

Vytautas Landsbergis, Lithuanian head of state (1990-1992), speaker of parliament (1996-2000), member of European Parliament (2004-2014)

Anna Sous, RFE/RL

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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

Anna Sous: Mr. Landsbergis, we're here at a significant place -- the memorial for January 13th, which commemorates the tragic events of Lithuania's struggle for independence in 1991. Lithuanians were among the first to pay the price for independence from the Soviet Union. As former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma recently put it, "There's always a price to pay for independence -- if necessary, in blood." And as Russian politician Grigory Yavlinsky said, "Freedom is expensive, and freedom from Russia even more so." Do you think the price of independence from Russia is as high now as it was 25 years ago?

Vytautas Landsbergis: The price varies, and not only in scale, but in type. As Lithuania was preparing to declare independence, we were threatened with demands to settle debts to the Soviet Union that were so big we would never be able to repay them. It was like we were hostages who would never be able to come up with the ransom. But we saw the situation differently. We had been occupied. So regardless of what they had done here -- even if they had invested in our strategic infrastructure, in our Sovietization, in fully incorporating Lithuania into the Soviet system -- those were their expenses, the expenses of an empire and an invader. They can't make any claim about their losses. We owed them nothing. To the contrary, it was the invader who was indebted to us, for the damage caused by the occupation. And now we see very clearly what price Ukraine is paying, and there's no end in sight. Recently they demanded that Ukraine pay money to Donbas, to [separatist leader in eastern Ukraine] Zakharchenko and others. It's ridiculous. Of course, Ukraine isn't going to pay anything. Ukraine is being destroyed. And what about its own restoration -- who's going to pay for that? It seems like Ukraine is going to have to foot the bill itself or Western democracies will have to do it. Nobody's going to ask Russia for compensation. And yet, Mr. Putin is the one who brought on the destruction. Ukraine didn't destroy itself.

Anna Sous: When I visited your office, I noticed a number of political cartoons on the walls. Nearly all of them have something to do with the Soviet Union or Russia. For example, there was one depicting Gorbachev climbing into a beehive labeled "Lithuania." Angry bees are flying out and giving him a hard time. On another wall there are photographs of you with various Western leaders -- not a single one with any Russian leaders. This RFE/RL project is called "Russia & Me." As an intellectual and someone with an appreciation for art, what kind of images come to mind when you think about Russia, both today and when you were head of state?

Vytautas Landsbergis: Most certainly it would be the image of Russia that had been striving toward democracy. It was during the last years of Gorbachev's perestroika, when more and more people -- thinking people -- began to believe that life could be different, and that

efforts should be made to get there. The election of the first Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union [in 1989] was the first of its kind. Perhaps not entirely, but in the sense that it was a competitive election. In Lithuania, we ran as the Sajudis reform movement, whose goals included freedom and, of course, reforms and changing people's way of life. We presented our political platform at an open debate with the Communist Party and we won. We didn't consider ourselves part of Russia. But we did want to have normal relations, to put crimes like Stalin's annexation of the Baltic States behind us. We assumed that Russia could and wanted to become a democracy. It was a time of hope. I remember Russian politicians, particularly the democrats, with affection and a feeling of regret that their hopes didn't materialize. I'm sorry that the Bolshevik-style forces of vengeance and imperialism proved to be stronger. They crushed Russian democracy in its infancy. They reversed Russia's progress, shifting it once again towards imperialism, repression, and terror. Blood is being spilled and there's no end in sight. And all of it in the name of the false greatness of the Russian empire, where a person is worth nothing, but territory and power are valued above all.

Anna Sous: You mentioned Russian politicians. What, in your opinion, are the key differences between Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Vladimir Putin?

Vytautas Landsbergis: Yeltsin was a sincere man. He had honor and pride. I saw this during our negotiations, including times when his colleagues tried to sway him into acting unfairly. It was enough just to remind him, "But Boris Nikolayevich, we had an agreement." He was an honest man. Then he was derailed by the war in Chechnya. Most certainly that was done by the forces within his corrupt inner circle; even his family circle. He became dependent on the situation around him. He was no longer able to resist the vengeful nature of the Russian empire. Maybe he even succumbed to it himself. Although we don't know what happened. At first he said, "We will never invade Chechnya, because we would not be forgiven for this." But two weeks later he was no longer resisting, and he signed a decree on the invasion. One day historians will get to the bottom of it and find out who was the real power pushing the president.

Anna Sous: If we speak about other invasions, more recent events -- I have your book about Ukraine, about the Maidan protests, which you visited...

Vytautas Landsbergis: There can't be any comparison between that and the policies of Boris Yeltsin. Attacking Ukraine would have been absolutely unthinkable under Boris Yeltsin's policies. Now, it turns out, it's not only possible but positively welcomed by the brainwashed Russian masses.

Anna Sous: You said in a recent interview that the West is reluctant to stand up to Russia and that if this doesn't change, Russia will be able to wreak havoc in Ukraine and move on to other countries. Lithuania has already begun military conscription. If this is not to change Russia will be able to wreck havoc in Ukraine and later move on to other countries. Lithuania has already reintroduced conscription. It seems to me that Lithuania -- unlike, for example, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or Hungary -- has a very good understanding and an appropriate reaction to what's happening in eastern Ukraine. How would you explain this? Is Lithuania more sensitive to the situation?

Vytautas Landsbergis: Due to its historical experience, Lithuania is smarter. Whereas in those other countries, some politicians allow themselves to be fooled, or pretend that they don't know, or let themselves be brainwashed.

Anna Sous: Or did they forget?

Vytautas Landsbergis: Some things they did forget. Or they succumbed to the very actively perpetrated suggestion that Russia is somehow different now -- that the invasions of Czechoslovakia or Hungary during the Hungarian democratic revolution would never happen today, that they have nothing to do with the new Russia. But we see now that all those things just got hidden away but are once again rising to the surface.

Anna Sous: Mr. Landsbergis, you served two terms in the European Parliament. If you were still holding a post within the leadership of the European Union, what would you do to stop the war in the Ukraine?

Vytautas Landsbergis: I would be insisting on peace negotiations -- not talks about a temporary cease-fire, but about peace between the warring nations, Russia and Ukraine. Russia always wins over those who don't mind losing -- I mean its claim that it's not at war with Ukraine. This is ridiculous. I suspect many Western politicians privately laugh at this repetitive lie, but they're too timid to say, "Hey boss, stop lying -- you're fighting there. Your weapons are there. Your soldiers are there. You send them there and then burn their bodies in crematoriums so you don't have to bury them at home -- so that mothers, parents don't know where their sons disappeared and what for." That's all you need to say -- "enough with the lies." Live "not by lies," as Solzhenitsyn put it.

Anna Sous: If we talk about your relations with Russia, what was the hardest, most difficult day? And which was the best, the happiest?

Vytautas Landsbergis: There were all kinds of difficulties. There were threats, ultimatums, blockades. All in the expectation that people would get angry, abandon independence, and welcome the return of the so-called Soviet power -- the occupational power, the central one, the power of the Kremlin. But this didn't happen. These methods were so obviously negative, there was no way they could work. So then they applied military might -- they came to kill people, possibly even in mass numbers. They could have killed thousands. They killed 14 on the spot and seriously wounded up to a thousand others. But the people defended their right to be worthy -- to have their own motherland instead of singing glory to a distant, huge, and greedy non-motherland.