

# BY SINGING REVOLUTION SCORE, OR TWENTY YEARS LATER

**T**hey say you can write history 25 years after the event. Latvia came close to the line. The Second Republic restored in 1991 has equaled in age the First Republic which was proclaimed in 1918 and existed up to 1940. What is the main achievement and disappointment of the past 20 years? Which prospects does the small country in the east of Europe have? It is currently facing bitter time. Did Latvia gain independence which it dreamt of? Can its national identity dilute in the melting pot of European integration? The Amber Bridge asked the questions to people who initiated the Singing Revolution – Atmoda – which radically changed the country in 1991. The first prime minister of independent Latvia, European lawmaker Ivars Godmanis, the founding father of new legislation Talavs Jundzis, and eternal dissident Janis Kucinskis fought for the freedom of their country together.

**T**oday they differ in assessing the events of the '90s and the future of Latvia. Some see Latvia as equal among equals while others describe it as rightless colony of predatory West.

## DREAMS: TEST OF TIME

*In the '90s of the past century the people desired freedom and united in the drive to new life. Dreams about future independent country were exciting. Did they come true?*

Ivars Godmanis: They did come true to a major extent. The main thing is that Latvia became independent. We built up a democratic system in the country during the years which ensures human rights and freedoms in all spheres.

Talavs Jundzis: Today Latvia realizes what freedom and independence mean. We feel it every day and every minute. I will cite only two examples although there are much more than that: firstly, it is difficult to overestimate the meaning of the word of freedom when you can freely express your opinion about any leader of the country, including the president. It was impossible to do it before. Secondly, it is the freedom of travel. I enjoy travelling and it is important for me.

Janis Kucinskis: Some opportunities increased. You can freely buy books in the English language, clothes, household appliances, and a second-hand car if you have the money. But is it the main achievement? We surrendered to the West and exchanged Russia for glass beads like Indians did time ago in America.

The country was included into a new alliance and has not been independent for one

### Ivars Godmanis: the last of the Mohicans

Born in 1951. Graduated from the Latvian University and trained in Austria, PhD, Physics.

During Atmoda joined public activities which quickly developed into political activity. In 1998 Godmanis was deputy chairman of the Popular Front which said its aim was the restoration of state sovereignty of Latvia. He was the first prime minister of independent Latvia and headed the government from 1990 to 1993. Godmanis was later the finance and interior minister. From 2007 to 2009 he again headed the government. At present he is a member of the European Parliament.

The only acting Latvian politician of Atmoda generation.



### Talavs Jundzis: federative Europe optimist

Born in 1951. Graduated from the law faculty of the Latvian University. PhD, Law and Political Sciences.

One of the authors of the Declaration on state sovereignty which the Supreme Soviet of Latvia adopted on May 4, 1991. Member of the Latvian delegation at talks with the Russian Federation on the pullout of Russian troops from Latvia. The first defense minister after the restoration of Latvian independence. The author of over 80 scientific articles and books, including Security and Defense of Latvia monograph (1995). Vice-President of the Latvian Academy of Sciences.



### Janis Kucinskis: eternal dissident

Born in 1956. Graduated from the Riga Industrial Polytechnic. Participated in the dissident Soviet-era Helsinki-86 group. He was a member of the Civilian committees which struggled for independence, the editor of banned Pilsonis (Citizen) newspaper. The author of New World Order and We book (2000), Life in State of War (2010), and numerous publications. Ten years ago he was among European skeptics who made a negative forecast of the consequences of Latvian accession to the EU. Employed in railway security.



day. Latvia was conquered without a single shot and became a colony of the West. Banks, supermarkets, petrol stations, and television - everything belongs to western investors.

Latvia advocates the myth that 20 years ago barehanded Latvian people defeated on the barricades a major empire with all its secret services and troops. In reality our Atmoda is a

reflection of geopolitical processes and the struggle of two systems. The West decided to back President Yeltsin as he suited it most of all. The developments then went along a single scheme designed by the United States. Perestroika policy came to us from Moscow. Latvia became a laboratory of "color revolution" which was staged by the Popular Front and the

government of Godmanis which in January 1991 deregulated prices and launched a shock therapy in the country.

## STILL TO BE DONE...

*Which are the most painful problems of Latvia?*

Ivars Godmanis: — Much has to be done to resolve social issues and raise the living standards in Latvia to the average European level. Most countries of the European Union are ahead in these two qualities - democracy and social protection. Honestly speaking, I did not think that banking and other crises could hit Latvia every seven-ten years. They seriously influenced the domestic situation.

Talavs Jundzis: — The Latvian Republic was first proclaimed in 1918 and reached a high level of prosperity by 1940. I thought that by restoring state independence we shall live in a well-off country in ten - maximum 15 years. Unfortunately, it did not happen. It is saddening! Yes, there are very rich people in Latvia but the average monthly wage comprises 417 lats (close to 800 US dollars). We occupy one of the lowest places in Europe by the indicator. Naturally, it is possible to consider the issue from another angle: Latvia is not the richest country of the European Union but it occupies the 47th place by the level of wellbeing in the list of 200 countries. Everything is relative...

