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Honorable [MP] V. Andriukaitis: V. Havel was not an Antisemite, and the Tragedy of the Holocaust is Not a Toy in Your Election Game

by Audronius Ažubalis, foreign minister [of Lithuania]

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Audronius Ažubalis

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Prominent figures of the democratic world from the Czech Republic, Germany, Sweden, Great Britain, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Canada, the USA, Russia, Tibet and elsewhere signed the declaration “On European Conscience and Communism” in Prague in 2008. It proclaims the precondition for a unified Europe is a common view of history and the ability to condemn crimes against humanity of the last century.

It says in the declaration that Nazism and Stalinism must be judged by the different circumstances and dimension of their brutalities, and further, that instead of setting one totalitarianism in opposition to the other, what is

needed is to cherish the memory of victims of both regimes. I believe this is natural since by appropriately assessing one set of brutalities, it is much easier to feel the pain of victims of other tragedies.

The Conservative Government is working in both directions, which reinforce one another. It was at our initiative that the Parliament proclaimed 2011 the Year of Remembrance of Lithuanian Residents Who Became Victims of the Holocaust. This was a year during which not only did we honor the memory of the genocide of the Jews in the international community (the EU and OSCE), but we also implemented a state program of unprecedented scope dedicated to honoring the memory of Holocaust victims, to commemorate the Litvak heritage and to fight antisemitism.

Without denying the unique nature of the tragedy of the Holocaust, neither did we during this time keep silent about another experience painful to Lithuania: the Stalinist terror. We initiated international discussions of historical conscience and memory and consistently supported cooperation between academic institutions and NGOs fighting against amnesia of Soviet crimes. We sought to criminalize denial of crimes by both totalitarian regimes on the European level at the European Commission.

Condemnation of Soviet Crimes Helps Rather Than Hinders the Fight against Antisemitism

The elite of Lithuania's Social Democrats are trying to ruin the Government's attempt to inculcate respect for the complete historical memory of our country. Vytenis P. Andriukaitis, Birutė Vėsaitė, Marija A. Pavilionienė, Algirdas Sysas, Justinas Karosas, Julius Sabatauskas and MEPs Justas Paleckis and Vilija Blinkevičiūtė recently signed a document which rejects as antisemitic the criticism of Stalinism in the earlier-mentioned Prague Declaration of 2008.

By rejecting the Prague Declaration, our leftists, perhaps without realizing it themselves, are harming the dialogue between Lithuanians and Jews and the fight against antisemitism. The "Seventy Years Declaration" they signed forbids comparing the tragedy of the Holocaust with the crimes of Communism because "philosophically, qualitatively and practically it was in essence different and special." I point out that these points in the declaration contradict one another, because it is only through comparing the crimes of

totalitarian regimes that their differences and the unique nature of the genocide of the Jews are brought out.

Lithuania's Social Democrats have "equated" totalitarian crimes in the wrong manner. In throwing out the earlier Prague Declaration, they have sacrificed an important fact (the fact that Nazism and Stalinism both committed crimes against humanity), replacing it with speculations on how many times the terror of Nazism is more unique and more memorable than the Soviet one.

The artificial counterpoising of historical tragedies acts as if to force people to choose which victim group's memory is worth more, instead of encouraging sympathy for the individual victim's different and unrepeatable suffering. This opposes the fundamental priority of the Government: to increase mutual trust between the peoples who suffered, [to increase] sincere remorse ["repentance"], [and to increase] dialogue and solidarity in building the future.

A question: Why are our leftist colleagues trying to set the memory of suffering of people against one another?

The Social Democrat Campaign: Not Historical Justice but Political Impertinence

There could be two reasons why Social Democrats signed the document rejecting the 2008 Prague Declaration: either a lack of political insight, or an intentional desire to defend the Soviet occupational past (since many of the colleagues, as they say now, "worked for Lithuania then, too").

