

Searching for Europe that does not exist

Lithuania, the gates of dawn

People and culture with very ancient roots. Lithuanians were the last Europeans to be converted to Christianity, and the first to rebel against the Soviet Union. But the Catholic faith and national pride are not enough today to curb the emigration, due to endemic poverty. Journey into Lithuanian mystery, suspended between hope and distrust

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In Vilnius there is a road that leads to the "Gates of Dawn". It is an ancient cobbled rise, surrounded by the magic of the old town, which is quiet, discreet, it climbs the hills, where the three crosses of the Franciscan martyrs stand over, and it overlooks the placid waters of Neris. The river includes the old city and protects it from the arrogance of modernity, either the melancholic one of the old (Soviet) power or the new one, of shopping centers, which siege it from the periphery.

No, no one will destroy the unique beauty of Vilnius, which is already World Heritage Site and in 2009 it will be European Capital of Culture. The "Gates of Dawn" are there to remind it, *Ausros Vartai*, in the fascinating Lithuanian, that is said it is the closest continental language to Sanskrit, to the Indo-European roots. An arch that looks at the south (even if you assume that the "gates of dawn" are pointing to the east), supervised by the Virgin Mary, a "Black Madonna" to which Lithuanians, mostly Catholics, have always made their vows. An open door, not a wall. Because Vilnius, the urban pearl surrounded by a wilderness of forest and countryside where they live as a half-century ago, owes its ancient beauty to the spirit of hospitality.

It is the fate of the limit-city. For some geographers, strange to say, Vilnius is the exact center of Europe that goes from the Atlantic to the Urals, and from the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean. On these hills the north and the east of barbarians and pagans joined the south and the west of civilized Christians by Rome: king Mindaugas in the thirteenth century was converted and built the cathedral, which closes with a beautiful view the main avenue of the city, Gedimino.

Lithuanians, however, stayed mostly pagan until the heyday century, 1400: Lithuania in this period extends its borders from the Baltic to the Black Sea, Vilnius became a flourishing commercial center and strikes ties with Italy on the Via Baltica, which connects the capital of Lithuania to Venice. The Catholic King Vytautas opens his doors to Jews of all over the continent, ensuring them security and prosperity: Vilnius becomes the "Jerusalem of the North", with 105 synagogues, a great Talmudic school, and the presence of the greatest interpreter of the Bible, the Gaon. This is the historical image of Lithuania: an ancient and proud nation, deeply Catholic, able to accommodate other ethnic groups and religions. Today, however, Lithuanian identity is weak, disoriented, sometimes exposed to the sirens of nationalism and revisionism, "tempted to erase the memory of too strenuous cohabitation" says Gad Lerner in an extremely severe (and perhaps even a little paranoid) report about Baltic country.

The modern history of Lithuania is a string of continuous abuses, with some victims who sometimes help the executioners, for frustration, or for convenience.

Crushed within the struggle between Sweden, Poland and Russia for supremacy in the region, in 1795 Lithuania succumbs Tsarist Empire, which seeks at all costs an access to the sea. Lithuanian has to disappear, the Emperor of Moscow orders, just as in Europe the irredentism of succubus peoples (like Italians, Greeks, Hungarians) rises. A Lithuanian patriot is in charge to secretly press, in German Koenigsberg (now Kaliningrad), thousands of precious books in the Indo-European language, written with Latin characters forbidden by the Czar in order to impose the Cyrillic alphabet (and Orthodox religion). Lithuanian culture survives everything, like the Catholic faith and indomitable spirit of the people. The rebellion is smouldering under the ashes, and the first historic occasion, with the Great War, Lithuania gets independence (1918), wedged between Russia and Germany, like the other Baltic countries.

The main protagonist of Lithuania independence and the history between the two wars is Antanas Smetona, leader of the independence movement, and future dictator of the country. Smetona was a restless young man, who had renounced the ecclesiastical training to become the first member of the student anti-Czarist movement, then Lithuanian nationalist newspaper journalist, always hovering between exile and jail.

Smetona becomes the first president of independent Lithuania. The new state, accustomed to defend itself against Russia and Germany, is able to come to terms with Lenin, who recognized its independence, but it must suffer the attack of Poland led with an iron fist by General Pilsudski. Poles occupy Vilnius and throughout the southern part of the country (1920). The capital moved to Kaunas, where they install the first democratic Parliament, destined to be short-lived: in 1926 Smetona, leader of the nationalist right, carries out a coup, and within a couple of years perfects his own regime.

In Vilnius, then, Poles rule, after Russians and Germans went away. This waltz of domination will be more gruesome, and will push a part of Lithuanians first in the arms of the Soviets, then in those of the Nazis. The most tragic fate, however, strikes Lithuanian Jews. Very advanced culturally, clearly predominant in the professions, Jews of Vilnius have anticipated the Zionist movement for the return to Israel, they are largely oriented to the left and anyway worried by the rise of Nazism in Germany .

