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'Hard times' in Lithuania: Crisis and 'discourses of discontent' in post-communist society

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Abstract
This article analyses the intersection of global recession with the underlying crisis of neo-liberalism in Baltic Lithuania, and the disappointment of expectations regarding the promised benefits of free market capitalism for the citizens of post-communist society. Drawing on an empirical analysis of Lithuania, a new European Union member state and former Soviet republic, the post-communist trajectory of neo-liberal economic and social development is critiqued. Global economic and financial crisis has resulted in a social and economic 'shock'. It occurred in an environment already marked by disappointment, alienation and high outward migration. Through an analysis of 'voice' expressed in 'discourses of discontent', the article attempts to chart the impact of 'hard times'. It predicts a new 'exit' in the form of a surge of outward migration resulting from the failures of 'voice', and the concerning possibility of 'internal exit'.

Keywords
discourse, economic crisis, labour migration, Lithuania, neo-liberalism, post-communism, social protest

> Many days you have lingered too long around my door
> Oh hard times come again no more
> (19th-century American popular song, Stephen C. Foster)

The Lithuanian journalist, Milda Seputyte, reminds us of an iconic moment in her country's journey towards independence from the Soviet Union in which Vytautas

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Landsbergis, leader of the independence movement, stands before an enraptured audience of a half-million fellow citizens, asking 'Do you want to be free?'. 'A loud affirmative response roars over the throng, and Landsbergis continues: "But it will be hard. Will you persevere?" Again, "YES!" booms through the crowd' (Seputyte, 2005).

In 1989, two million citizens of the Baltic States joined hands in a human chain along the length of the Via Baltica highway from Tallinn, capital of Estonia in the north, through to Riga in Latvia, and ending in Lithuania's capital city of Vilnius in the south. In the largest demonstration in human history, the three Baltic nations gave 'voice' to their collective desire for freedom. Twenty years later, Lithuania's 2009 Eurovision television song contest entry was enlivened in its final moments, as the vocalist opened the palm of his hand to reveal a burning flame illuminating a background placard upon which was inscribed a single word – 'HOPE'. This forlorn declaration on behalf of tiny Lithuania's suffering population, daily sinking deeper into a crisis-induced morass of despair, failed to move the multi-million audience of the Eurovision extravaganza. Lithuania's entry was voted into second to last place. These two moments symbolically benchmark not only the tumultuous pathway from Soviet republic to new European Union (EU) member state, but also how far contemporary post-communist Lithuania has travelled between expectation and disappointment in the space of just one generation.

This article ethnographically explores popular responses to the impacts of the global economic and financial crisis in Lithuania. It analyses emergent 'discourses of discontent' resulting from the collapse of mass living standards and expectations with its onset. It suggests that the failure of 'voice', as manifested in expressions of popular discontent and social dialogue, will result in migratory 'exit' of many of the disillusioned and increasingly desperate populace. The impact of the crisis is all the more severe, given previously burgeoning economic growth and rising expectations. Post-communist states such as Lithuania, having embraced a neo-liberal path of rapid economic transition to the free market, with minimal regard to considerations of social justice, now face gathering popular discontent and social turbulence, on a scale which perhaps outmatches that which led to the fall of communism.

The neo-liberal 'Baltic Tiger'

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s, all three Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, have distinguished themselves in their ardent adoption of neo-liberal policies of economic and social reconfiguration (Aidukaite, 2009; Bohle and Greskovits, 2007). The Baltic States, in particular, received a special accolade from the World Bank for their zeal in introducing free market 'reforms' and encouraging inwards foreign investment by promoting a business-friendly climate (World Bank, 2005). Ideas of social equity and inclusive citizenship, in the context of welfare state protection for the disadvantaged, the poor and the vulnerable, found no resonance in the pro-business policies of both

conservative and former communist parties that governed Lithuania since independence. For the new elites, US-style neo-liberalism seemed to offer the appropriate political and economic model, even to the extent of importing a US citizen of Lithuanian origin, Valdas Adamkus, to take office as the president of the republic.

The result, at least until the onset of global recession, has been deemed an 'economic miracle'. With GDP expansion at 8.9 percent per annum in 2007, following an increase of 7.8 percent in 2006, the Lithuanian economy experienced among the highest levels of growth in the European Union, even though slowing to a still respectable 3.1 percent in 2008 (BTI, 2009). The economic downturn, therefore, represented a reversal of the seemingly endless vista of increasing living standards and rising GDP, in what had been previously dubbed a 'Baltic Tiger' economy (*Economist*, 2003).

The onset of the crisis therefore was a cataclysmic social and economic 'shock', but without the ideological rationalization of the 'bitter medicine' necessary to cure the inherited economic ills of socialist planning, as was argued during the chaotic early years of transition in the first part of the 1990s (Berend, 2007). It resulted in an unprecedented level of popular protests, not seen since the pro-independence demonstrations of the late 1980s. Social unrest has involved trade union protest actions and violent riots. These manifestations of discontent were among the first such protests in Europe. This uniquely unfavourable conjuncture frames the analysis presented here.

This article proceeds as follows: Albert Hirschman's (1970, 1993) paradigm of 'voice/exit' is used to examine reactions of an angry populace in response to government-imposed cuts in living standards. To deepen this analysis theoretically, a Marxist 'social dialogics' is utilized, based on the seminal writings of the early Soviet scholar, Valentin N. Voloshinov. The article suggests that there has been a 'double failure' of 'voice' in contemporary Lithuania – both of orderly institutionalized social dialogue between labour and capital, and of ongoing public protest. In combination, these failures seem likely to intensify a new wave of outward mass migration. A 'second surge' is predicted, possibly exceeding the mass emigration which accompanied the accession of Lithuania to the European Union in 2004. But it is also suggested that 'exit' may take an 'internal' form, in withdrawal from democratic politics and rising populism (Berezin, 2009). These outcomes can be seen not only as the results of the global economic and financial crisis, but of the longer-term flawed trajectory of neo-liberalism in post-communist society. The analysis presented, therefore, has wider implications for those countries in Eastern Europe which have chosen a similar path of social and economic transition.

The 'voice/exit' paradigm

A brief outline of Hirschman's (1970) theory follows. It has an elegant but subtle simplicity which, while not without its critics and including critical re-interpretations by its author (Hirschman, 1993), has nevertheless achieved ubiquity in the

study of organizational failure. Hirschman was concerned with the choices people make in terms of either protesting ('voice') or abandoning ('exit') organizations of which they have been a member in the face of deteriorating performance. For current purposes we can note that the 'voice'/'exit' paradigm has also provided a framework of analysis in the field of migration studies (Brubaker, 1990; Hughes, 2005; Meardi, 2007) but not, so far, in the field of cultural studies.

Hirschman pointed out that organizational performance can deteriorate – often for random causes – in terms of the *quality* of the product, services or benefits it offers to its members. His analysis attempted to anticipate the alternative responses to the perceived *disappointment of expectations*. Contrasting potential responses of 'voice' and 'exit' were outlined. Both are seen as potentially corrective in some sense, leading to recovery or improvement, as managers take action to hold onto customers, or leaderships try to address the concerns of members departing from the organization. 'Voice' (often a collective response) takes the form of expression of dissatisfaction through 'general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen' (Hirschman, 1970: 4) whereas 'exit' tends to be an individualistic decision, a kind of silent protest. A confounding factor – 'loyalty' – tends to delay 'exit' and legitimize 'voice', that is, people may be reluctant to leave organizations they may have invested with emotional and social capital, and therefore feel they have a right to complain. 'Exit', says Hirschman, belongs to the realm of economics, whereas 'voice' belongs to the realm of politics. Both 'exit' and 'voice' therefore can operate as 'recuperative mechanisms' that allow 'organizational recovery'.

