

In Lithuania, a Trashbin for Carnations, Candles and Soviet Nostalgia

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What impact has the war in Ukraine had on the political scene in Lithuania? Who are the “vatniks” and how is this notion applied? Activist and editor Jurgis Valiukevičius talks about the problems of the Lithuanian left and its possible strategy

On 24 February 2023, marking one year of war in Ukraine, a shattered Russian tank was displayed in the central square of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. According to the Lithuanian Minister of National Defence, this tank was a symbolic gesture in support of Ukraine. The minister claimed that by showcasing the tank, the ministry propagates a good image of the Ukrainian army — its strength and determination to defend the country from its aggressor.

However, a few days passed and the tank became an object of political turmoil. It started when several people left carnations and candles on the tank. The carnation — a small red flower — was one of the most popular flowers in Soviet times. The act of leaving a flower on the tank was soon described as a provocation, and people who did it — a threat to national security. Politicians started urging the State security agency to investigate the people who left the flowers. Small fights broke out between the people who tried to leave the flowers and those who were guarding the tank from “flowering.” The police started a criminal case by claiming that putting carnations on the tank violates the law that forbids the promotion of nazi, soviet or any other kind of totalitarian symbolism.

The media started to boil with discussions: what to do with people who are putting flowers on the tank. Should they be stripped of citizenship? Should we prosecute them and put them in jail? On the other hand, there were voices criticizing the militaristic rhetoric and the “silencing of oppositional voices”: “pure militarism, nothing less,” — wrote Darius Pocevičius, one of the best-known anarchist figures in Lithuania, on his social media account. The Lithuanian president [claimed](#) the tank was a good way of finding provocateurs in Lithuania: “We needed it. We needed it to see the ‘vatniks’ who are now coming there, placing flowers, and organizing prayers. It is very good to see who is who in Lithuania.”

Some of the people who left flowers are quite well-known figures of the [far right in Lithuania](#). They have been active in recent years under the banner of a “pro-family” coalition that united various right-wing groups opposing a same-sex partnership law, claiming that the LGBT community aims to destroy “traditional families” — a frequent homophobic nationalist discourse in Eastern Europe with [ties to US Christian right-wing groups](#). While there is speculation about far-right financial connections with the Kremlin, the ideological similarity is very visible — as much as the “pro-family” groups, Putin’s regime claims to fight for the traditional values destroyed by the liberal West.

The irony of Lithuania’s president’s statement is that just two years ago he personally [congratulated the “Family march”](#) demonstration in Lithuania. At the same demonstration, there were speeches by AfD — a German far-right party that [opposes sanctions for Russia today](#). The same party representatives were invited to give a lecture in Parliament in 2018 by our current chairperson of

the Committee on National Security and Defence. Today he is a fierce fighter against Russia as much as “illegal migrants” — a term coined for the asylum seekers coming through the Belarus border. So, “who is who” in Lithuania?

Marginalization by the mainstream media and new strange alliances

In Lithuania, “vatnik” is a popular political slur used to say that someone is influenced by Russian propaganda and supports Putin. To be called a “vatnik” is to say that your arguments are not rational because they are consciously or unconsciously based on Russian propaganda. After the war in Ukraine escalated, such a person is cast as a threat to democracy and civil (liberal) society.

However, as with many other political pejoratives, the rules of who can be called “vatniks” are quite obscure. For the most ardent Facebook fighters, disapproval of some argument or even a single like on a wrong post can be a sign of “vatnikism.” An important dimension of this slur is class and ethnicity. Some Lithuanian scientists [warned in 2017](#) that since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2014, “vatniks” had been used to label a very broad array of society, including “Lithuanian Russians, people feeling nostalgia for the Soviet era, lower social strata, people complaining about economic conditions.” An association between the “Russian threat” and social position in society has been made for over a decade. Analyzing the riots in Lithuania against austerity measures in 2009, political commentator Daiva Repečkaitė [noted](#) how media and politicians started to describe working-class subjects as aggressive “losers of the post-soviet transition” — the so-called “Homo sovieticus.”

Left movements in Lithuania have been fighting against such marginalization by pointing to the social damage done by neoliberal policies and attempting to speak in the name of those called “vatniks” or “Homo sovieticus.” However, the mainstream media was suspicious. At least since the 2009 crisis, left movements in Lithuania have been associated by mainstream media with “Russian” influence, claiming an inevitable link between the Soviet Union and the left. Such accusations came out during [mobilizations against the new labor code](#) in 2017, [during the teachers’ strike in 2016](#), and on other occasions.

However, the attitude of the media towards left topics has been somewhat changing in recent years, and the war in Ukraine has brought more attention to the relations between right-wing movements and Kremlin influence. The election of Trump, and later the reaction to Covid restrictions, nurtured a new wave of right-wing mobilizations, which culminated with the [“pro-family” marches in 2021](#) that claimed to defend “the traditional family from the attacks of LGBT.” The mainstream media has been suspicious of these movements. Firstly, [attacks on journalists](#) trying to report during “pro-family” protests did not help the journalists be open about their ideas. But also, the war in Ukraine “polluted” the strongholds of right-wing alternatives — Hungary became one of the symbols of a “Trojan horse” inside Europe, and Trump does not look like a trustworthy candidate anymore.