We have to admit that our political system is inefficient and based on proportional election scheme. It exists in many European nations however it does not fit for such young democracies as Latvia because it allows many parties to have seats in parliament. That results in another major minus - constant partisan disputes on all vital issues and instability of the coalition government as a result. I would call it even political irresponsibility which does not allow to quickly and efficiently engage in reforms. It is not accidental that the idea of switching to a presidential republic takes hold in Latvia.

Janis Kucinskis: The current developments in our political life can be compared with the return of the country to the Middle Age when Latvians were completely rightless. I would recall that the First Republic emerged in 1918

right after the First World War and the revolution. The country was in ruins, but people worked hard and life gradually improved without IMF loans. In 1990 there was no ruin in the country. Latvia had no debts as Russia took them over. There was industry that could be upgraded. But it was intentionally ruined and Latvia became a backward country. To make a thousand domestic millionaires flourish hundreds of thousands of Latvians had to lose jobs and savings.

In my book *New World Order and We* I predicted in 2000 that we shall go in the European Union through the same thing which happened in the XIII century when Vatican blessed Baltic tribes that adopted Christianity to create their own states. The result was the cancellation of the rights of local peoples who found themselves in debt to Germans. It is not by chance that the house of Chernogolovykh has been restored in Riga which is a palace of German traders, that they began to praise Duke Jacob and excellent Swedish times. All signs in city streets are in English. U.S. economist Michael Hudson was right to say the European Union behaves itself in east European nations as in occupied territories with conquered enemies. The so-called Latvian political elite comprises compradors who act in the interests of foreign capital. It is only fantastic that a majority of Latvians continue to consider them "legitimate" government. Latvian Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis sincerely poses the collapse of national economy for a success history!

## ONE COUNTRY, TWO COMMUNITIES

*Latvia failed to resolve the national issue in twenty years of independence. Society remains split into two communities. The country still has up to 300 thousand non-citizens. Who is to blame and what is to be done?*

Ivars Godmanis: Non-citizens in Latvia have all possibilities to obtain citizenship. However if they do not want to then a democratic state cannot compel them to become citizens. There are interesting statistics: when a non-citizen passport did not allow to freely travel in Europe 15-16 thousand people annually naturalized. When the obstacle was

lifted the number quickly dropped to 1-2 thousand a year. It is also to be taken into consideration that non-citizens enjoy simplified travel rules to Russia than Latvian citizens.

To obtain citizenship you have to speak Latvian language. It is natural as there is no

Talavs Jundzis: — Political parties that have ruled all this time shall bear responsibility for the failed integration of society. The main thing which I am thinking about is the teaching of the Latvian language. Its knowledge is the main integration factor. To finally open Latvian language



European country where you can obtain citizenship without knowledge of the official language. For a state to be stable it should not hand out citizenship to everyone. However it should not freeze the problem either.

I believed for some time that a change of one generation will put an end to one-nationality parties in Latvia. I no longer think so. Most likely the ratio between Latvians and Russian-speakers 58/42 is the source for reproduction of the parties. However the growing integration of Latvia into the European Union will gradually decrease the national-political standoff.

courses in Riga an ethnic Russian, Nil Ushakov, had to be elected its mayor four years ago.

Janis Kucinskis: We went broke in the '90s. In order to stop us resisting the process authorities began to play off one community against the other, provoke language wars, and advocate a myth about the Russian threat in public conscience. It is a paradox, but Russians in Latvia are a stabilizing factor while the Latvian people are not united. Just imagine what can happen if they all disappear. Given the current attitude to people, the state and national interests we could begin to devour each other with major appetite and thus increase dependence on the West.

We are incapable of solidarity - either social or national. Therefore, it is possible to stage such experiments in Latvia. It is naturally unpleasant for Latvians that in some areas of the country they do not feel themselves full masters of the house because of ethnic composition of the population. If we trust what newspapers and online publications write there can be an impression that Latvians and Russians hate each other. However in real life ordinary people of different nationalities amicably co-exist. It is more frustrating that many people are emigrating from Latvia.

## EMIGRATION: PERIL OR SALVATION?

*In recent years over 200 thousand people emigrated from Latvia. Isn't it a catastrophe for a nation with a population just over two million people?*

Ivars Godmanis: Latvia exists within the European Union system which is characterized by a full freedom of choice - each person can decide where to live, work, and do business.

Naturally, there are countries in the European Union with living standards higher than in Latvia. People want to live better not in future, but now and therefore leave the country. I do not think we have the right to blame them. Such is the situation: many people took mortgage credits to buy an apartment or a house and then the crisis erupted and they had no money to repay the loans. Equaling living standards in various countries is a major policy of the European Union and Latvia is gradually progressing towards average European level. I believe emigration from Latvia will not increase. Do not forget that countries where Latvians go suffer from the crisis like we do.