When in 1940 Stalin's troops arrive, according to the partition agreement with Hitler (Ribbentrop-Molotov pact), many Jews enter the new Bolshevik leadership, working to the deportation of nearly all Lithuanian elite to Siberia. This fact creates yet another anti-Semitic tale, which, unfortunately, you can still hear its echoes, which wants Jews the architects of communism (in the same way, someone charged the children of Abraham with all the faults of capitalism).

The reality is completely different: the horrors of Stalin affects Jews as well as other Lithuanians and more, in proportion. In contrast, there are not few "real" Lithuanians that welcome the advent of communism, for conviction or opportunism, so that the president Smetona, who wanted to oppose Soviets, is isolated, and therefore chooses to go into exile to United States, where he died a few years later in a fire.

While Lithuania lives Stalinist purges, in Berlin the anti-Soviet resistance is organized in the former Lithuanian embassy. With the support of the Nazis, Lithuanian activists create a vast anti-Semitic and anti-communist propaganda, stubbornly preparing the ground for what will be the largest massacre of Jews in Europe.

When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, the German army arrived in Lithuania, a bloodbath is caused. Lithuanians, in many cases, anticipate Gestapo itself and often they surpass it in ferocity for the physical elimination of Jews. In just five months, from July to December 1941, over 160 thousand people are murdered, equal to eighty percent of the Jewish population: in Lithuania the "final solution" was carried out immediately, even before its official approval by Hitler's regime .

At the end of the war, the Baltic country has a dismal record: the highest percentage of exterminated Jews, 95 percent of the original population.

It is contradictory to note today, and here Gad Lerner is right, that the "Genocide Museum" in Vilnius, is not about Jews, Holocaust victims, but Lithuanians deported en masse by Stalin, before and after the war between Soviet Union and Germany.

A human river of more than 300 thousand people, mostly made up of women and children, who were scattered in the gulag, sent to die of cold, hunger and slavery in Siberia or the Arctic Circle, locked in jail and tortured to death. "It is as if, in proportion, the U.S. had lost 20 million people", write the historians Kuodyte and Tracevskis. And they add: "No leader of the Communist Party paid for his crimes. No commander of an extermination camp has had to paid for his inhumanity. They do not even talk about reparations. The crimes of Soviet Communism are mostly mentioned only in the hearts and souls of the victims".

The latter statement is only partly true, because while the memory of the Holocaust here has been confined in an almost hidden small town along the road bordering in the old ghetto, the Genocide Museum is downtown, in the great building that was headquarter as of Gestapo as KGB.

Rachel Kostanian, director of the tiny museum of the Holocaust, called it "separation of memory". Rachel was a child when her father sent her family in the USSR to save it from the massacre: "I never knew much of the Holocaust. Stalin had erased the memory, because specific Jewish question does not have to exist, but only a terrible war won by the Soviet Union against Nazism". Only with the "glasnost" built by Gorbachev in the eighties, remembers Rachel, they began to speak of a complete extermination of Jews. It is just thanks to Gorbachev openings in the field of expression freedom that Lithuanian independence movement, never fully tamed, raised its head after years of harassment.

Lithuania is the only Soviet republic in which there was a strong armed resistance against Moscow power after the end of World War II, even up to 1953, the year Stalin died. Lithuanian partisans, called "Forest Brothers", with their guerrilla war (virtually unknown in the West) in fact discouraged Russian immigration policy that instead twisted Estonia and Latvia physiognomy. The fact is that Lithuania did not raise the issue of coexistence with Russian-speaking minority that characterized the other two Baltic republics.

But not only the largest ethnic homogeneity (Lithuanians of Russian origin are only eight per cent of the population, just over the component of Polish origin) to distinguish the path of Lithuania independence.

Anti-Soviet opposition in this country has always been somehow linked to the Catholic Church (virtually absent in Estonia and Latvia), which worked as a pole of attraction of dissent, so that the first democratic achievements focused on freedom of worship and the re-appropriation of the main churches, starting from the cathedral. This is one of the two factors that made the independence transition less controversial, and accelerated it (Lithuania anticipated more than a year the departure from Moscow, it took place on March 11, 1990). The other factor is related to the attitude of the Communist Party led by Algirdas Brazauskas.

Lithuanian Communists did not wait for Yeltsin's victory on the coup leaders who wanted to restore the Soviet regime in August 1991, to embrace the cause of independence and democracy: they had already made a crucial turning point two years before.

Thus, as the protagonists of the transition to independence were the "Sajudis" movement members with their leader Landsbergis, in the first elections the Communist Party heirs (now called "Democratic Labour Party", and then become simply "social-democrats") won a large majority, and their leader Brazauskas won the presidential election of 1993. To determine the victory of former Communists, was probably the harsh impact of Lithuanian society with market economy, the difficulty for a still rural country to accept the turning of "modernity". One difficulty that you find today, fifteen years after the first elections, and it is absolutely understandable.

First, politics gave, anyway, a disappointing answer to the population.