The strategy of the right-wing movements is to claim that “left and right” are the same, thus pretending to be the only “oppositional voice” to liberalism. The “anti-LGBT” rhetoric enjoys wide support in Lithuania, less visible in the mainstream media but gathering support in blogs and alternative media channels. On the other hand, opposition to such right-wing anti-establishment movements has brought the parliamentary left, liberal and conservative politicians to a strange alliance based on support for “human rights” or “European values.” The intensification of the war in Ukraine has made human rights defense even more important in the geopolitical imagination.

As a left person, the question for me is how much perspective is there for the left movement in this coalition? Reacting to the “flowering” of the tank, the Vilnius municipality placed a trashbin, on which was written, “For carnations, candles and soviet nostalgia.” The idea that attitudes, political convictions or even economic positions are simply the heritage of the Soviet political system is

known by every Eastern European. But should we forget now that most of these statements have been made to silence opposition to neoliberal policies and the erasure of workers' rights? How much of these campaigns to erase the "Soviet heritage" was used to push privatization, gentrification and the closure of public spaces? And should we just postpone these conflicts until the war ends?

Perspectives for the left

I am not arguing that the left movement should start supporting Russia or blaming NATO for the war in Ukraine because "we need to oppose liberals." While the left in Lithuania has not been as energetic about the war in Ukraine as the right (because militarism and the fight against Russians has not been part of the left's agenda), most of the parliamentary and non-parliamentary left groups continue to release statements in support of Ukraine as well as to organize humanitarian aid, gather financial support or help Ukrainian migrants inside the country. In Lithuania, the question about supporting Ukraine does not produce different political values. A more energetic and divisive topic relates to the aggressor of this war. How much are "everyday Russians" responsible for what is happening in Ukraine? Should we support the Russian opposition or criticize it as the same imperial force under a different name? Should we cancel Russian artists and activists in public events?

While such discussions might sometimes fall into the "sensitive left" category, where the fact that nobody's feelings have been hurt is more important than the outcome of the discussion, it nevertheless gives a space to speak about strategic questions concerning the war and transformation of the region, and avoid militaristic ambitions or the silly talks about peace agreements coming out of thin air. Many on the left criticize domestic citizenship laws that are based on the exclusion of nationalities. They point to the fact that ethnic Russian populations and the Kremlin regime are not the same, and supporting the Russian opposition, not isolating from it, is a more strategic perspective for bringing a democratic revolution in Russia and a more peaceful life for everyone else in this region.

One of the examples of such heated discussions was this year's commemoration of International Women's Day. On 8 March, a performance was organized by a group of Lithuanian feminists. Organizers announced an invitation for other feminists to join the performance. Among those who joined was a representative of the Pussy Riot group, but no Ukrainians answered the call. However, a couple of Ukrainian women showed up for the 8 March event with posters asking whether Russian feminists have made a reckoning with Russian imperialism. This situation became a huge scandal after one social media activist claimed that "Lithuanian feminists wanted to put Russian and Ukrainian feminists into one group, and when Ukrainians rejected the offer, they chose the Russian feminists, because they are more popular." Soon, the Facebook accusations of who is a vatnik began.

The war has intensified fighting on social media and raised witch-hunting to a new level. In some cases, it seems that searching for "Russian agents" is an activity for those fighting the war on Facebook more fiercely than the soldiers on the frontlines. There are also politicians or some kind of influencers trying to capitalize on the anger against Russia by inciting hatred against minorities. And yet, the presence of insecurity in the society is undeniable — it grew over the last decade, when Russia started annexing Georgian and Ukrainian territories. This insecurity results from the history of the 20th century in which Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union and suffered deportations and political persecution. The war in Ukraine only confirms that Russia remains a very real threat to Baltic countries. This fear can explain why 77 percent of Lithuanians support NATO, the second-highest approval rating in the EU after Poland.

The rising cost of living and one of the highest inflation rates in Europe add another layer of economic stress and anxiety. These should be left concerns, however, there seem to be some reservations, because by raising economic issues, the left might be stepping on the thin lines of

coalition with the liberal side, who will evoke the “Soviet” ghost as soon as they hear something about progressive taxes or the regulation of business. Nevertheless, the alternative way would be to speak of security not only in militaristic and macho terms, but as the social welfare of all.

While many right-wing politicians aim to restrict Russian and Belarusian citizens from entering the country and significantly limit the Russian language in the school curriculum, there seems to be another, opposite effect of getting closer to neighbors on the societal level. The Russian language is more important on the streets than before the war. In addition, journalists and some professionals learn the Ukrainian language, and the Belarusian diaspora is more visible. The disagreements on the opposition to Russian imperialism with some of the Western left brought more attention to the movements in Eastern European regions — which, I think, is a valuable connection that should be fostered and developed. Realizing that we have a better knowledge about some topics than “the West” changes the colonial psychology that the only examples of valuable political knowledge can be found in the West.

However, at the moment, it would be absurd to expect something other than more nationalism and militarism in the political arena. How to fight against it, or, how to build a more sustainable and convincing alternative (on both sides) is an open question for everyone in Lithuania and the region.

Jurgis Valiukevičius is based in Kaunas, Lithuania. He is an organizer in the May 1st Labour Union, a member of the editorial board of Lithuanian left media gpb.lt and one of the organizers of a yearly festival for left ideas, “[Kombinatas.](#)”

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