Hirschman envisaged the possibility that the 'exit/voice seesaw' (he eschews the term 'dialectic') could become unbalanced in certain extreme situations. In these circumstances, where 'exit' and 'voice' mutually reinforce each other, recovery might not be possible as organizational performance deteriorates beyond a point of no return. In his 'conceptual essay' in *World Politics*, Hirschman (1993) applied this theory to the collapse of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR), analysing popular protests and the migratory 'exit' of citizens from East to West as the Berlin Wall crumbled. Hirschman substantiated his analysis of currents and counter-currents among the populace through analysis of the slogans and 'voiced' demands of protesters in the streets of Leipzig and Dresden. This approach to failing social and economic systems informs the current analysis, but the notion of 'voice' is given a specifically Marxist 'turn'.

'Voice' – a Marxist view

Hirschman's notion of 'voice' is often applied in a somewhat uni-dimensional and unproblematic manner, inadequately differentiating its 'inner' dynamic interplay in contexts where it offers not just a passive expression of discontent but an emergent *critique* of the established order. This emergent critique can be discerned in the 'discourses of discontent', comprising spoken utterances of participants in social protests, ordinary people's voices captured in news reports, slogans on banners and

placards, and protest manifestos and declarations. These are 'dialogic' statements of discontent 'from below', addressed to the ruling authorities and posing uncomfortable, even potentially incompatible questions about the new social order of post-communism. Very often, such dialogic protest takes a moralistic accusatory tone, addressing issues of fairness and social justice in society, of the perceived betrayal of the promises of what a 'free' democratic Lithuania should offer to its citizens. In the current article, the development of more challenging 'transgressive' discourses is revealed, pointing in previously unimagined directions (Huspek, 2009).

Theoretically, this approach draws on Valentin N. Voloshinov's masterwork, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (translated 1973). Voloshinov's Marxist socio-linguistics has been developed by a number of scholars in active theoretical critique of both structuralist and Habermasian approaches to social discourse analysis (Brandist, 2000; Collins, 1999; Foster and Woolfson, 1999; Gardiner, 1992; Gunson and Collins, 1997; Holborow, 2007; Jones, 2004; Welty, 1989). It has also been productively employed by Stuart Hall, who described Voloshinov as 'that very great Marxist theoretician of language' (Hall, 1981: 235) when constructing his own field-defining elaboration of ideology and popular culture (Hall, 1977). Paul Willis and Mats Trondman (2000: 8), in their 'original manifesto' in the pages of the inaugural issue of this journal, also attempt to define a new cultural studies, calling for an ethnography distinct from contemporary post-modernist and 'post-structuralist' analyses. Voloshinov's concrete and historical method in the study of social dialogue offers the opportunity to develop a Marxist ethnography that goes some way towards meeting this challenge.

Voloshinov assigned priority to language as the lived experiential linguistic sign, realized in the form of contested spoken utterances, themselves seen as the vehicle of ideological social consciousness. As Voloshinov (1973: 15) noted:

> Every ideological refraction of existence in the process of generation, no matter what the nature of its significant material, is accompanied by ideological refraction in word as an obligatory concomitant phenomenon.

The dialogic realization of utterances is contingent upon the underlying processes of new forms of emergent social identity conditioned by class relations. However, language is no mere mechanistic reflection of the struggle of base with superstructure. Voloshinov identified not simply the reflection of reality in signs but its ideologized refraction, infusing an 'inner dialectical quality' in word meaning (Voloshinov, 1973: 23). This dialectical tension creates a clash of 'differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community' representing the ambiguous nature of 'voice' (Voloshinov, 1973: 41). The refraction of class struggle is registered in what Voloshinov (1973: 23) termed the 'social multiaccentuality' of the ideological sign, in which theme and form of sign are inextricably interconnected and ultimately determined by these sets of

contested forces:

> Indeed, the economic conditions that inaugurate a new element of reality into the social purview, that make it socially meaningful and 'interesting,' are exactly the same conditions that create the forms of ideological communication (the cognitive, the artistic, the religious and so on), which in turn shape the forms of semiotic expression. (1973: 22–3)

For present purposes, the 'new element of reality' is the complex unfolding of social identities, as the market economies of post-communism experience the destabilizing impacts of the deep economic and financial crisis. Within this altered world, the specific refraction of reality which each ideological sphere attains through the semiotic materiality of signs achieves particular clarity in dialogic discourses of social protest. The new order appears to be failing and this poses profoundly challenging questions to its rulers for which no clear answers exist. Dialogic discourse allows us to begin to analyse changing forms of social consciousness, or in Voloshinovian terms, 'behavioural ideology', a term that is useful in emphasizing the connective threads between the lived experience of social change and its complex signification in language. As Voloshinov (1973: 23) suggested:

> The word is the most sensitive index of social changes, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularized and fully defined ideological systems. The word has the capacity to register all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change.

But the indexical potential of words, in providing a window into changing social consciousness, is also conditioned by ideological interventions which are themselves politically and socially 'motivated' by the need to retain and preserve the current hegemonic order from contestation. This contestation 'from above' is not new.

Over the period of two decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, an attempt has been made to impose non-class 'shared' assumptions in the common project of transition. This has been an acutely 'necessary' form of the state's ideological intervention, given the fraught social tensions created by the spiralling inequalities of post-communist society. Insider-led privatizations, coercion and gangsterism accompanied the appropriation of state assets by the new (old) elites, laying the foundations for an enduring 'symbiosis of politics and crime' (Juska and Johnstone, 2004). Economic reconfiguration was a violent 'smash and grab' process (Fearon and Laitin, 2006: 20).

The majority of the population experienced the trauma of transformation to the market system as coercive economic dispossession. These costs translated into a

pervasive pessimism and social alienation which is still the defining characteristic of contemporary Lithuanian society. Even before the onset of crisis, authoritative survey evidence pointed to Lithuania as among a group of European countries in which people reported 'particularly low life satisfaction, happiness and life fulfilment' (Anderson et al., 2009: 22). Whatever the benefits for the few, the transition to capitalism came at a high price for the many.

Thus, faced with the need to secure at least a minimum of social cohesion, the new ruling elites of post-communism have attempted to give a supra-class or eternal and 'immutable' quality to word meaning in language, and therefore to perceived reality. Above all, it has been necessary to forestall any 'backward-looking' or yearning for the securities of the previous era. There has been resistance by the emergent elites to rights-based social justice demands, and to collective discourses of 'fairness' in society (Matonyte, 2006). The *absent* nature of this discourse has been achieved through explicit deployment of the rhetoric of anti-communism, together with a philosophy of 'hyper-individualism' on the one hand, and the promotion of a supra-class ideology of the 'common interests' of a united *'Lietuva'* (the Nation of Lithuania) on the other.

At the same time, the new order has explicitly *de*-legitimized class perspectives. In this post-communist rhetorical landscape, the assertion of independent working-class 'voice' has found almost no space. The sociologist Rasa Balockaite perceptively describes the process of marginalization in which the dispossessed 'new poor' have been rendered 'voiceless':

> These people did not master the new language of power – the market economy and political liberalism – and were left adrift outside of the public discourse. Their pauperization was reinforced by the shift in ideological guidelines; while socialist ideology was based on collectivist righteousness and pride of the working class, the new liberal regime emphasized personal ability and individual success. The very term 'working class' became disgraced and discredited. (2009: 16)

Nevertheless, new realities generate dialogical 'tension' between idealized 'non-class' representations and the lived experience of the excluded majority. This disjuncture creates what Voloshinov called semiotic 'flux'. The continuing potential for flux critically poses socially disruptive challenges to the assumptions underlying the new social and economic order. In turn, the recognition of such challenges may require that they be 'defused' by a partial dialogic (re)incorporation in the supra-class ideology of the state. The discourses of discontent become the privileged site upon which a more or less fierce and ongoing 'socially interested' interrogation of contested signs between labour and capital takes place. This article suggests that in the (re)discovery of 'voice' in popular protests, a dynamic dialectical flux has been set in motion in which themes of social justice, if not of class, have been re-legitimized in collectivist discourses of discontent. First, the economic contours of the crisis are sketched.

