How is Leonidas Donskis remembered in Lithuania?

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First of all, I would like to thank The Romanian Association for Baltic and Nordic Studies, and prof. MiloIU personally for organising this conference. We, as the Lithuanian Embassy in Romania, highly value the Association's contribution to promoting the relations between the academic communities of our respective countries and deepening the knowledge of the Romanian public about the Baltic Sea region. We have been cooperating with the Association for many years now and our Embassy is always

delighted to contribute to and participate in the Association's events. This year it is even more special, because this time we are celebrating the legacy of the late Leonidas Donskis, Lithuanian political theorist, historian of ideas, social analyst, political commentator, and professor, who also happened to be a close friend of the Romanian Association for Baltic and Nordic Studies, and one of the masterminds behind the idea for this conference.

I was asked to talk about how Leonidas Donskis is remembered in Lithuania. Being one of a few non-scholars in this event, I will not try to go deeper into ideas of prof. Donskis - I believe this will be the topic of prof. Miloiu's presentation. Instead, I will try to paint the portrait of prof. Donskis, the way he is remembered in the Lithuanian society, and also briefly summarize the initiatives which were or will be implemented in order to pay tribute to prof. Donskis and preserve his legacy.

For those of you who are not familiar with Leonidas Donskis and his work, I would like to start with a brief introduction to his life. Mr. Donskis was born in 1962, in the Lithuanian port city Klaipėda. He graduated from the present-day Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, majoring in philology and theatre, and continued his studies in Vilnius University, where he received his first doctorate in philosophy. He earned his second doctorate in social and moral philosophy from the University of Helsinki, Finland, and later was awarded with an honorary doctorate in the Bradford University in Great Britain and, of course, Valahia University of Târgoviște.

Mr. Donskis was a Professor at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania, where he served as the Dean of the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy, but he also taught students all over the world: Finland, Estonia, USA, Great Britain, Sweden, Hungary, etc. Donskis has been published widely in international refereed journals, and is the author or editor of more than 50 books, half of which are available in English. His works have been translated into 18 languages, including Romanian. Donskis also served as a member of the European Parliament from 2009 to 2015.

His unexpected death in 2016, at the age of 54, was a great shock and a profound loss to the people of Lithuania and to the academic society and intellectuals all over the world. The passing away of the most famous

Lithuanian liberal theoretic was also a loss to the liberal thought in the Central and Eastern European region in general.

Mr. Donskis was not only a prominent scholar, but also an exceptional personality. He was an intellectual and a man of culture, a very versatile human being, whose interests and talents transcended the boundaries between disciplines. According to his students, he was an amazing teacher, never boring, never read from the notes, recited Shakespeare and made references to a broad range of schools of thought, authors and events during his classes. His friends remember him as a warm and calm person, extremely well educated and knowledgeable in different subjects, yet never arrogant. One of his close associates wrote, that it was actually somewhat intimidating to be next to him, such an extraordinary and well-educated personality, because it made you realize your own shortcomings – yet prof. Donskis never positioned himself above others, never considered any audience unworthy of his time, and always listened attentively to others, even if they had an opposing opinion.

Prof. Donskis was a passionate believer in the European project and a promoter of the EU's core values. He used his term in the European Parliament to promote the universal values which transcended the national interests, such as democracy, tolerance and human rights. He was very much interested in the future of Europe, and society as a whole, in the promotion of democracy and civil responsibility, and that interest was not limited to his term in the EP. Prof. Donskis strongly believed in the crucial role of education here, thus he would gladly participate in the discussions on these topics with students, pupils and young people, and has also authored a textbook on civic education for the 10th grade school students.

In our minds Prof. Donskis remains an advocate of liberal ideas and principles - not so much the economic side of it (he was even critical of some of its elements and by-products, such as consumerism which he believed to damage the human relationships and society as a whole), but the social and cultural dimension of liberalism, such as rights and freedoms, tolerance and a peaceful coexistence between different groups and ideas, putting an emphasis on moral sensitivity. Considering tolerance to be an essential element of a healthy society, he did not think that it comes naturally, on the

contrary, for him it was a result of a constant hard work, convincing oneself to accept someone who is different from you, who has different attitudes and approaches, without any prejudices or hate. Prof. Donskis believed in the value of discussion, because only through a careful and attentive consideration of different positions the truth and reconciliation could be achieved.

