolution at the dawn of independence and in its first years, they rapidly lost their positions and were forced to the fringe of political life. As A. Samalavicius believes, they should partially blame themselves for losing the competition for the right to control power levers: “While the society’s priorities were rapidly changing, they still continued to talk in the outdated language of the “Singing Revolution”. Besides, they did not feel that the society’s values had changed when Lithuania encountered economic difficulties (particularly when Moscow began an economic blockade) — individualism, pragmatism and striving for personal gain had begun to thrive and the bonds of social solidarity to crumble. Intellectuals returned to their professional and academic milieu, alienated themselves from civil initiatives and sometimes openly loathed political activity.” [19, p. 3]. The famous Lithuanian sociologist, Vladas Gaidys identifies another reason for humanists-intellectuals having gradually lost their former standing. He believes that, in the post-Soviet Lithuania, they lost their chief weapon — the right to have their own opinion, for, in the new conditions; it was available for everyone [5, p. 139].

In 1992, Sajūdis lost parliamentary elections; in 1993 it ceased to exist as a unified political force giving rise to other movements and becoming the “backbone” of the ruling party of Lithuanian conservatives (Homeland Union). A more valuable resource for the recruitment of political elite in the changing conditions of the 1990s was the administrative skills integral to Lithuanian ex-nomenklatura. Ex-communists, being experienced in political games and familiar with the public administration mechanisms, replaced politically untried non-professionals from Sajūdis [11, p. 31]. “Moral politicians” found themselves well away from the centre of political activities.

The ex-first secretary of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, Algirdas Brazauskas, who, until his demise, was considered the chief opponent of Landsbergis, was elected president. The role of ex-communists in new Lithuania is so significant, that the Lithuanian elite can be called bipolar, divided into two opposing camps — the alliance of Brazauskas (left-wing elites) and the alliance of Landsbergis (right-wing elites) [5, p. 124].

Brazauskas and Landsbergis are traditionally considered in opposition; the former is believed to be a typical pragmatist and realist, the latter is an idealist and, to a great degree, a romantic. As R. Lopata shows in his study, in terms of their approaches to Lithuanian history and politics it is not quite so: “President” A. Brazauskas is a romantic, whereas “Professor” Landsbergis, despite the feeling of personal involvement in the history of Lithuania (through the “genetic past”)⁶, is a technocrat and a calculating geopolitical player [10, p. 139—142].

In this context, it is useful to invoke Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital conversion [3], which makes it possible to state that, during the transformation period, Landsbergis and Brazauskas managed to convert their social capital into political one. Brazauskas managed to stay on top among the elite thanks to his high proficiency, wide experience in political work and public administration, and good connections made over the years of the party involvement. Landsbergis’s political “equipment” rested on symbolic capital: 1) an appeal to the pre-war history of Lithuania and the use of nationalistic argumentation; 2) the formation of a foundation for prospective political programme of Lithuania in the context of the “return to the West”; 3) the perception of Russia as a potential (also military) threat and the application of Russophobic rhetoric.

It is the age of “moral politicians”, when the outlines of the future constitutional order of new Lithuania were drawn and the foundations for further relations with Russia were laid. According to clause 1 of the Constitutional Act of Non-alignment of the Republic of Lithuania to Post-Soviet Eastern Alliances of February 11, 1991, which preceded the Constitution of Lithuania of June 8, 1992, the former Lithuanian SSR “aspires to develop mutually beneficial connections with all states that earlier constituted the USSR, but will never and under no circumstances accede to any political, military, eco-

⁶ During the war, V. Landsbergis’s father was a member the Provisional Government of Lithuania and emigrated after the war.

conomic or other alliances or commonwealths established on the basis of the former USSR” [32]. The body of legislative acts, which has formed over the past 20 years, and numerous cases from modern political reality offer other examples of similar attitude towards cooperation with Russia. Such an approach is also characteristic of the other Baltic countries, which is corroborated (in line with K. Waltz’s idea of weak countries gravitating to stronger ones, for instance, for defence purposes [22]) by official documents⁷.