Crisis in Lithuania

The free market policies that produced seemingly endless growth in the Baltic economies in recent years were largely based on 'bubble' economics. Rising living standards were a result of property speculation and an orgy of profligate personal consumption fuelled by cheap foreign credits, courtesy mainly of Swedish banks. The economy was not re-built upon long-term investment in productive industries. As a result, the Baltic States were already economically vulnerable to a 'hard landing' which was exacerbated by the problems in the global financial system.

All three Baltic countries experienced sharp economic contraction with declining output, a severe 'correction' in property prices, and reduced income and consumer consumption levels, as well as widespread unemployment. By the spring of 2009, the European Commission economic forecast for the Baltic States was gloomy, and for Lithuania particularly so, with the economic downturn predicted to be 'deeper and more protracted than previously assumed' (European Commission, 2009a: 80). Lithuania has had the distinction of experiencing the most severe aggregate fall in GDP in the EU. In the first quarter of 2009, GDP plunged 13.6 percent (Statistics Lithuania, 2009a). This fall became precipitate, reaching 22.4 percent year-on-year in the second quarter (Statistics Lithuania, 2009b). The largest increases in the unemployment rates in the EU from June 2008 to June 2009 were also observed in the Baltic States: in Lithuania (from 5.1 to 15.8 percent), in Latvia (from 6.4 to 17.2 percent) and in Estonia (from 4.6 to 17.0 percent). By June 2009, youth unemployment in Lithuania had reached 31.0 percent, second only to Spain at 36.5 percent, compared with an average rate of 19.6 percent for the EU27 (Eurostat, 2009a). Measured against the same month of the previous year, by June 2009, the country's industrial production dropped by an extraordinary 41.3 percent, the sharpest fall among EU member states which experienced an average decline of 24.0 percent (Eurostat, 2009b). The number of the unemployed in the first quarter of 2009 reached 194,000, the level of the year 2004. The largest numbers of persons dismissed were from industrial enterprises (35,000) and from the construction industry (29,000), with high rates of unemployment appearing not just in traditional manufacturing regions but, for the first time, in the capital city (Statistics Lithuania, 2009c). By the end of the second quarter of 2009, there were 223,000 officially registered unemployed nationally and by the first quarter of 2010 over 293,000 or 18.1 percent (Statistics Lithuania, 2010a).

Thus, the three Baltic States had the unwelcome distinction of suffering the economic effects of the crisis in the most acute form in the European Union with their currencies, banking systems and economies verging on collapse (*Economist*, 2009a). In terms of the attendant social consequences, the European Commission noted that while all EU countries were damaged by the global crisis:

> . . . in some countries situations of hardship are more widespread, and some populations are likely to be more severely affected by the economic downturn than others. In Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Latvia, *more than one third of the*

population see their living conditions severely affected by a lack of resources. (European Commission, 2009b: 19, emphasis added)

Neighbouring Latvia was forced to seek a 7.5 billion euro bailout from international lenders led by the International Monetary Fund. This support was conditional, however, on stringent cuts in public expenditure, including the closure of schools and hospitals. Lithuania also was saddled with a huge budget deficit of 4.8 billion litas (1.4 billion euros), accounting for up to 4.8 percent of GDP, but managed to avoid recourse to the IMF. The centre-right coalition government, led by the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats (TS-LKDP) party of prime minister Andrius Kubilius, proposed a series of draconian measures to address the deficit. These entailed swinging financial cuts in the public sector, including reductions in state pensions and social support, substantial wage cuts (from 10 percent to 30 percent for state employees), as well as increases in value added tax (VAT) on certain products of up to six times.

The strategy of 'internal devaluation' was replicated by governments across the three Baltic States in an attempt to save the national currencies from collapse and retain their 'peg' to the euro. The 'hard landing' became all the harder as Swedish banks through their local subsidiaries, having significantly overexposed themselves to potential defaults, now embarked upon severe financial retrenchment. 'Internal' devaluation was nevertheless preferable from the point of view of the government to an 'external' currency devaluation. It would offer the foreign banks some possibility of securing loan repayments, mostly denominated in euros rather than in local currencies, and avoid the extensive business bankruptcies or defaults among mortgage holders that would accompany a currency devaluation. The Baltic States also had significant potential to produce economic instability in the form of a wider regional 'contagion' of competitive devaluations which might spread across the European Union (*Economist*, 2009b). To avoid this, living standards of the population needed to be radically reduced.

The January protest

The anti-crisis measures of the new Lithuanian government were hastily devised and rushed into law in day and night sessions during December of 2008 in order to be in place before the start of the new taxation year. Traditional consultative processes with the 'social partners', for example, the trade unions, were simply pushed aside as likely to impose unacceptable delays. The trade unions repeatedly requested the continuation of the 'social dialogue' that they had established with previous administrations. Their expressed concerns over the effects of proposed government measures on their members had received no response. Drastic 'belt-tightening' measures were to be proposed and enacted without consultation. For the trade unions, although organizationally and numerically relatively weak, this absence of social dialogue in a time of national crisis was unacceptable. It was a direct threat to maintaining their credibility as organizations claiming to represent the interests of working people. For the first time in the post-independence period,

the notoriously fractious competing national trade union confederations publicly united around a common set of demands. Collectively, they called for a popular demonstration scheduled for 16 January 2009. This event took place one week after a similar demonstration in Latvia which had ended in disorder and riot.

The trade unions planned their protest action to comprise a short gathering outside the parliament in Vilnius, followed by an orderly march down the main thoroughfare, Gedimino Avenue, in order to hand in their written demands to the government headquarters (*Delfi*, 2009a). In the event, some 7000 persons, both young and old, gathered in freezing temperatures and heavy snowfall, in one of the largest popular gatherings since independence. Co-ordinated trade union-led protests also took place in at least half a dozen towns and cities, such as Klaipeda, Siauliai and Panevezys, places that had rarely or never seen trade union demonstrations before on this scale.

The demands of the trade unions were comprehensive and worth careful scrutiny, calling on government: 1) to guarantee social benefits for anyone who is unemployed that they should be able to survive; 2) not to introduce education study and health care reforms according to which people on low and middle incomes need to pay for services; 3) to introduce taxation in order to reduce social inequalities (progressive taxes) so that state expenses should be covered to a greater degree by better-off people; 4) to introduce a property tax; 5) to create a clear indexation system for minimum wages and social guarantees; 6) to guarantee social benefits and pensions, halting the transfer of funds from state social insurance to private insurance funds; 7) to oblige employers to provide explanations to the unemployment exchange, state labour inspectorate and municipality as to the specific reasons for redundancies and imposed salary cuts; 8) to halt liberalization of labour relations legislation, and to strengthen state control for legal violations; in addition, all social and economic questions to be discussed on the Tripartite Board (for social dialogue between employers, government and trade unions); 9) to preserve government obligations towards employees in the state sector, and restore previous existing salary grades; 10) to create transparency in energy pricing; 11) to reduce VAT to previous levels on pharmaceutical drugs, medical equipment, heating, food products, books, newspapers and public transport; 12) to avoid structural public sector reforms which would require additional financing; 13) to prevent dismantling and privatization of strategic national resources; 14) to introduce measures that would prevent families who have lost jobs and income being evicted from their homes for non-payment of credit loans.

These demands, of a defensive nature, were a clear reflection of the myriad problems facing working people as a result of the onset of the crisis. They were precisely the kind of issues that the trade unions had come to expect to be consulted upon within the established framework of neo-corporatist 'social dialogue'. This social dialogue had not occurred, and now it was time to make their 'voice' heard.