The attempts made by Lithuanians was significant, in terms of mobility of the vote. Suffice to say that in the second election, in 1996, the ex-Communists were swept away (73 to 13 seats), and voters opted decisively for Landsbergis' right (16 to 70 seats).

They chose Adamkus in 1998 presidential elections, a manager that had always lived in the U.S.. But the four years marked by liberalism and a massive pro-Western policy did not solve any of the problems of the new country, from the widespread corruption of the ruling class to the poverty of much of the population, from the abandonment of the countryside, which had suffered the dismantling of "kolkhoz" (Soviet era collective farms, for better or worse they were the only working facilities) to the increasing youth unemployment.

So, in the 2000 election, another reversal: the conservatives in government are punished (from 70 to 9 seats), and the ex-Communists of the old fox Brazauskas win again, who was thought already finished, with a coalition with some center parties. Left, right, center: Lithuanians try them all, systematically rejecting the ruling parties and rewarding every time the opposition. But the frustration remains, and it is reflected in the low turnout in elections (just over 50 per cent). "There's a whole generation, the thirty-forty years old, who rejected politics, focusing on the work, the economy", says Andrei Baranovsky, 38, a teacher at the Institute of Italian culture. For this reason many members of the old Lithuanian leadership are still in power, unlike Latvia and Estonia,

where new generations are already forcefully coming to the political scene. "I would not be too severe even with the old Soviet era politicians - Andrei continues, with the typical disenchantment of his generation - in many cases they were the only ones who have the necessary preparation for politics, and corruption is a general problem, which concerns even those who have never been communists".

The ex-Communists brought Lithuania into European Union and NATO. The consensus about European integration, however, is almost unanimous. But the country is unable to leap forward, so that Lithuanian population continues to decrease in numbers: the emigration of young people, especially to England, Ireland and the United States, remains massive.

Disappointed by everything and everyone, Lithuanians, in the last election (2004), are enchanted by the promise of a Russian-born businessman Viktor Uspaskikh, with a dubious past. His "Labour Party" (there is not a lot of political fantasy here), appeared from nowhere, wins a relative majority, but can not govern alone and it is forced to ally with the outgoing center-left wing. Uspaskikh gets the ministry of the economy, even if someone cries conflict of interest for the various entrepreneur activities. The parable of Lithuanian Berlusconi is short, involved in a scandal of corruption and embezzlement, the impertinent businessman flees to Russia, causing a mini-crisis that sees the handover between the old Brazauskas, who finally leave the scene, and his dolphin Kirkilas, the current Prime Minister.

Last years of Lithuanian politics was poisoned mainly by revelations about the lists of former employees of KGB, just as it is happening, in an almost grotesque way, in Poland. Once again, the past does not seem to pass. For some, the so-called *lustracija* (the opening of all archives resulting in the "cleaning up") is a historical necessity; for others (especially young people) is basically a power game that people do not care about.

The problems of Lithuanians are more severe than determining if someone twenty years ago actually collaborated with the Soviet secret service KGB, or was only recorded without playing an active role.

On the other hand, create a feeling of optimism in Lithuanian society is a titanic job.

Also the Catholic Church noticed it, it cherished the hope that it had intercepted a "boom" of the Roman faith, which was to infect even Russia, the Vatican's forbidden dream. Nothing of that. The new seminars, religious institutions popped up like mushrooms during the years of independence remained mostly empty. The approach to religion is still very much tied to traditional expressions, rituals, simple worship.

Lithuanian unease seems to be deep, and not always easily interpretable. This country has had for 15 consecutive years the primacy of suicides in Europe (last year it was overtaken by Russia). Alcoholism is widespread, as the drugs consumption and prostitution, mainly destined for export (someone says that even half of the prostitutes who work in Poland is of Lithuanian origin). Yet, Lithuania, despite all its problems, seems much more genuine than other Baltic republics, more aware of itself, more humble and more powerful at the same time. Here there is not the fake enthusiasm of Latvia and Estonia, Lithuanians do not allow the sirens of consumerism to fool them. And although the churches full of people, a Catholic fundamentalist does not exist here, as in Poland. The revisionist trends did not create significant extreme right movements, as the leaders of Jewish community realize; they feel more safe. And hidden in their discretion, Lithuanians evaluate with wit and sometimes with sarcasm, the false self-confidence of Westerners who come here. "Here is a beautiful youth - says Ido Baldasso, psychologist and theater director, who has lived here for several years - "with a strong female presence. The humanistic faculties are full of passionate people, and the theater, which already gave us a big as Nekrosius, is very much alive".

In short, Lithuania seems to believe in a not yet existent Europe. Which has to be invented, because the Union was born old, a prisoner of the illusion of buying the people favor (now mostly Eastern one), and giving up everything else, namely, a clear vision of world. However, as the philosopher Lacordaire said, "we need to believe in delays". In Lithuania there is a feeling that the night is going to pass. Through the gates of dawn, we see that another future is possible.

Cesare Sangalli