

International historical conference
"History and Memory. The Soviet Past – 1953-1990"
Vilnius, November 28, 2011.

Inese Vaidere

From a common historical memory to a common identity

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

History and Memory is the title of this conference.

The great German philosopher Hegel has said that *"without memory of the past there is no history"*. It is obvious that - without memory of the past there is also no future.

If we forget the errors and crimes of yesterday, we are prone to repeat them tomorrow.

This is why it is very important that history is being analysed and such conferences are being organised. I would like to thank the Lithuanian Parliament for holding this very important event here in Vilnius.

I am one of those who represent Latvia in the European Parliament. My country, just like Lithuania, was cut off from the rest of Europe by the Iron Curtain. The Baltic people went through a horrific double occupation. Both the Nazis and the Soviets inflicted enormous human sufferings in the Eastern Europe countries, now characterised by historians as the "bloodlands".

Some people in Europe are surprised why do we not celebrate the Victory Day in May.

On May 9th, 2005 the Prime minister of Luxembourg, Junker thanked the Soviet Union for liberating his country from Fascism. He forgot that for a half of Europe this liberation was the beginning of a new occupation. Not less cruel and barbaric as the one before. The post-war Soviet rule not only destroyed our independence, it ceased the development of our countries by forcibly changing their demographics and cutting them off from the world for half a century.

The Soviet occupation has left very deep scars in Latvia.

We have established a special body to analyse the consequences of the Communist rule – "The Research Society of the Occupation of Latvia".

I am honoured to chair the Council of this organization, which brings together historians, lawyers, economists, scientists and academics.

Our objective is to research the totalitarian regime and to work towards fostering the rights of those people who had suffered under the foreign occupation.

"The Research Society of the Occupation of Latvia" analyses the losses, which our country had suffered. Both human and material losses. Our experts had created a methodology to calculate the overall damage inflicted by the Soviet occupation on Latvia, which is why this June, I co-organised a very successful international conference „Social, economic and environmental losses-damage caused by the Soviet Union in the Baltic States”, which gathered Members of the European Parliament and experts from a numerous of countries, including Mr Arūnas Bubnys and Mr Boris Sokolov.

Of course, assessing damages inflicted by the totalitarian occupations is a difficult, nearly impossible task. Every human being is priceless. No methodology in the world can calculate the value of a new-born life lost somewhere in the wastelands of Siberia. For the global statistics it might be hardly noticeable. But for the mother it was everything.

Human suffering and human losses are the most tragic consequence of the totalitarian rule in Latvia. At the beginning of the 20th century Latvia's population exceeded that of Norway. Today it is twice as small. Deportations and persecutions put the very survival of our nation at risk.

The Soviet system also attempted to change the mindset of its citizens. For 50 years people were forced to think one, but to do another. It was a schizophrenic system, very much resembling that of Orwell's "Animal Farm".

The Soviet occupation has also had a dramatic effect on the economy. Latvia was literally erased from the world economic map. Between 1925 and 1934, our GDP by purchasing power parity was equal to that of Finland and Austria, rating among the highest in Europe, our agriculture sector was significantly more developed than in France. The Soviet collectivization destroyed all of that and turned the Latvian farmers into State-owned slaves.

During the Soviet occupation, all Latvian export routes, all business connections established during the short years of independence were abolished. For fifty years Latvia was turned into a colony, which served the economic needs of the metropole - the Kremlin. Hence, a decline in economic indicators followed. In 1975, our GDP by purchasing power parity had declined to 45% of the Finnish indicator.

It is a myth that the Soviet Union made huge investments into Latvia's economy. Our researchers had studied this subject thoroughly and concluded that the Soviet investments in Latvia were proportionally even smaller than in the other republics of the Soviet Union. Latvia was used as a colony, it is the most appropriate way to characterise the economic reality of the Soviet occupation.

The most dramatic and long running consequence of the Soviet rule in Latvia, however, is often neglected. It is the Colonisation and Russification. Let me remind you that in 1983 the European parliament adopted a Resolution, in which it suggested to submit the issue of the Baltic States to the Decolonisation Subcommittee of the UN.

