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## **Building Bridges** *Thoughts about the other Russia*

*Leonidas Donskis Memorial Conference and Concert*  
Kaunas, September 20, 2019

### **Introduction**

Since Russian politics are dominated by Vladimir Putin the image of Russia as a country has become seriously tainted in the eyes of the world. From a country that just left 75 years of totalitarian Communist rule behind and was making first and still uneasy steps in the direction of a more democratically ruled state and desired to maintain good and peaceful relations with its neighbors, it has quickly sunk back into a state in which bullying has become a rule in politics and those who dare to oppose the current regime are subdued by any means available. This not only counts for the country itself, but also for its neighbors.

However, the tainted image also reflects very much on the image that people have of the Russian population in general. Western commentators often forget to make a distinction between Russian leaders and the Russian people, and the seemingly overwhelming support for Putin by the Russian population further fuels this identification of one with the other. For instance in Ukraine, the horrors of war resulting in occupied lands, the killing of more than ten thousand civilians, volunteers and military, the displacement of up to two million citizens and the hurt to national pride very much strengthen this negative view of “the Russians”. The behavior of a certain category of Russian tourists completes the image of Russians as a horrible imperial-thinking, uneducated and arrogant lot that tends to behave itself as an owner rather than a guest in foreign lands.

To make things worse, stimulating Russophobia abroad has become one of the leading mechanisms by which Putin maintains control over his population. By stimulating an increase in Russophobia through a variety of means, he shows his citizens that the world around is an enemy and that only he as a strong leader can help them thwart that external threat.

### **Building bridges**

In time of conflict, shades of grey become black and white and the soft corners of an image become harsh and uninviting. Close personal contacts are almost invariably affected, even within families, and the negative feelings towards a ruling elite are subconsciously conferred onto people who are not connected to those in power, and might even be an opponent or victim.



However, among the Russian population there are many who do not support the current political constellation inside their country, who either try to stay out of it as much as is possible, who express their dissident views at home and in the kitchen among friends, or who dare to come out and protest and risk long terms in prison or camp for doing so. And then there are many who decide to leave, because they have lost the hope their country will ever become a civil society based on the rule of law.

Also in Soviet times there were many Russians in the human rights movement, people who had the courage to stand up, resist, speak out, and accept as a consequence the repressive measures including incarceration in prison, camp or psychiatric hospital. The most prominent human rights defender, Academician Andrei Sakharov, was a Russian by ethnicity, but saw himself as a representative of all nations that were subjected to Soviet rule, including Baltics, Crimean Tatars or even lesser known nations like the Gagauz. Sakharov and other Russian dissidents showed the other side of Russia, and so did many writers, artists and scholars.

## **The conference**

The goal of the September conference is to discuss the need to distinguish between “the Russians” and Putin’s clique. This is necessary for various reasons. Russia is our neighboring country, and thus Russians are our neighbors as well. Sooner or later the Putin regime will disappear and hopefully a brighter future will appear on the horizon. Bridges are necessary because without a foundation it will be extra hard to re-establish good-neighborly relations and return to a situation in which the integrity of the other is respected.

Secondly, condemning a nation for the wrongdoings of its rulers is not only shortsighted by also unfair. Even if Putin is backed by most his population, this positioning is very much the result of a Soviet, post-Soviet or re-Sovietized mindset, a barrage of propaganda, fear that is almost genetically installed thanks to the Stalinist terror and the usual basic tendency of mankind to survive and ride out the storm.

Thirdly, understanding the current situation purely based on simplified images is dangerous and can lead to serious misunderstandings, of which there are already enough around. And fourthly, such simplified pictures leave out the ones who do speak out, who dare to oppose the repressive state and who disagree with the policy of the Kremlin.



## The Donskis Memorial Conference

It will be the second time that the Andrei Sakharov Research Center for Democratic Development will organize a conference and concert in memory of Leonidas Donskis (1962-2016). The event is named after Leonidas Donskis, a Jewish-Lithuanian philosopher, political theorist, historian of ideas, social analyst, and political commentator, who was professor of politics at Vytautas Magnus University. He was also Honorary Consul of Finland in Kaunas and deputy chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish Community.

Donskis was a well-known public figure in Lithuania and internationally known as a defender of human rights and civil liberties. Politically he was a liberal advocating individual reason and conscience, which is reflected in the many books that he authored.

### The program

The program on September consists of four components:

#### Film screening

During the morning of September 20, 2019, the film “The Russian Opposition” by film-producers Yevgeni Gindilis and Kirill Rogov will be screened. The screening will be followed by a discussion with the audience.

Location: Small Hall of the Vytautas Magnus University. Free entrance. The film is subtitled, discussion will be in English.

#### Conference

During the afternoon a panel discussion will be organized with the following speakers/participants:

- **Vyacheslav Bakhmin**, former Helsinki Group member and former political prisoner, ex Ministry of Foreign Affairs and several foreign donor organizations;
- **Yevgeni Gindilis**, film producer from Moscow
- **Arkady Ostrovsky**, journalist and writer and author of the book “The Invention of Russia”
- **Marina Sakharov-Liberman**, physicist and granddaughter of Andrei Sakharov
- **Mikhail Shishkin**, Russian writer now living in Switzerland
- **Andrew Wood**, former Ambassador of the United Kingdom to Russia

The debate will be videoed and life-streamed. The materials of the conference will later be made public, both in video and in writing.



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Location: Small Hall of the Vytautas Magnus University. Free entrance but registration recommended. Russian with simultaneous translation Russian-English will be provided.

### **Reception**

A reception will be held at the Valdas Adamkus Library for those who registered for the Donskis concert.

### **Leonidas Donskis Memorial Concert**

Aleksei Botvinov and Mikhail Shishkin will organize a joint performance where music (Botvinov) is combined with reading letters by Prokofiev and Shostakovich (Shishkin).

Location: M.K. Ciurlionis Gallery in Kaunas. Registration obligatory, limited number of seats.