The slogans on the banners and placards carried by demonstrators, many of them 'home-made', offer an insight into the shifting consciousness of a formerly largely passive working class. Invocations of labour solidarity, familiar in the West

but unusual in the Lithuanian context, were to be seen: 'Our power is in being united! For workers' rights!' alongside another demanding 'For the Lithuanian worker – a European salary.' Hand-painted placards were held up, many clearly sketched out the previous evening on kitchen tables and living room floors: the derisory character of these placards was different in tone to the more sober trade union banners. 'Jokers out from Parliament! Freedom for word and press!!!' said one. Another read: 'A. Brazauskas – why have you stopped progressive taxation?' This last was a pointed reference to Algirdas Brazauskas, one of the leaders of the independence movement, former Communist Party leader and subsequently two-times social democrat president of the new republic. Brazauskas and his ex-communist colleagues set Lithuania on its neo-liberal course, rejecting progressive taxation in favour of a flat tax pro-business regime designed to attract foreign investment on the most favourable terms. A Rabeliasian riposte was displayed in another banner: 'Let's tax the ''fart'' coming out of Parliament!!' On yet another was written, 'If this is the way it's going to be – NAFIK' (It's a DICK!). A recurrent theme was the concise condemnation, 'The parliament are thieves'. One banner asked, 'Who is the president, parliament and government serving?' Small business, for which the imposed increases in VAT were crippling burdens, pleaded, 'Stop business collapse'. Here, in embryo, was the rudiment of a political alliance between organized workers and small capital, against the large capitalist groupings dominating the economy, and in whose interests government was perceived as serving.

While outside on the streets protesters gave 'voice' to their dissatisfactions, the leader of parliament, a former TV showman, Arunas Valinskas, heading a new populist political party in the governing coalition, the Rising Nation Party, was discovered by journalists lunching in one of the best Old Town restaurants, patronized by the capital's 'great and good'. In response to awkward questions Valinskas offered his now much-derided TV catchphrase, 'NAFIK!' Two leading government ministers were confronted by journalists as they dined in the plush glass-fronted second-floor restaurant of the Novotel hotel, enjoying a grandstand view overlooking Gedimino Avenue of the demonstration in front of government headquarters.

Meanwhile, still outside the parliament, the Frontas Party leader, Algirdas Paleckis, attempted to lead a delegation to speak with government ministers. Frontas was a new political force with radical leftist policies – something previously unknown in the Lithuanian context. Its stated objectives included: '*To create a socially just Lithuania,* where there is no gap between the rich minority and the poor majority, between the large owners of capital and the rest of society' (Frontas website, emphasis added). Frontas's leader admitted to the foreign press that his party 'reluctantly omits ''socialism'' from its name' because it has 'heavy negative connotations' (*The Observer*, 2009). Outside the doors of the parliament, Paleckis, emboldened by the vociferous crowd behind, pressed forward: 'I want to meet someone from the parliament secretariat. I want to speak with people who work at Valinskas's office', he demanded. At this point snowballs began to rain down on assembled police officers guarding the doors of the parliament, while

windows were pelted with eggs and stones. With Paleckis leading the chorus with the help of a megaphone, the demonstrators chanted: 'VAL-IN-SKAS! VAL-IN-SKAS!' Sensing that the atmosphere was turning volatile, Paleckis called out: 'Everyone calm down – we are going to negotiate with them.' Angry crowd shouts could be heard of: – 'WE ARE WAITING!' The embattled and dispirited police officers guarding the parliament doors were taunted by calls from the crowd: 'YOU LIVE FOR OUR MONEY. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU ARE PROTECTING THIEVES!' Chants again began to swell up of 'WHY? WHY? WHY?' and 'AWAY WITH THIEVES! AWAY WITH THIEVES!' Television cameras record Paleckis at the door of the parliament: 'Can you invite someone from the government?' 'No, sorry', replied the police officer. A somewhat crest-fallen Paleckis called out: 'We are not going to meet. I am asking everyone to go right now to government headquarters to meet Kubilius.' Angry protesters began enthusiastically kicking a placard bearing a caricature of the prime minister. By then, events had begun to take a momentum of their own.

One hapless politician was brave enough to venture forth from the parliament building in order to speak with the demonstrators. Arturas Zuokas, businessman and leader of the Liberal and Centre Union party, received an egg on his head for his trouble and soon departed. Thereafter, the television records an unknown man going forward, Lithuanian flag in hand, initiating a doorway crush. Turning to the crowd, he called out: 'Why are you waiting? – Let's go!' The surge forward pushed aside the police cordon. Demonstrators hammered in anger on the locked doors of the parliament. From seemingly nowhere, a flare exploded. The phase of riot had begun.

Formations of helmeted riot police appeared in full body armour, wearing black balaclavas and tear-gas masks, carrying truncheons and shields, armed with rubber bullet rifles and accompanied by dogs. Some were wearing battle fatigues. Nothing like this had been seen since the days of an abortive Soviet military intervention in January 1991 which cost the lives of 13 demonstrators. As one demonstrator shouted, 'When we elect them, they shut the doors and call in the army and don't come out to speak.' Confronting the demonstrators were riot police supported by the Public Security Service, a paramilitary unit answering to the Ministry of Interior, comprising about a thousand hand-picked officers with a remit that included the suppression of riots and civil unrest (King et al., 2007).

Their arrival was the trigger for a formerly relatively peaceful demonstration to turn into something far uglier. For the next few hours, as pavements were torn up to provide missiles, police and rioters hurled tear-gas canisters at each other in running battles. In an attempt to force demonstrators back from the parliament building, the main thoroughfare was sealed off. Thick clouds of tear gas drifted across Independence Square adjacent to the parliament.

The 'demonstration-cum-riot', as the local press liked to describe it, saw some acts of wanton hooliganism, including attacks on vehicles, casualties on both sides, and over 150 arrested, with several dozen subsequently sentenced to periods of imprisonment. One demonstrator had a finger severed by a rubber bullet, while

another was hit in the face, although miraculously, there were no fatalities. Further threatened disturbances later that same evening were quickly quelled by riot police. The following morning, the media carried claims by the authorities of a firearm being discharged during the fracas. Photographs showed a neat row of Molotov cocktails primed and ready, 'discovered' near the parliament building. 'There are forces that are interested in destabilization and chaos in Lithuania, and they are using the public's dismay over painful reforms to achieve their hostile plans', said prime minister Kubilius. For the ruling class, nothing short of orchestrated conspiracy could explain these tumultuous events, a conspiracy that by insinuation, and with the assiduous support of a compliant press, was increasingly laid at the door of the firebrand Frontas's party leader, Paleckis. Subsequently, however the leaders of the three trade union confederations appeared in court, charged with failing to ensure public order during the demonstration by keeping demonstrators the prescribed distance of 75 meters from the parliament building. Although eventually acquitted of these charges, which carried fines and imprisonment, they indicated how far the state was prepared to go to intimidate or silence dissent. In post-communist Lithuania there is an imperceptible line between legitimate social dissent and perceived subversion.

Voices from the crowd

Comments made by participants during the January protest provide indications of shifts in mass consciousness reflected in the 'discourses of discontent'. In response to the question by journalists 'Why are you unhappy?', one man held up a plastic bag of almost worthless white 'cent' coins. 'I paid so much taxes that this is all I have left' he said. Said another, 'This is not what we imagined. We imagined a completely different Lithuania. All people want justice. If they accept that new law which the government wants, to lower the minimum wage from 800 litas [232 euros per month], then I don't know what will happen to Lithuania.' For older people, the crisis measures were especially unacceptable. The average old age pension was 241 euros per month for a person completing the full compulsory qualifying period. As one pensioner put it, 'Well I worked 45 years and I only get 900 litas [261 euros] before tax. So it's enough to pay the utilities and to buy food. But I also need money for clothes and it's not enough for that.' Another reflected his sense of exclusion in the new Lithuania:

> We people rebuilt Vilnius after the war when it was completely destroyed. But these days no one cares about that. The government says everything is ours and you can't have anything … I used to be a machinist at my work. I used to get enough money. And now, I pay taxes and I've got 100 litas [29 euros] left. And Valinskas also wants to raise the taxes so that I will have 50 litas left soon.

