

Leonidas Donskis
Fifty Letters from the Troubled Modern World

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To the memory of John Hiden

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Foreword

The year 2009 marked a substantial change in my life. Having long served as a wandering scholar, then as a well-established Lithuanian academic and host of an intellectual television program, I was elected to the European Parliament on behalf of Lithuania. It was in July 2009 that a Lithuanian journalist who served at that time as a columnist in *The Baltic Times* came up with a proposal for me to act as one covering the life and creative endeavor of a MEP, and also offering some insights into Lithuanian and all-European politics and culture. After deliberating a bit, I agreed to accept and began writing a monthly text for *The Baltic Times*.

Looking back, I have no regrets. Serving as a columnist and writing short pieces that were meant to give more focus on and attention to the region of small countries with a big and rich history repaid me in many ways. I began analyzing Lithuania's legislation and foreign policies, and also those of our difficult neighbors to the east. A closer observation of dissent and its suppression in Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and other "transitional democracies,"—or, to be precise, tyrannies parading as democracies—was an asset as well, since I have always been keen on defending human rights, especially those of human rights activists themselves, people like dissenting Russian intellectuals and disbarred Chinese lawyers.

Since much of my scholarship revolved around East European studies and East European intellectual history in particular, it would have been incomprehensible for me to bypass men and women of dissent and ideas whose moral choices and political actions were formative and decisive when I was working on my early academic books. This was the case, for instance, with *Identity and Freedom*, the book

in which three noted Lithuanian émigré scholars and intellectuals are portrayed: the sociologist Vytautas Kavolis, the political scientist Aleksandras Shtromas, and the poet and literary scholar Tomas Venclova. Shtromas and Venclova were high-profile Soviet dissidents. Writing of them, I had no chance to rethink and portray them otherwise than through an intense process of delving deeply into the life and work of major Russian and Ukrainian dissidents who were Shtromas's and Venclova's brothers- and sisters-in-arms.

The genre of brief commentary is not totally alien to me, and it has never been so, as I was early on writing short commentaries for Lithuanian newspapers and online magazines. Yet this time I had to take on a different path in terms of linguistic and political sensitivities, since writing for an English-speaking readership allowed me to reassess many things trying to make them as understandable and available, or, on the contrary, challenging, intriguing, and provocative as possible. Whatever the case, a brief political commentary is not a philosophical essay; nor is it a free-floating review essay or an intellectual overview of literature and arts. Having said this, the point was to find somehow a proper way to connect my Eastern and Central European sensitivities to a wider readership made up by people of various professions, creeds, doctrines and political views.

Therefore, this book is an account (as well as a hidden diary) of a politician and human rights defender who has at hand more tools to handle his experience in scholarly ways than his more conventional peers. My experience as coordinator on behalf of European liberals in the EP subcommittee on human rights, and also as an active human rights defender helped my considerably in getting first-hand knowledge of the human rights situation and record in many regions and countries of the world.

In addition to *The Baltic Times*, in 2011 I began acting as a columnist for *Ukrainian Week*, a bright and challenging magazine that richly contributes to the atmosphere of political liberty, dissenting opinion, and civic-mindedness in Ukraine. Thanks to the translation of my books into the Ukrainian language, I was not an unknown en-