# *VALUES AND VICES IN SOCIETIES IN TRANSITION*

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A sad fact of the human condition is that the lowest common denominator of cultures is the most readily and easily incorporated by emerging economies. Back in 1996, riding my bicycle on the dike along the Danube, I came to the Hungarian border and heard blaring from the guard house some unmistakable American music about a "place where the sun don't shine." My first thought was that of all that is worthwhile and beautiful from American life, how is it that such audible trash contaminates the Slovak countryside? But who were the guards? Probably oafish guys who would be pumping gas or chopping wood if not for the military job. Universally, such guys are more likely fixated on prurient issues than on esthetics of the upper-classes. So, like the camel's nose under the tent, cultural contamination eases into the stale authoritarian environment – new, provocative, and rude gestures to the established order. The downward spiral of societal norms came riding into Eastern Europe on waves of social license provided by Western economic theories and practices. Globalization, in a word.

Along with authority come ideas about prerogative, privilege and expendable people – some of whom are sons and daughters of neighbors and kinsmen – the ones who are leaving Eastern Europe for the West and salaries that can support a middle-class lifestyle. This can be explained succinctly by considering the internet invitation of the Lithuanian Development Agency for employers to relocate to a place where work can be accomplished for a fraction of costs in Western Europe. Translation: We offer cheap, competent, and compliant labor. Naturally, this fosters a work environment of mutual contempt – managers who treat people like serfs, and the internet-savvy workers who see the behavior for what it is.

These sentiments echo the circumstances in the UK and the US before unions forced oligarchs ("robber barons" as they were then known) to pay decent wages and to eliminate child labor. (Several years ago, I intervened when a friend was about to pay 3,000 Euros to buy her daughter a government job. She said it was not unusual.) So maybe this means that the adoption of Western business practices requires repetition of the ugly steps of the past to effect the transition here in Eastern Europe.

One young man, echoing many of his cohort, came to me for help in preparing his application for an MBA program in France. Working for a bank, he said, "I am doing well financially for my age, but I know I have no real financial future here. I have to get a ticket to opportunities in the West that do not and will not exist here!" But his friend, who introduced him to me, had a somewhat different perspective. Several years ago, the friend developed an idea for a trans-Baltic consulting firm as a class project. That idea came to fruition as *Civitta*, a firm with 150 consultants and offices in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland. The former student with the idea, now 25, is a member of *Civitta's* Board of Directors – and significantly, driving a program to provide start-up assistance across the region, beginning with the "Silicone

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Vikings" in Vilnius and now offering "Start-Up-Preneurs" training. He and his colleagues, mostly Millennials, are undercutting the stale, Soviet-style bureaucracy being perpetuated by those who remember "the bad old days." Money (and results) talk, and authoritarian baloney has to walk, yielding to the power of performance metrics!

These two talented, ambitious young men reflect the dichotomy in imagery that is polarizing Lithuanians and perhaps other Eastern Europeans as well. The one vision is of a bureaucratic, wage-suppressing, opportunity-limiting socio-political structure; and the other a vision of unlimited opportunities for job and wealth creation, constrained only by the lack of conceptual tools and the support of enthusiasts committed to reshaping the economic landscape using entrepreneurial power (By the way, despite the gloomy projections of many, Bloomberg Business News reported recently that "GDP per capita in Lithuania tops all other ex-Soviet republics" with average salaries rising 7.2 times in the 2004 to 2014 decade.) Perhaps the worm in that apple is that living costs have risen along with GDP so that many people still feel an economic deficit.

So, consider popcorn as a metaphor, outsized containers of the stuff coated with faux butter, in the arms of kids in theatres. They watch Western movies full of gratuitous profanity and casual promiscuity, being programmed for the new norms, for the further erosion of social standards and definitions of what's okay and what isn't. Some of those ancient prohibitions were control codes, with priests as sheep dogs to keep strays from leaving, and to keep the herd, the flock, the tribe moving in "right" directions. Even today, "right directions" seem to coincide with the dogmas of right-wing, exclusionary politics and religions that represent the status quo -- or worse, past practice and further restrictions on necessary social and economic mobility.

When cultures are being compromised in such a wholesale manner, outcomes show up in unexpected places. For example, the escape to the West of so many created a shortage of students, and even venerable Vilnius University did not attract the expected enrollment last fall. It was estimated that 54,000 potential students were absent for the 2014-2015 academic year in Lithuania. To fill the resulting economic gap, my school has dispatched a recent graduate home to Nigeria, where he will visit 50 high schools to offer distance learning opportunities.

By the way, did you know there were more babies born in Nigeria last year than in all of Europe? In the predominantly Roman Catholic countries of Eastern Europe, birth rates in this post-Soviet era have fallen well below maintenance levels of 2.14 live births per woman. Is this a reflection of vice, or a victory of choices for women? No matter. This fact, along with emigration to the west, has resulted in Lithuania losing 21 percent of its 1991 population. The inevitable result is that all European societies will have to accept replacement hands and minds from the mostly non-white societies of the south and east. Looking at Europe's continuing adventures with acculturation, more shocks to the bodies politic and prevailing attitudes about color, competence, and compatibility are coming. Meanwhile, the people-in-charge will revert to form and rely on authoritarian interventions to keep the foreigners out or compel them conform to local norms.

A gay Catholic priest of my acquaintance said, "Put two people in bed together, and they'll figure out something to do!" In your ears, is that "Hooray for humanity" or "That's an abomination"? We who study and teach are victims, too, and also complicit in the chaos as a new world order evolves. After all, how many angels *can* stand on the head of a pin, and can His eye be on the sparrow and not on drownings in the Mediterranean and the continuing slaughter by true-believers in His name? And if



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sparrows are more important than people, those old verities really are ridiculous and irrelevant in this age of bank transactions in nano seconds and the reality that such technology will eliminate two billion jobs in the next two or three decades, according to an estimate from Singularity University in California. That alarming result will drive more young men (and some women) into the ranks of jihadists of one flavor or another. These are the young men who, as identified recently by American commentator Paul Krugman, "… Have never held a job, held a girl's hand, or authority over anyone!" Of course they respond to agencies that offer salaries, girls, and a mission.

As we teach and lead, we necessarily reflect our biases, seeing vice or value as we confront disruptive changes. Does our teaching support possibilities, encourage entrepreneurship, advance a "can do" spirit to plant seeds of social responsibility; or shall we stay comfortably within the confines of our academic disciplines and leave ideas about making change, making money, and creating opportunities for others to others? If the latter is our course, of course it's time to order more popcorn!



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