Talavs Jundzis: It should not be perceived too dramatically. We have just begun to recover from the crisis. What would happen if the 200 thousand people who emigrated would remain in Latvia? What would happen then? Unemployment would be much higher and more budget appropriations would be necessary to pay the dole. Today Latvians abroad send money back to Latvia. Nobody knows how big the financial inflow is, but it is definitely

substantial. This is the practical side of the issue.

But there is also the strategic side. Similar situation emerged in many countries of the world. President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences told me that many Chinese who emigrated from the country are now coming back with education they received in the United States and other countries and accumulated knowledge and experience. I will cite only one figure: 40% of professors in the United States are Chinese. I hope that people who left Latvia will soon come back with education diplomas and experience. And Latvia will enjoy the experience and education for free...

Janis Kucinskis: It is a fact that the country paid a very high price for complying with Maastricht requirements: Latvians are dying out. People have to leave their native country as there is no food or work here. Social welfare programs exist in cities, while the countryside where most Latvians live is being destroyed. Over 500 residential settlements disappeared from the map of Latvia. There are abandoned houses, foreigners bought out land, schools and hospitals close down. Brussels supports the genocide policy because old European nations face a catastrophic demographic situation. Europeans need "slaves", white-skin cheap labor which quickly assimilates. Our children educated at Latvian expense are most suitable for that. Our politicians did not conceal it in the '90s saying Latvia will join global turnover due to cheap labor.

## UNION OF EQUALS OR UNIFIED STATE?

*Do you think that modern Latvia - EU and NATO member - does not correspond to the independence model which many Latvians perceived in the '90s? Latvia of the '30s was a sample model for them - a national isolated state. Does the federation to which the EU has been striving of late kill national states?*

Ivars Godmanis: - It is impossible to compare the developments 80 years ago with nowadays. The situation radically differed from the current one. In the '30s national isolation could serve as the background for self-conscience growth. Latvia consumed what it

produced. Today we live in a global world and can buy goods and services from anyone we want and sell goods and services to anyone. In such conditions isolation is inappropriate.

The dream of a national state develops into a different thing today. It is permanent competition in conditions of open borders. Understanding of it is key for comprehending the situation. By cutting off from the world we can lose, firstly, the living standards and, secondly, own cultural and national traits. It is clear the European Union is working to make every member preserve its cultural and national traits. National identity of France, Germany, Spain, Italy and other countries has not disappeared and will not vanish. The same is true for our national priorities.

EU federalism is the answer to the grave crisis that hit it. A number of European countries, including Latvia, were in a very bad plight. EU assistance saved Latvia, Greece, Portugal, and Ireland. The slogan of federalism is used like a banner today which tries to prove that it is better to live in a single state. But it is wrong as people who work better and earn more will not pay those who work worse.

I believe the European Union is moving towards efficient interaction among countries, but not to a federative state. I do not think the talk about federalism will have serious consequences specifically now when the European Union is recovering from the crisis.

Talavs Jundzis: I see the future of the European Union in a federative state, but on condition that national identity and variety are the values of the federative state. In modern world small economies cannot survive. We should not be afraid that Latvia - economically and politically - will be within a single democratic union. Variety of peoples is the wealth of the EU and there are no grounds for concern for our national identity. We succeeded to preserve our language and culture in the Soviet Union. Why should we lose them in the European Union?

I am skeptical about the future of the European Union in its current state. Modern Europe is not competitive. But I am an optimist about federative Europe. There is no escaping federative Europe. Life will compel us to make the choice.

Janis Kucinskis: The European Union is no union of sovereign states but rather a business project for the rich created to expand the sales market. Countries compete in it and the strong strangle the weak. No major decisions are adopted in Riga any longer. The Saeima and the government only adjust to local conditions the documents adopted in Brussels which determine the economic and social policy of the country. Even wages, pensions and allowances are agreed with international institutions. Up to 2004 the president of the Latvian bank and the prime minister first signed a memorandum with the International Monetary Fund and then had the commitments approved in Saeima. Now it is different!

Fulfilling instructions from Brussels is our homework. Polls show that 70.9 percent of Latvians believe western nations are using the country in their own interests while 78.3 percent are convinced that Latvia is a second-tier country in the EU. Actions of current local authorities do not differ from what Pelshe and Voss did in Soviet times - to apple-polish bosses and career at the expense of misfortunes of their own people. In the same way the new authorities forge transition to "green" energy and make people pay for inefficient production.

It is common knowledge that in 1940 Latvia switched to Soviet rubles. Today, 73 years later, the occupational lat is to be replaced by occupational euro. Nobody wondered then and wonders now what the people think about it. We are told the government does not interfere in market relations. But everything is done to strip Latvia of economic relations with Russia. Here is only one example: medicines from the east are taxed higher than from the west.

Our history shows that when Latvia was within the empire our countries traded intensively which resulted in economic growth. When economic ties were disrupted it triggered collapse. 54.4 percent of Latvian residents believe today that Latvia lived well in the USSR. 64.6 percent are convinced the future of the country is in close cooperation with Russia and other CIS nations. However the West is not interested in the data.

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