Gradually, the post-communist political elite (which is most pronounced in the parliamentary segment) became dominated by people holding degrees in technology [13, p. 56]. The analysis of the occupational structure of the members of the Lithuanian Seimas conducted by an influential researcher of elites, Irmina Matonyte, shows a marked tendency — a significant (almost threefold) decrease in the number of academicians and artists. While in 1990, university teachers and professors accounted for 33.1 % and journalists and writers for 10.5 % of the members of parliament, in 2004, their weight reduced to 12.1 and 2.1 % respectively. This process was accompanied by a considerable increase in the number of officials and businesspeople: they accounted for 7.5 and 12.8 % respectively in 1990 and 27 and 38.3 % in 2004 [12, p. 125].

A similar trend is registered by the Estonian researcher, Vello Pettai, who, having analysed the occupational structure of aspirant members of the Seimas of Lithuania in 1992, 1996, and 2000, came to a conclusion that whereas, at the initial stage of Lithuanian independence, the political elite was most accessible for “humanists”, in a decade, most successful candidates are CEOs and bureaucrats [18, p. 19].

These changes observed in the process of political transformation in Lithuania are characteristic not only of the Baltics but also of a number of other CEE countries. According to the German researcher, M. Edinger, whereas earlier one of five members of parliament worked in the field of education, in the late 1990s, this ratio decreased to one of ten. Teachers and professors gave way to people involved in political decision-making in their professional life. Parliaments of CEE countries boast a significant number of business people and CEOs. In 15—20 years, after the regime change, they became the largest occupational group. Erdinger comes to the following conclusion: there are two major trends characteristic of CEE political elites — social impermeability and professionalism [36, p. 19].

The elite of the transition period overthrew the old regime, which it conceived as its main objective, and served as an agent of mobilising the then key demand — the dismantling of the communist regime. As the situation stabilised and a social equilibrium was achieved, the “input” demands of the political system changed, but “moral politicians” continued to offer the same decision “output”. In this sense, the case of “moral politicians” can illustrate the four-stage Stanford model of development crises, according to which

⁷ See, for example, Latvia’s foreign policy guidelines (2006—2010) [27], and the National Security Concept adopted by the Riigikogu (Parliament of Estonia) in May 2010 [14].

each stage has a set of certain components integral to it. Demand mobilisation agents and crisis accelerators belong to the stage of changes in the environment and system functioning. Later, there emerges a need for those, who must fight for preservation, strengthening, and the development of new rules of the game in the framework of forming coalitions, formulating political agendas, and redistributing resources. However, the ideas that later became the cornerstone of the modern political system of Lithuania and the other Baltic countries were proposed by the elite of the late 1980s — early 1990s. The issues of the attitude to the Soviet period of Lithuanian history, to the sensitive topic of “occupation”, and to Russia in general, which were brought to light by the “moral politicians”, are still among most acute and dividing in the Lithuanian society. Can one maintain that this line of argumentation, which handles Russia as an “irritant” [34] and was also formulated more than 20 years ago, will remain a priority both in internal political interactions and the sphere of international relations for most representatives of the Lithuanian political elite? The logic of the economic cooperation between Russia and the Baltics evidently guides the political elites towards more pragmatic bilateral relations [27]. At the same time, a number of actions taken by the Lithuanian leadership (a refusal to participate in the construction of the Baltic Nuclear Power Plant in the Kaliningrad region, an attempt to block negotiations on Russia-EU relations in 2007) corroborates the hypothesis that, although most “moral politicians” have left the political stage, their contribution into the formation of the policy of the Baltic states should not be ignored. In this case, using B. Kapustin’s terminology, one can say that the initiatives undertaken by the elites in the period of “big politics” do affect the “small politics” of today.

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