But this was not the protest of those simply nostalgic for Soviet times. Another commented, 'I think you shouldn't tax people but you should tax houses.'

One protester accused: 'We are living in a criminal world and a world of lies. But the worst thing is when Lithuania completely collapses, the old generation and the new generations will be buried together under the ruins.' And continuing this theme with eloquent outrage, 'We need to change the system because the only people who are doing well now are a bunch of arrogant parasites. We are run for the last 19 years by garbage, and it should be the other way. Because the really good people who can actually do something are on the bottom, because trash managed to take over Lithuania.' The perception that the livelihood of people had been stolen was a recurrent theme. It was ubiquitously present in chants of demonstrators: 'The parliament are thieves.' It imbued their discourses with a moral accusatory tone that challenged the legitimacy of the political system.

A more analytical articulation was provided by those who, as part of a professional political class, sought to 'speak for' the people. Frontas leader Paleckis proclaimed: 'We are against this system and the government which is pauperizing Lithuanians. Now they are attacking small businesses. Before, Lithuanians used to emigrate, but now they are staying and fighting for their rights' (*Baltic Times*, 2009a). This may have been wishful thinking, but it was nevertheless an understanding of the interrelationship of 'voice' and 'exit'. An equally telling comment was provided by Edvardas Satkevicius, author of a book on Lithuanian surnames. Comparing the forced losses of population during the Soviet period to the scale of emigration since independence, he expostulated: 'In the Soviet Union, 138,000 Lithuanians were deported to Siberia. Today after the new Lithuanian state, two million have gone – that is fifteen times more. The government has destroyed the Lithuanian nation,' adding for good measure: 'I don't like Kubilius – he is one of those who have created the genocide of the Lithuanian nation' (*Baltic Times*, 2009a).

The use of the word 'genocide' in this context offers a remarkable example of the imparting of new word meaning in the context of the inauguration of new elements of social reality. 'Genocide' in Lithuania has had a very specific, almost hallowed meaning. The memory of Lithuania's 'genocide' is institutionally embodied in the Vilnius Museum of Genocide. However, this grim exhibition chronicles the brutalities of the Soviet occupation and the heroism of partisan resistance. The holocaust against Lithuania's Jewry, 90 percent of whom perished between 1941 and 1945, many at the hands of their fellow Lithuanians, receives but a single sentence mention in the exposition. In condemning the current government for 'genocide' the speaker *transgresses* the accepted use of this totemic term in the lexicon of anti-communism. There could be no more acute condemnation of government failure.

These sometimes disparate voices were those of ordinary people seeking to make sense of how they had reached this debacle; *they* had '*rebuilt*' their city but now were excluded, *they* wanted a fairer and more '*just*' Lithuania, but were ruled by '*arrogant parasites*' and '*trash*'. 'Exit' was not their preferred route for those who demonstrated outside the parliament. This was the 'voice' of those who wished to stay, at least for the moment. The 'loyalty' of the protesters was best captured in

the ubiquitous waving of the national flag throughout the protest. A vivid expression of such 'loyalty' was the creative 'compilation' of two Lithuanian flags carried by one young trade union demonstrator. The first flag, in the national yellow, green and red stripes of Lithuania, was complemented by a second smaller flag also in national colours, but bearing the logo of the Lithuanian basketball team, the sporting obsession of the male population. These two flags on a single extended flagpole, and waved with huge gusto, symbolically declared the 'hyper-patriotism' of this ultra-loyal *Lithuanian*.

A 'darker' kind of 'voice'

In Kaunas, the second city of Lithuania, and its nationalist heartland, a more problematic protest took place the following day. It was led by Vytautas Sustauskas, a former member of parliament, ex-mayor of Kaunas and the one-time controversial populist leader of the Lithuanian Freedom Union. He first gained notoriety as a self-appointed 'champion of the poor', when the brash new high-society elite of Lithuania inaugurated a 'Viennese ball' in Vilnius town hall. Sustauskas organized a 'march of the poor' in the square outside, as an alternative 'party'. The ball was cancelled the following year, and only re-instated as a regular event when the threat from 'the poor' subsided. Among statements which subsequently caused Sustauskas to face impeachment proceedings in parliament were: 'There will not be order until we'll march through the parliament with Kalashnikovs'. His anti-Semitic outburst was also widely reported: 'If Hitler wouldn't have killed the Jews, I'd now have to shine their shoes in the middle of Freedom Avenue' (Kaunas's central thoroughfare). Rejected in a parliamentary re-election contest in 2004, he had thereafter retired from political life.

With some 400 supporters assembled outside Kaunas municipality headquarters, Sustauskas seized the opportunity of the hour:

> We were silent for a long time. This was my fault, but God has given me a second chance to complete my mission in Lithuania. Today the most important thing is not that we are already poor and downtrodden, but the most important is that we don't have our Fatherland (*Tevyne*) because one fifth of Lithuania already went out (emigrated).

While Sustauskas might be dismissed as an easy target for derision, the same could not be said for the more sinister Mindaugas Murza, one-time leader of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Party and former member of Siauliai city municipal council. Also long known for his anti-Semitic statements, Murza spoke that day as neo-fascist flags emblazoned with an 'Iron Cross' flapped around his head:

> We are for a new Lithuania. Today in Lithuania there is no democracy. We want to dismantle the oligarchic system. Lithuania doesn't have democracy. You have to understand this. Democracy existed in Lithuania … [but] little by little the oligarchs have started to rule. (Delfi, 2009b)

Such populist sentiments were amplified by placards depicting crude caricatures of political figures. One asked: 'Mr. Kubilius – how much did you receive from the Finns for privatizing Telecom, how much from the Americans for *Mažeikių* refinery?' This placard, referring to the contemporary sell-off of the state-owned telephone network and to the earlier shady privatization of Lithuania's major oil refinery, depicted the prime minister sitting on a large 'moneybag'. Still other placards were more threatening, a waiting gallows for the country's leaders: 'A. Kubilius, V. Adamkus, A. Brazauskas, A. Paulauskas – during 19 years deserve only a loop.' Some echoed the sentiments of Murza: 'Away with oligarchs, tyrants and dictatorship!' Here was a 'darker' kind of 'voice', one that had abandoned the democratic process and perceived only a new totalitarianism as an alternative to a 'criminal' ruling class. Such voices reflected the deep undercurrents of populism and authoritarianism which have long characterized the nation's politics.

Muted protest

Social protests in Lithuania continued throughout 2009, but in an increasingly 'muted' form. Rather than a gathering tide of protest, there were increasingly symbolic protests involving particular groups of workers or citizen interests. Popular mobilizations on a scale of the January protest were not repeated. In the aftermath of the disorder and the subsequent court proceedings, trade union leaders seemed to have been dissuaded from risking further social unrest for which they might be held responsible. Protests continued sporadically only where groups of workers had some strength in organization. In early April, there was an attempt at a cross-border Baltic protest, with workers in Riga and Vilnius simultaneous staging protests against pay cuts. The main activities, however, took place in Latvia, with an estimated 10,000 education and science workers demonstrating against pay cuts of 20 percent or more. In Vilnius, around 150 police officers, fire-fighters and border guards facing pay cuts and budget reductions led a procession to government buildings, with smaller demonstrations taking place in several outlying regions. Some police officers marched 'barefoot'. Their message was: 'I am cheap – You are not safe.' Another complained, 'I Once Had a Pair of Shoes, Thank You for Taking Both of Them', while a third declared, 'Barefoot policemen – the nation is in danger'. One attacked the government's anti-regulation body, the so-called 'Sunset Commission'. 'Sunset for Officers, Sunrise for the Mafia', it warned. As before, no government representatives met with the protesters, prompting union leaders to threaten a nationwide rally. They were further angered when it was revealed that the Interior Minister, with whom they had sought discussions, had reportedly lost a list of key union demands (*Baltic Times*, 2009b).

