

DALIA GRYBAUSKAITE: DRIVE BY THE RULES...

The first decisions of Dalia Grybauskaite as the head of state of Lithuania reduced the presidential staff and cut government expenses five-fold and her own wage two times. She also rejected flash lights on the presidential limo saying the cortege will drive by common rules and at the same speed. Traffic police was instructed not to switch on the green light when the presidential car is approaching as it will wait for it with others. Those were not the only popular measures adopted by the head of state.

TAKING OFFICE

The president remains popular after nearly two years at the wheel of the state. The global crisis badly hit the newcomers in the European Union and Lithuanian voters enthusiastically welcomed the decision of successful European Commissioner for Financial Programming and the Budget Dalia Grybauskaite to radically change her occupation and become the top politician in Lithuania. Tired of endless squabbles in parliament and government and of incompetent national leaders the people viewed her as a genuine savior. Besides, Dalia Grybauskaite was alien to local political clans.

While taking office the president did not promise an early economic recovery and rapid

growth of prosperity but pledged to put an end to the vicious system of political oligarchy when political and business circles merge, to eliminate corruption causes, and promote democratic and other structural reforms. Some observers even predicted she would follow suit of President Rolandas Paksas who was impeached after pledging to eliminate clans in the Lithuanian establishment. Acting Constitution gives the Lithuanian president little powers to influence domestic policy. The parties that win elections to the Sejm form the government and nominate the prime minister after which the whole government is approved by the president who can definitely voice remarks regarding that or another candidate. If the head of state twice rejects the nominated prime minister and his program an early parliamentary election may be declared, however the legislature may also impeach the president. When they reminded Dalia Grybauskaite about that she responded she will directly address the people if necessary. So far there was no need for that.

Unemployment in the country exceeds 15 percent and emigration acquired a catastrophic scope. Numerous excises were increased to fill in the budget and pensions and wages cut. Few people believed the government of Andrius Kubilius will survive on such a background. But thanks to the president it keeps office for over two years. Any time the opposition calls to oust the government Grybauskaite always responds she sees no alterna-

tive to it. And they adhere to her opinion. The president often interferes into the powers of the government and sometimes does it aggressively without excessive explanations.

FIRM HAND

The first politician ousted by Grybauskaite from the political arena was parliament speaker Arunas Valinskas. He headed a populist party uniting showbiz people which unexpectedly won numerous protest votes at the latest election to the Sejm, formed a fragile majority coalition with the Conservatives, and was convinced his allies will not let him down. However as soon as the media published photos of Valinskas in the company of crime bosses, the president voiced no confidence in him and achieved her aim. The speaker was doomed, but the coalition remained. The president believes the ruling Conservatives headed by Kubilius are certain hostages to their partners. However it does not impede her from controlling the government and directly influencing its decisions.

While taking office Dalia Grybauskaite promised to fight corruption, nepotism, and build up civil society in the country. The first step in the anti-corruption fight was her decision to abandon the scheme of nuclear power plant construction proposed by oligarchs when the state took on nu-

merous commitments while the LEO LT energy company had practically no responsibility.

She purged the office of the prosecutor general and the state security department, the financial crime investigation service and the agency of special investigations, police and courts, and replaced heads of departments suspected of clan and other indecent relations by people with proper reputation. Besides, the president introduced rotation of the heads of the services. Dalia Grybauskaite said she sees clear big business pressure on legislative activity in many spheres. She has to take major effort to block such processes. She admitted that the energy sector has long been a sinecure for most right-wing and left-wing parties and said she would put an end to it.

Upon a presidential instruction a parliamentary panel and the prosecutor general began to investigate reports about CIA jails in Lithuania where former Guantanamo prisoners suspected of terrorism were allegedly kept. No proof was found as the U.S. State Department did not respond to queries. However the very fact of the existence of a suspicious building and officially unregistered flights of aircraft of U.S. secret services to Vilnius were made public and nobody has rejected them. It is noteworthy that two former high-ranking employees of the state security department who moved to diplomatic service in Georgia and



Ukraine were recalled by the president without any explanations. She appointed a professional to head the service and major political parties have no influence on him.

Dalia Grybauskaitė insisted on the resignation of Foreign Minister Vigaudas Ushatskas who she said engaged in his own foreign policy, as well as of the social protection, health and culture ministers who she believed were incompetent. The resignation of Economy Minister Dainius Kreivys was the most scandalous as before coming to the state service he “sold” major packages of shares of several enterprises to his mother. One of them won two tenders to reconstruct schools with European Union money. As EU funds were distributed by the minister, Grybauskaitė said it was a sufficient reason for him to step down. When the prime minister rushed to defend Kreivys the president advised him not to take over other’s sins and focus on curbing the financial crisis and recovering economy. The prime minister retreated, as a result.

