

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

**Leonidas Donskis, *50 Letters from the Troubled Modern World*. Nordhausen: Verlag T. Bautz, 2012. (Martyn Housden)**

Leon Donskis needs little introduction. Professor at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, media figure in Lithuania and MEP representing Lithuania's liberals, he has published extensive seminal discussions of the state of Europe and provides proof personified that the West of the continent has plenty to learn from the East. In *50 Letters from the Troubled Modern World* he adds to his body of work with a series of cogent reflections which, originally, were published in *The Baltic Times* and *Ukrainian Week*. The stated focus of the collection is dissent and its suppression in 'transitional democracies', also called 'tyrannies parading as democracies' (10–11). Inevitably, given the scope of Donskis's concerns, even this conceptual framework is too limited for the full extent of the material deployed here. Perhaps also inevitably, although the book comprises numerous short discussions, a variety of topics emerge time and again.

Unsurprisingly one recurring theme is that of Baltic identity. The question is posed...

'What is the pattern of identity that Lithuania and the two other Baltic States could maintain as a bridge between their precious cultural legacy and the world?' (47)

... and the answer turns out to be rather a work in progress. In 2010, we learn, Thomas Venclova attacked Lithuania for 'parochialism and moral provincialism' (47). Donskis too attacks his own country for the 2009 law prohibiting the promotion of homosexuality. How, he asks, can you claim to be better than Russia if you infringe human rights in this way? But if a more culturally attuned Lithuanian identity is rather elusive, these essays do give us a fine insight into some of the contemporary challenges facing citizens of Central and Eastern Europe. People are complaining that their lives have been ruined by sweeping transformations, to which Donskis comments:

'A lifetime of a human being proves insufficient to witness a thrilling and sweeping transformation of society' (50).

Unfortunately, historical meta-processes are no respecters of the needs of individuals. Nor is it just the 'man in the street' who has reason to feel stifled. Donskis observes that people in western Europe tend not to learn eastern languages. This means not only, in practical terms, that it is hard for an academic from Central and Eastern Europe to get a job at a British

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university but, more existentially, he or she is threatened with the status of a ‘non-person’ in the face of ‘the mass narratives in the West’ (99).

If you want to discuss Baltic identity, or identities (and there is also a discussion of this point), then a characterisation of ‘the other’, of Russia, is never going to be far away—whether expressed openly or held tacitly. Disputes between Russia and the Baltics over how to read the Second World War are seen as symptoms of Russian determination to retain its moral authority based on its role in the defeat of Nazism. In the end, in fact, this is history being manipulated to justify on-going power-political agendas. That these are malign is, no doubt, ensured by the very character of the Russian élite. Russia, it is said, is run less like the old USSR and more like an African kleptocracy (see essay 26). Generalising, Donskis even suggests Eastern Europe is seeing a revolt of ‘crooks’. In this connection he criticises western figures for tolerating the situation (and for misreading Russia wilfully) so long as there is something to be gained (not least gas and oil). Hope for the future, such as it is, is said to lie with ‘Russian democrats struggling for the democratic future of Russia’ (53).

It is possible that at times the Russian critique goes too far. Gorbachev is described, for instance, ‘globally as a weak and confused individual’ (25). But wasn’t there something more resigned, even tragic about him than that?

It’s hard to escape the impression that Donskis’s time as an MEP has conferred its share of disillusionment on him. There are suggestions that democracy in Europe is facing almost systemic problems. Politicians are said to trade on fear, offering to chase it away. Remorse and guilt are commodities to be expended in communication games, while hatred can be distributed in carefully measures doses. It has become a world which:

‘...easily lends itself to adventure-seekers, criminals and crooks of various shades’ (149).

Violence and economic success have become grounds for abandoning human rights. Something almost Orwellian is happening, since increasingly ‘... Truth is success... Success is truth....’ (147). There are, then, fundamental issues needing to be addressed:

‘Genuine democratic representation and legitimacy, rather than the search for the efficacious forms of public communication, appears as a pivotal problem of present politics’ (98).

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Donskis even seems to doubt that his own political faction can respond properly to the challenges of the time. Liberalism in Central and Eastern Europe emerges as something only semi-formed, with a greater concern for economic freedom than human rights and democracy. In this connection, hope perhaps lies with the next generation of power-holders. Donski's experiences lecturing university students around the continent have persuaded him that European citizens do exist and that far more can be created. This is where he believes universities can assist the European project:

‘What is the role of the academe in fostering and strengthening the EU? The answer is quite simple: the education of a multilingual, tolerant, curious, liberal-minded European’ (27).

These people should capitalise on and underpin the ‘diversity, openness ... [and] responsiveness’ of European culture.

Of course, many more issues are raised throughout the book than these. There are explorations of the relationship between power and truth, of the status of nationality in the Facebook age and of genocide. Regarding the latter, Donskis maintains the Armenians did not experience attempted genocide during the First World War and neither did the Baltic peoples during the Soviet period (although the latter might have experienced ‘stratocide’). Only Europe's Jews are said to have faced a truly genocidal project in the shape of the Holocaust.

This, then is book, wide in scope and provocative in accomplishment which offers insights and theses which, if unlikely to be accepted by every reader, at least map out a terrain of highly topical concerns. Foremost, however, has to be the very political movement which Donskis is representing as an MEP. Given the short-comings of the movement which the author flags up, and given the general challenges to the EU which surface throughout this book, the essays really serve to highlight the need for a further, more sustained analysis. What is the character and state of liberalism in Central and Eastern Europe today, and where is it taking Europe's fateful relationship with Russia? Maybe the author will say still more on these themes in the future; we hope so.

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