Later today Dr. Klumbys will present a report about the Russification of Lithuania. I must say that also Estonia and especially Latvia was particularly hard hit by the Soviet programme of ethnic engineering. The consequences of it are felt even today.

Before the Soviet occupation in 1940 there were 8% of Russians in Latvia. By the end of the occupation in 1989, their share had skyrocketed to nearly 50%, including the Russified minorities or so called Russian-speakers. In 1991 majority of them voted against Latvia's independence in a referendum.

Latvia does not have and had never had a problem with national minorities. We are however challenged by the demographic and hence, political consequences of the Soviet occupation.

Right now as I speak, in Latvia signatures are being collected to call for a change of the Constitution, introducing Russian as a second official language. About a hundred thousand

citizens had already signed this demand. It is more than clear that, if accepted, the Russian as an official language will seriously undermine the positions of indigenous Latvian language and put the very existence of Latvia as a European nation state in question.

These worrying developments are a direct result of the Soviet occupation and of the fact that its consequences had not been properly addressed. What we also observe today, is the increased activity on the part of Russia, which tries to manipulate its compatriots in Latvia. Such actions are not helpful. They only worsen the situation and place unnecessary obstacles to a successful integration. Nevertheless, I am hopeful because there are an increasing number of Russians, Poles, Ukrainians and representatives of other minorities who consider Latvia their home, who speak Latvian and who cherish our culture and traditions.

The European Parliament has called on Russia to come to terms with its totalitarian past and to recognise the occupation of the Baltic countries by the Soviet Union. Up to now this call has not been answered. On the contrary, we see the opposite signs - glorification of the Soviet past and justification of the Soviet crimes. Unfortunately, many people in Russia still believe that the Baltic states belong to Russia, and that their independence is temporary.

Let us not forget that 72 years ago on this very day, the 28th of November, the Soviet Government denounced the non-aggression Treaty with Finland and moved in to occupy the country by force.

The Soviet Union is gone, but the imperialistic leanings are still there. The recent Georgian war is a living example of that.

Given the realities we face today it is of utmost importance that Europe stands united, not only as an economic block, but also as a cultural and historic entity. We share the common European values of freedom and democracy. We share the common European identity. Yes, our continent has been divided by the Iron Curtain for half a century. The Western and Eastern Europe have had different historical experiences. But today we are one. If Europe wants to stay united, it must work towards creating a united historical memory of its citizens. All its citizens, both in the West and East of the continent.

I have been a member of the European Parliament since 2004, I have put great effort in building a common understanding of the European history and recognition of the equally criminal character of both Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes. Today, we see a number of very positive outcome of this work.

Of course, it takes time and effort but IT IS POSSIBLE to break the ice of prejudice and double standards. A good example is the decision of the European parliament to proclaim a European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism on August 23rd.

Raising awareness about the totalitarian past is very important for the future.

In 2008 I persuaded the European Parliament to support the creation of the documentary "The Soviet Story", which tells about the Communist crimes in the Eastern Europe. Since its premiere in Brussels the film has had a massive resonance the world over. It has been translated into 30 languages and shown by televisions from Asia to North America. In Russia it generated a hysteria which resulted in the Pro-Kremlin youth burning the effigy of

the film's director outside the Latvian embassy. According *"The Economist"* magazine "The Soviet story" was the most powerful antidote yet to the sanitation of the past. The film is a breakthrough in the field of European history documentaries, which contributes to the change of the current mindset of Europeans regarding history.

I am delighted that this evening it will be shown in the National Television of Lithuania. For the third time.

The legacy of Communism is painful. It is a tragic page for every nation which was subjected to the Communist experiment. But up to now the Soviet crimes had escaped legal persecution by an International body. The Nazis have had their Nirenberg. The Communists haven't.

Earlier this year a platform of the European Memory and Conscience was established in Prague by institutions from 8 European countries. I was honoured to sign the founding document on the part of Latvia.

I strongly believe that by common efforts we can bring about the universal condemnation of the criminal Soviet regime. In memory of all those killed, and all those never born, I have no doubt in my mind that one day the truth and justice will prevail.

Thank you.