Such radical decisions are typical of the president and critics and opponents blame her for authoritarian rule in the Russian and Lukashenko style.

However the president kept Energy Minister Arvidas Sekmokas in office after the opposition tried to oust him for the failure of the tender to build a new nuclear power plant and for fanning up a conflict with Gazprom which is monopoly gas supplier to Lithuania. The head of state said the minister has to continue the energy reform “as liberalization of the gas sector and the creation of alternatives to the monopoly comprise cardinal decisions which the population expects from us.”

The merits of the president may also include her initiative to provide a possibility for non-partisan candidates to participate in municipal elections which influential political forces have op-

posed for long. She also backs the idea of direct elections of city mayors. Thus, Grybauskaitė gradually forms another center of influence on the domestic policy while formally staying within the limits of her powers.

The priority task set by the president has been fulfilled. The country succeeded to recover from the crisis without IMF support. As EU commissioner she bitterly criticized Lithuanian authorities for “eating away” the budget and inaction in time of crisis. It is noteworthy that despite numerous claims to the prime minister she does not



change horses in midstream and plans to keep Andrius Kubilius in office at least up to the Sejm election due next year.

AMERICA IS NO MENTOR FOR US

Declaring foreign policy tasks Dalia Grybauskaitė said “neither the United States nor Russia will dictate political terms to Lithuania.” She stressed the United States was and remains an important partner in ensuring security of the country in the NATO framework, but recalled that under the previous president who lived in the United States for long Lithuania was a kind of hostage to American policy. Naturally, Lithuania and its president

synchronize independence with pan-European policy, but some steps of Grybauskaitė show she has her own perception of foreign policy principles.

Her refusal to go to a summit with Barack Obama in the Czech Republic where in April 2010 a new strategic arms reduction treaty was signed by the United States and Russia caused major repercussions. Some western journalists suggested the U.S. administration will not forgive that and Grybauskaitė “will be allowed to the White House only as a tourist.” The Lithuanian president explained the refusal by radical changes in the policy of the U.S administration which pays all attention to Russia and ignores the interests of small countries. She believes that only by demanding and obtaining security guarantees from NATO the Baltic countries can cope with unfavorable processes related to the “reset”. She clearly realizes that such conduct will hardly be welcomed in Washington, but insists the main thing is to properly protect own interests and be fully-fledged NATO partners.

The president did not fear voicing her specific position regarding the latest events in Libya. In an interview with the Austrian Die Presse she said NATO actions have gone beyond the UN-mandated powers and expressed bewilderment about choosing Libya as a target while there are numerous other countries in Africa with much more notorious dictatorships. The statement put Foreign Minister Audronus Ažubalis into a difficult situation as he traditionally voices US and NATO opinions as the Lithuanian position. However the Lithuanian public positively reacted to it.

PRAGMATISM COMES FIRST

In contrast to the predecessor Dalia Grybauskaitė does not demonize Russia and realistically

perceives the fact that the big country will always influence the neighbors. The main thing is that Lithuanian interests should not suffer. In one of the interviews she admitted it is difficult for her to communicate with the Russian leadership because of high emotions both on the part of Lithuania and Russia. However it is necessary to communicate and overcome tensions.

Grybauskaitė’s unofficial statements about Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko as a “guarantor of stability” in the neighboring country triggered major emotions. The press service of the Lithuanian president rejected such statements. However the head of state stressed she supports the position voiced by the European Union however tries to avoid sharp remarks about the developments that followed elections in Belarus. She has an ambiguous attitude to the leader of the neighboring country and hopes relations will improve and the government of Belarus will “open towards” Europe and human rights as it promised before elections.

Grybauskaitė is often blamed for “betraying” the interests of Georgia and Moldova in contrast to Valdas Adamkus who eyed a specific role in relations with the former Soviet republics. She responds she has only switched the relations to a business level and abandoned everything personal and visual. Bilateral projects, exchange of experts, and expanding economic ties that truly grow in intensity are more important for her than the number of top-level meetings, receptions and beautiful toasts. During the working visit to Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in May she made no exception for Tbilisi. At a meeting with Mikhail Saakashvili Dalia Grybauskaitė confirmed that “Lithuania supports the territorial integrity of Georgia in the limits envisaged by international agreements, as well as its aspiration for Euro-Atlantic integration.” She recalled “major homework” which Georgia has to do in the sphere of the freedom of the speech, human rights, and the rule of law. She also advised to launch a dialogue with South Ossetia and Abkhazia and, in particular, to rule out restrictions in access to energy resources and water as an instrument of influence.

In her presidential position Dalia Grybauskaitė combines straightforwardness and decisiveness with political maneuvering. She makes decisions guided by her own rules of the game. Judging by domestic and outside reaction she has succeeded so far.

By Galina Afanasyeva