In late April, further protests took place against a new round of cuts in the state budget for social insurance under the banner of 'Defend Social Guarantees'. Conducted at the stipulated regulation distance from the front of the parliament building, this dignified but ineffectual gathering of trade union leaders consisted of the permitted number of nine persons, accompanied by a handful of supporters.

In early June, a larger gathering of more than 400 medical staff, patients and doctors from various districts was held outside the parliament to protest changes in medical staff working hours. 'I'm tired – you're dead', said one placard. 'Health ministry has a crisis of mind', said another. 'Today – a Minister, tomorrow – a corpse', predicted banners draped along a line of ambulance vehicles. When the health minister stepped out to talk with the crowd, he was greeted with shouts of 'Shame on you!' (*Baltic Times*, 2009c).

In mid-June 2009, further measures were announced as government sought to reduce the state budget by up to 30 percent. These included reductions in public-sector pay, cuts in parental benefits of one third, and increases in VAT of up to 21 percent. 'If we do nothing, the deficit may reach eight to 10 percent next year', warned the prime minister (*Eubusiness*, 2009a). By late June, it was the turn of 'mothers and fathers' facing reduced parental benefits to take to the streets. A demonstration originally planned to involve a thousand people, supported by leading music stars, was banned by the municipal authorities citing fears of public disorder. Organizers were forced to reduce the number of those taking part to the regulation nine persons, while supporting mothers and fathers with prams looked on (*Delfi*, 2009c). Placards reflected the 'novice' nature of the event: 'Excuse me for being born', said one held up by a small child. 'Lithuanian mothers and fathers unite!' read another. 'You're taking away everything so take our toys as well' proclaimed a third, as children deposited their toys in a heap on the ground. A very 'Lithuanian' poster on one pram warned: 'When I grow up I will return.' The black masking tape over the mouth of a participating TV star spoke to the 'silenced' nature of this protest. This civilized and even 'cosy' affair nevertheless was an expression of new unrest reaching into the middle classes.

At the same time, there were the first stirrings of discontent among sections of business. The Lithuanian hoteliers and restaurateurs association whose members were already struggling with the effects on trade of the bankruptcy of the national airline which severely reduced direct flights from most European capitals. Here too, dialogue with government over VAT increases of nearly four times had proved impossible. The hoteliers now staged a series of nationwide, much-apologized-for 'lights switch-off' protests. A poster on the front window of one leading hotel depicted the prime minister, his ears plugged with wine bottle corks. The text, in both Lithuanian and English, read: 'Prime minister, hello! Lithuania has disappeared from the world tourism map! EU countries stimulate inbound tourism by reducing taxes, while the Lithuanian government frustrates it by increasing them.'

However, as the crisis unfolded, a 'long hot summer' of unrest did not materialize. Instead, the trade unions were forced to adopt more symbolic forms of protest. In July, police and border guards renewed their 'barefoot' protest, holding their uniforms on clothes hangers, since they were not permitted to wear them while demonstrating. A 24-hour hunger strike by a small group of trade unionists, organized by the trade union confederation, was intended to persuade the government to embark on dialogue. A comment from the local *Baltic Times* neatly summed up the 'gestural' nature of these protests: 'When carrying around placards

and chanting slogans isn't enough to get the message across, union workers are hoping a little starvation could finally help them make their point' (*Baltic Times*, 2009d). Then, in late July, the fire brigade trade union mounted a protest outside the presidential palace. Arriving on bicycles but in full uniform, they observed that they were simply 'practising for the future', as 'budget cuts would soon mean they had no petrol for the fire tenders'.

Wages cuts were forcing even employed workers to seek assistance from the charitable 'food banks' now operating across the country. With over 13 percent of the workforce on the minimum wage, in the words of one worker, 'I simply don't earn enough to feed my family anymore.' By early August 2009, in an agricultural region in northern Lithuania, a charitable agency which had set up a food distribution point reported lengthening and increasingly angry queues as people waited for hours for hand-outs. Porridge and basic foodstuffs were now essential to family survival (*Delfi*, 2009d). For those without work, the maximum period of eligibility for unemployment benefits was nine months, available only for those with an employment record of 35 years. The maximum rate of unemployment benefit, 1041 litas (301.5 euros) per month, was payable for the first three months, and after this only as a reducing proportion of eligible benefits. The front page of the leading right-wing newspaper captioned its report 'The Ghost of Hunger' (*Respublika*, 2009). Anecdotal reports of surreptitious 'survival feeding' at supermarkets began to emerge. A World Bank study noted that the estimated number of people below the official poverty line of 350 litas (101 euros) per month could increase to 49 percent of the total population (636,000) in 2009 (*Baltic Course*, 2009).

As the new mass poverty became entrenched over the summer and early autumn, residents in working-class neighbourhoods received an invitation letter from Moment Credit, a company offering financial relief with only minimal credit checks. 'Easier than asking a friend' was the inviting message. The size of the loan, 100 litas (30 euros), suggested a careful calibration of the level of desperation facing many households. The charge for this princely sum was an interest rate of 9 percent per week, or over 430 percent per year. Meanwhile, one of the Swedish banks in the region with considerable bad-debt exposure announced the setting up of Institutes of Private Finances in all three Baltic States. Their purpose was stated, without a trace of irony, as being that of 'educating people in the areas of lending, payments, savings and safety measures related to personal finances' (Swedbank, 2009). It was a far cry from the days when easy credit offers to customers were relayed by SMS messages, and large mortgages denominated in hard currency were handed out to naïve borrowers on the basis of unsubstantiated claims of gross earnings.

By late October 2009, with 6800 newly unemployed in the course of a single week, the trade unions had largely lapsed into quietude. All three trade union confederations endorsed a 'historic' social pact with government and employers, a 'national agreement', ostensibly offering to protect living standards in exchange for a promise by trade unions to suspend social protests (Nacionalinis susitarimas, 2009). In fact, the national agreement, although the result of four months of

negotiations, entailed wage reductions and benefit cuts, including in pensions and maternity benefits. The government, for its part, pledged not to raise taxes beyond a 2 percent increase in social insurance contributions until the agreement expired in 2011. It also promised to consult the trade unions in the reorganization and dissolution of state institutions. Further budget cuts were held to be necessary in order to restore Lithuania's adherence to the EU's Maastricht fiscal criteria, thus holding out the possibility of future membership of the European Monetary Union.

In securing the national agreement with the trade unions, the prime minister had adopted a new language of 'compromise', recognizing the need to protect 'the most vulnerable' in the crisis and to maintain social 'solidarity'. The trade unions were happy to find their 'voice' again being acknowledged, even though it was on terms which effectively sealed off their demands. The government, for its part, had little alternative but to re-create the appearance of social dialogue if it wished to prevent open conflict erupting again. As a health workers' trade union leader warned, addressing a demonstration on the eve of the endorsement of the national agreement: 'He [the prime minister] wants to do it his way and we want to do it our way which is the reason we met with him. If they don't talk to us, social conflicts for sure will happen' (*Lietuvos Rytas* tv, 2009). Yet, the appearance of relative surface calm and the fragile patched-up neo-corporatist consensus disguised deeper currents of gathering unrest and social tension. By endorsing the national agreement, the trade unions had sealed themselves off from voicing rising discontent at the base of society.