It seems that at least in the cases of A. Sysas and J. Karosas the reason was the former, because both politicians, as demonstrated by their own comments, did not understand what they were signing. There was J. Karosas in the media saying that between the crimes of Nazism and Communism "there are many [places where they] coincide: the destruction of people, murder unites [them], but these are slightly different things ... It appears otherwise to us, but I empathize with the situation of the Jews." And then Sysas comments that "one and the other are crimes, they are uniformly horrible, but these things can't be made somewhat equivalent. If we are talking about painful matters—gas chambers and deportation—these are

somewhat different things. People still came back from deportation, but not usually from the gas chambers.” It’s ironic that the comments by both colleagues contain spontaneous hidden and direct comparisons of the crimes of Nazism and Communism, comparisons which are proscribed by the declaration they themselves signed.

The conviction of the Social Democrats that only by rejecting the 2008 Prague Declaration can one sincerely sympathize with the situation of the Jews and feel the unique nature of racist murder is surprising. At least I have never heard anyone call the late honored V. Havel, who signed the declaration then, an antisemite. Sadly, that’s something the new “Seventy Years Declaration” allows for, and that’s why I would never sign it.

It is appalling that V. P. Andriukaitis, named as the future foreign minister by the Social Democrats, has made a public relations campaign out of this dilemma and is talking about current “attempts to trivialize the brutal atrocities of the genocide of the Jews.” I want to ask my colleague in good will: what efforts? What, honorable Vytenis, are you thinking of specifically?

Do you also consider the initiative of the diplomatic corps and the Government in organizing international conferences (1), exhibits (2), publishing publications (3), commemorating the Litvak heritage (4), organizing remembrance of Holocaust victims events in Lithuania and at embassies abroad “increasing” outbreaks of Lithuanian antisemitism of which you speak in your press releases?

I want to assure everyone that this government and the Lithuanian people will not play the card of the tragedy of the Holocaust in the cynical game of the opposition. That the crimes of Nazism are unique does not mean they need to be counterpoised to the pain of the Soviet terror. This spring in travelling to Israel I will feel it my duty to again express remorse for that which happened in our land during World War II. But that does not contradict another duty: to judge appropriately the crimes which the Soviets committed.

Both the one and the other historical wound was and will be a tender spot for Lithuania and Europe. And to the contrary of what is contained in the document signed by the Social Democrats, what is needed is to write about the crimes of both totalitarian regimes in school textbooks. Not out of the desire to make them identical, but because of the duty to assess both of them

appropriately, and to incorporate into ourselves for future generations human dignity as the fundamental value of our democracy which both totalitarian regimes in essence denied.

Those who want to rehabilitate the Soviet version of history might not agree with me. It seems these include our Social Democrats as well, complaining in their articles about the January 13th [1991, anniversary of the deaths of anti-Soviet protestors in Vilnius] that the “right-wing discourse” dominates in historical topics. Honorable Vytenis, I remind you that today, with the help of neighbors, we also hear the left wing. It’s just that Lithuania is still not so blind and naive as to believe it.

1. Prague – “Fight against Antisemitism in the Public Space”; London – “No Simple Stories: Lithuanian and Jewish Relations from Condominium to Violence,” Vilnius – “Tolerance and Totalitarianism. Challenges of Freedom” and others.
2. “The World of the Jewish Past – Today’s Hope”; exhibit in former Gestapo cell at Center of Genocide and Resistance of Residents of Lithuania [sic, he didn’t cite the full name]; exhibit of Samuel Bak’s work at the Vilnius Jewish Gaon Museum [sic, the proper name is Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, Vilna not Vilnius, even in Lithuanian]; Arbit Blat exhibit of works and others.
3. “The Holocaust in Lithuania 1941-1944”; Abram Sutzkever’s book of poetry in Lithuanian and others.
4. Fragments of the historical Jewish quarter in Vilnius are being restored, a memorial plaque was unveiled dedicated to commemorating the old Jewish Šnipiškės cemetery, surviving fragments of the Great Synagogue were found, statues were erected of YIVO founder Dr. Tsemakh Shabad, Gonkur Prize winner writer Romain Garry, scholar Zalman Reizen, popular music composer and performer Danielius Dolskis in Kaunas, other works were accomplished with the participation of historians, ethnographers and museum specialists of Lithuania from different Lithuanian locations. In December a Jewish public library opened its doors in the capital.