Further, even as financial pundits of the US and Western European economies were trumpeting 'the first green shoots' of recovery, the full impact of the crisis had still to engulf Lithuania's economy and society (*EUbusiness*, 2009b). The Central Bank predicted that the economy would shrink 19.3 percent overall in 2009, among the worst recessionary downturns in the EU, while official unemployment was forecast to reach 19.8 percent in the coming year. Given the appropriate trigger, an eruption of a new wave of social unrest seemed more than possible. The normally sober business press spoke of a 'social explosion' and of rising emigration (Traceviciute, 2009). Just to be on the safe side, the government placed orders for new riot-control trucks equipped with water canon.

On the streets of the capital, as winter darkness gripped, every second and third street lamp was turned off, signalling desperate attempts to conserve the municipal budget. On the final day of the year, Lithuania's Chernobyl-style nuclear reactor at the Ignalina power station, the source of three-quarters of the country's electrical energy, was shut down (part of accession conditions for entry to the EU). This presaged an unprecedented increase of 30 percent in household electricity prices as Lithuania experienced the coldest winter of a decade. Lack of preparedness for the closure of Ignalina, and the failure to secure alternative cheap energy, was in large measure due to the tightening grip of Lithuania's oligarchs over the domestic energy sector from which they now intended to extract maximum advantage. It was clear that a 'tipping point' was approaching in the coming year (*Financial Times*, 2009).

The double failure of 'voice' and of 'exit'

In response to the crisis, the discourses of discontent assumed an initially explosive but thereafter an increasingly 'muted' character as the state has sought to smother discontent, and where necessary 'defuse' potential sources of opposition. The atrophy of 'voice' was in fact a generalized one. 'The political elite does not know how to establish a dialogue with society', commented a leading political scientist, speaking in the aftermath of the 16 January disorders. 'Will government learn this lesson so that such violence will not break out again? I doubt it' (ABC News, 2009a). Lamenting the fact that government was now detached from the people, President Adamkus said, 'I speak out of a dialogue that should be led not by street riots and clashes, but by normal, calm dialogue between the people and the government' (*Baltic Times*, 2009a). Both observations were a parallel recognition of dialogical failure. Here, Hirschman's characterization of 'voice' as expression of dissatisfaction through 'general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen' is apposite. The governing elites in Lithuania have shown little inclination to listen. There is in fact a *double failure of voice*, first in the discarding and then in the discrediting of 'legitimized' channels of dialogue between labour and capital, but equally, in terms of elite response to (*dis*)orderly protest. The double failure of 'voice' reinforces the likelihood both of further social unrest and of future 'exit'.

'Exit' has been a long-standing option taken by tens of thousands of Lithuanians in the two decades of independence, especially after Lithuania joined the European Union in May 2004. The Baltic States together with Poland, provided the main outflows of migrant labour from Eastern Europe to older EU member states permitting free movement of labour, both in absolute terms (in the case of Poland) and proportionately (in the case of Lithuania). In the first three years of EU membership, the cumulative outflow reached somewhere between 120,000 and 150,000 persons, in the region of 10 to 15 percent of the entire labour force.

As the crisis has deepened, evidence began to emerge of a gathering 'second surge' of migration. This, in turn, should be seen against a background of a longer term pre-existing demographic crisis. The population of Lithuania experienced a net decrease of 4.8 per 1000 inhabitants in 2008 (compared to a natural increase of 4.6 per 1000 in 1990) (Statistics Lithuania, 2009d), one of the highest rates of decline in the EU. Over the course of the year 2009, according to official data, and despite the return of some migrants from abroad, nearly 22,000 persons, mainly under 35 years, emigrated from Lithuania, the highest total on record (Statistics Lithuania, 2010b). However, as many migrants failed to declare their leaving intentions to the authorities, this was likely to be a substantial underestimate of the true figure. The new 'exit' did not comprise young hopefuls seeking a better life but the unemployed driven by desperation and disillusionment. As labour market conditions deteriorate in 2010, with unemployment levels perhaps in excess of 20 percent, out-migration may exceed that accompanying EU enlargement in 2004.

For those who remain, prospects are equally uncertain. Irrespective of the pace of global economic recovery in some of the older EU member states, the likelihood is that the Baltic economies will not see a return to positive growth before, at the earliest, 2011, and possibly not before 2012 (European Commission, 2009b). Previous improvements in wages, largely created by the domestic labour shortages resulting from the first wave of emigration, have been quickly reversed. The return of migrant workers from Spain, Ireland and UK during 2009, mainly due to a collapse of demand in construction industries, has added to the downward pressures on domestic wages. Anecdotal evidence suggests wage cuts of up to 50 percent and generalized work intensification, as employers extract increasing output from their disempowered workforces. Those still in employment have become increasingly 'unprotected', pressured to accept unpaid overtime work, staggered working hours, forced 'holidays' and eroded working conditions. During January to April of 2009, employers registered more than 6000 vacancies for fixed-term and 18,800 vacancies for permanent jobs. Compared with the same period in 2008, fixed-term 'work opportunities' increased by 38 percent, while permanent jobs decreased by 47 percent. For many employees, the 'de-regularization' of the employment contract has been accompanied by the renewed imposition of 'undeclared' wages in a mushrooming 'shadow economy' accounting for perhaps a quarter of GDP. Tax and social insurance avoidance by employers has limited employee access to already meagre welfare provisions. For trade unionists who had previously taken strike action for better wages in the good times, Kaunas trolleybus drivers being one such group, now was the opportunity for employers to impose arbitrary dismissals, the names of those singled out for redundancy posted by management on the company notice board, as a warning to others.

The crisis has arguably produced a double form of 'exit'. With national identity threatened by out-migration, population decline and wider forces of seemingly uncontrollable globalization, and with few countervailing resources in civil society in which to anchor collective resistance or cushion the shock of crisis, populist and even xenophobic political forces have become potentially resurgent. This unwelcome 'voice' could already be heard in the streets. In Vilnius, on Independence Day for two successive years, neo-Nazis have marched under the flag of 'patriotism'. The fear must be that external migratory 'exit' will be matched by an internal 'exit', as those who remain, trapped and increasingly impoverished, withdraw into a narrower world of reassuring prejudice and rejection of all that is the 'Other' (Woolfson, 2010).

In Hirschman's formulation, the 'exit/voice seesaw' has become fundamentally unbalanced. The corrective impulses of both 'voice' and 'exit' no longer underpin responsive societal adjustment. 'We need to change the system', as one protester said. But while a return to the previous system seems unlikely, the alternatives are unclear. The connective social compact between citizen and state has been profoundly damaged if not altogether broken. This 'loss of faith' was acutely summed

up by none other than Prime Minister Kubilius:

> In the spiritual sense, we have a lot of people disappointed with their authorities and the state, citizens who believe in nothing, and we must breathe self-confidence and trust in a common Lithuanian future into these citizens. (*Baltic Times*, 2009e)

Hirschman's bond of 'loyalty' – the inhibition to 'exit' – has dissolved, and with that, the belief in the ability of the system to deliver either material prosperity or a decent life. Thus, the economic and social drivers of both 'exit' and 'voice' are working together, but in perverse combination. Given the ramified failures of 'voice', migratory 'exit' can be seen as a private expression of 'silent' or 'silenced' voice. It is an outcome which perhaps suits the short-term purposes of ruling classes in removing potential sources of dissent. However, it also undermines the prospects for any future development of constructive 'voice' and this, in turn, creates the conditions for further 'internal exit'.

Towards 'transgressive discourse'

As the year 2009 drew to an end, Arturas Palauskas, a senior leader of one of the liberal centrist parties, as well as a former Prosecutor General of unimpeachable integrity, called for a demonstration outside the parliament. Palauskas invited 'everybody condemned by the present-day authorities to poverty' – pensioners, the disabled, the unemployed – to protest under the banner of 'Against the reduction of pensions and impoverishment of the Nation' (*Baltic Times*, 2009f). Within days of this event, a further heavily policed protest took place against the passing of the 2010 budget. Under the populist banner of 'Against the oligarchs' and 'Against corrupt privatization deals', this drew a further thousand demonstrators onto the streets of the capital in a somewhat inchoate gathering, with representation from the police and border guards trade unions, as well as ultra-nationalists, 'anti-paedophilia' protesters and sundry others (*Delfi*, 2009e).

Meanwhile, the country's new president, Dalia Grybauskaite, a hard-headed former EU Commissioner for Finance, admonished government to intervene to regulate prices in order to protect vulnerable sections of the population, condemning the 'unreasonable appetites' of the oligarchs. Such language would have been inconceivable previously. In condemning the role of the 'oligarchs', an attempt was made to 'defuse' potentially disruptive understandings and deflect emergent discourses away from issues of systemic failure and towards the actions of 'malign individuals', who almost 'by definition' had achieved their wealth by 'illegitimate' means and at the expense of ordinary people. Prefaced with the stark observation that Lithuania had 'come to the breaking point', in her first 'State of the Nation' address, Grybauskaite articulated the dynamic of 'voice' denied, 'loyalty' dissolved, and migratory 'exit':

> The decision to leave your homeland is a difficult one. But the number of those who decide to take this step is growing... We console ourselves by saying that it is a natural

> consequence of the downturn. However, the countries where our fellow citizens emigrate are also challenged by the crisis... And it is not only those without a job who are leaving. So, let us look the reality in the face and admit that people are emigrating not only for economic reasons. They are moving abroad because they feel alien at home. (President of the Republic of Lithuania, June 2010)

The central theme of her extraordinary address – the loss of trust and confidence in the institutions of the state and the collapse of participation in civic and political life – was no less than a blistering attack on the perceived consequences of 'extreme economics', the 'lack of justice and solidarity' in society, and rampant corruption orchestrated by individual interest groups. As a stratagem to re-assert supra-class ideology this 'critical' narrative had profound limitations, not least those imposed by objectively worsening social conditions, as government relentlessly pursued policies designed to serve the interests of those very same individuals.

There were just a few glimmers of hope that something positive might result from the crisis. On an optimistic reading, the turbulent events at the start of 2009, and the continuing though muted social protests, represent a turning point in terms of the potential regeneration of social solidarities. As expressions of 'voice', these protests involved significant organized collective mobilizations, albeit with sometimes ambiguous voices and disparate demands. Nevertheless, for the first time in the post-independence era, there also appeared the outlines of new 'transgressive' discourses of discontent, challenging many hitherto taken-for-granted assumptions.

The 'discourses of discontent' were beginning to raise fundamental issues of social justice in unprecedented ways, counter-posing 'rich' versus 'poor', rejecting the unfairness of a system of non-progressive taxation, the inequitable burden of sales taxes increases, the lack of a tax on property values, the slashing of public expenditures and wages, and the unacceptable ever-rising prices for food, fuel and energy as the result of the greed of the few. Those who managed to secure a stranglehold over the economy in the pursuit of their own enrichment could yet be called to account. Under the impact of social and economic 'shock', mass consciousness, linguistically embedded in 'behavioural ideology', has revealed deep semiotic flux. While often still largely populist in expression, the discourses of discontent have the potential to achieve a sharper *class* edge, 'transgressing' the increasingly fragile assumptions of the neo-liberal ideology of the established order.

Final utterance: *Lietuva* KAPUT!

As a prelude to its incorporation into the NATO alliance, George W. Bush visited the country in 2002, sealing Lithuania's irreversible geo-political divorce from the legacy of the Soviet Union, as well as its future participation in the 'coalition of the willing' in Iraq. To an enraptured throng in Vilnius town square, Bush delivered a

solemn pledge: 'In the face of aggression, the brave people of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia will never again stand alone.' These words were thereafter to be immortalized by a bronze plaque on the walls of the city hall, appropriately capped with the two intertwined national flags.

A token of gratitude to their American mentor and saviour was the establishment in Lithuania of 'at least two' secret extrajudicial detention facilities (so-called 'black sites') to facilitate the CIA's program of 'enhanced' interrogation of senior captured al-Qaeda operatives (ABC News, 2009b). Lithuania's rulers embraced both the free market and 'the American way' without hesitation or scruple. As a contributor to the *New York Times* (Bumiller, 2002) noted in the aftermath of Bush's triumphalist visit, not only were post-communist states such as Lithuania now 'more militantly and exuberantly pro-American than many of the old-timers in the creaky cold war alliance, but their pursuit of capitalism, however imperfect, provides just the kind of spark to kindle the love of any American president'.

The rallying call in the first heady days of independence had been to persevere in the pursuit of capitalism in the hard road ahead. Today, the Lithuanian version of that 'American dream' has failed. Instead, it has created a world of despair and disappointment – in the poignant words of one protester: 'This is not what we imagined. We imagined a completely different Lithuania.' Articulated here is not just the perception of capitalism in crisis, but of *post-communism* in crisis.

The final 'dialogic utterance' is that of an early-morning drunk, sprawled across the steps of a pedestrian bridge in Vilnius old town, an all-too-typical representative of that now-redundant 'Soviet' generation, ridiculed and excluded, for whom the cost of 'transition' has been individual dereliction. With mock exuberance, he rasped out the chorus line of the United States' national anthem – '*Amereekaaa! Amereekaaa... Lietuva* KAPUT!' In this brief ironic coupling was encapsulated the simple lesson of the disastrous trajectory of contemporary Lithuania.

Reflections on ethnographic practice

This article was prefaced with the refrain of the hauntingly beautiful 19th-century song, 'Hard Times', translucently rendered by the incomparable Emmylou Harris. The song shares its title with Studs Terkel's chronicle of the Great Depression (Terkel, 1970). In their manifesto for ethnographic practice, Willis and Trondman suggest that the task of theory-building and evidence-gathering for cultural studies requires 'disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events' (2000: 5). Studs Terkel, the indomitable 'witness-cum-recorder', did not live to see the global 'recession' of the new century. In a modest way, the current analysis has tried to carry forward the spirit of Terkel's project. The author has lived for 10 years in Lithuania, arriving a decade ago amidst the visible wreckage of communism, and now departing amidst the visible wreckage of the free market. This has made it possible to 'witness-cum-record' events over time through participant observation, to access official statistical and documentary sources, as well as mass media, survey and interview data.

However, this 'witness-cum-record' is symptomatic rather than conclusive. First, it is an attempt to chart a specific moment of socio-historical crisis. It attempts to 'apprehend' the changing forms and themes of popular consciousness, fleetingly caught in a condensed telegraphy of protest. It seeks to uncover the complex, sometimes contradictory, 'indexical' utterances of participants at a point when *new* demands of a previously *absent discourse* of social justice are being raised. It applies Voloshinov's Marxist method in a preliminary way, aware of the complexity of tracing linkages and transitions between 'generative processes of existence'/'base' and ideological forms of culture and social consciousness – the domain of 'behavioural ideology' – trying to detect what is changing, when and how.

But, the analysis is symptomatic in a more troubling sense. The dialogical character of discourses offers insight into an emerging but incomplete critique of new and harsh realities which can point in a number of opposing directions. As well as eventual possible renewal, there are disturbing disconnects and ambivalences in the emergent 'transgressive' discourses of discontent. Sometimes, they would appear to signal incipient social disintegration and disrepair, a darkened reflection of the multiform unravelling of social linkages between the individual and society, even diagnostic symptoms of deeper unresolved social ills. At rare moments, the kernel of new kinds of collectivist consciousness can also be discerned. The final outcome is uncertain. What *is* certain is that in this 'really existing' but failed political economy of a now-tamed 'Baltic Tiger', 'hard times' are here again to stay.

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