Donskis was a devoted fighter for the human rights, and his efforts in this field, at least in Lithuania, were widely acknowledged. This was a the core issue during his mandate in the European Parliament: he coordinated the human rights policy in the ALDE European party, bringing to the attention of his colleagues the human rights issues not only in the EU, but also in the regions which are further away, such as Tibet and India, or are often overlooked by politicians, such as Central Asia. Mr. Donskis used his position in the EP and all the soft power available to him to protect the dissidents in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine (where the pro-Russian forces ruled at the time) and Central Asia. I believe it is no coincidence that the topic of today's conference - „Dissent and conformism”- was conceived together with him, because he has seen the cases of dissidents in this and neighbouring regions everyday, he worked hard to raise awareness about these issues around the world, and I believe that this conference is a nice extension of his work in this field. Upon ending his term at the European Parliament Donskis wrote: „I hope that there will be someone to remember that there was a colleague from Lithuania who did not limit himself merely to the interests of his own country and his region, but instead was thinking about the human dignity, freedom and rights all over the world.” I believe, that prof. Donskis in his own words managed to summarize not only his term in the European Parliament, but his life-long work in general. For his efforts, prof. Donskis posthumously was awarded in Lithuania with the National Equality and Diversity Lifetime Achievement award.

As you may already understand, prof. Donskis was not a distant scholar, living in the world of philosophy, and watching the world through the rose-coloured glasses. He was very much present in the Lithuanian public life and media, trying to bring a broader, philosophical perspective to the current events and issues: for several years Donskis had his own TV

show where he discussed different phenomena and issues of the modern society, from reality TV and sports to the search of a national identity, all from the sociological, philosophical point of view. In addition, Donskis constantly published his comments on the latest topics of the political agenda, on a broad range of subjects, and also was involved in different social projects and activities of the non-governmental organisations, most importantly - those promoting human rights and tolerance, including the organisations of the Lithuanian Jewish community. One of those organisations - "The Sugihara Foundation – Diplomats for Life" in 2017 has founded the annual Leonidas Donskis Prize for the continuous efforts to promote tolerance, dialogue and human rights.

At the initiative of Mrs. Jolanta Donskienė, the widow of prof. Donskis, there was established a "Leonidas Donskis fund", with the objective to preserve the legacy of prof. Donskis, and to continue the dissemination of his ideas. Last year the fund, at the initiative of the close associate of prof. Donskis, a philosopher, artist and politician Mr. Arūnas Gelūnas, organized a series of events called "Donskian discussions". The idea behind this initiative was to revive the discussions in the spirit of Leonidas Donskis: calm, slow, benevolent, "without anger or hatred". As Mr. Gelūnas pointed out, "Donskis was a man of conversation: he initiated a conversation - be it a dialogue, polylogue, discussion or happening - with his students, those like-minded, different-minded, with everyone who were willing to listen and to hear". Up until now, six discussions have taken place, highlighting the ideas and issues which were (or would have been) close to prof. Donskis's heart: nationalism and patriotism (and their role in creating divisions in the society), relationship between the European Union and Lithuanian identity, parallels between Machiavelli's "effective truth" and "fake news" phenomenon, civic education in Lithuania, the perception of liberalism in Lithuania and the world, and the human rights situation in Tibet. As you can see, the range of the topics is as broad as were Donskis's interests, yet all of these discussions share the same form with the to uncover the complexity of the discussed subjects in an intellectually-rewarding and open environment.

The legacy of prof. Donskis has also been acknowledged by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania - in 2017 one of the halls in the ministry was renamed "European Hall", and memorial plaque for Donskis unveiled, to remind the future generations about the pro-European values of prof. Donskis. Ministry pledged to contribute to the promotion of these values, including through events and discussions aimed to foster the ability to listen and hear, and to maintain an open dialogue - one out of many values that were cherished by the Professor. Since then, the Ministry contributed to the publishing of the Dutch translation of prof. Donskis's book, and organisation of several discussions and conferences, including this one.

One of the most ambitious initiatives to immortalize the memory of Leonidas Donskis is a plan to erect a statue for Professor in Kaunas, next to the Vytautas Magnus University, where he used to teach. The project is currently under development, as well as an idea to open the "Office of Leonidas Donskis" in the Vytautas Magnus University which would host his personal book collection.

Since prof. Donskis has been conducting activities all over the world, it is no surprise, that the initiatives to preserve his memory and to pay homage to his legacy appeared outside the borders of Lithuania as well, the best example being the decision of the Romanian Baltic and Nordic Studies Association to name its library in Tirgoviste University after him. This gesture was greatly appreciated in Lithuania and made it to the headlines in our media, so allow me to thank you for this once again. Also I should mention, that you have a "sister" library in Lithuania - in 2017 Vytautas Magnus University has also named its new library after prof. Donskis.

To mention other initiatives, Bologna University, where prof. Donskis had been teaching, established a graduate student fellowship under his name. In Belgium, the Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs contributed to the the Dutch translation of Leonidas Donskis' collection of essays "The Little Europe: a Map by an Aesthete", which was published last year.

To summarize, Leonidas Donskis is remembered as a great intellectual, one of the most important contemporary Lithuanian

philosophers, who tried to bring the philosophical perspective to the present-day issues of the world, and who not only preached the universal values of democracy, tolerance and human rights, but also embodied it.

Coming back to today's conference, I should note one more thing - prof. Donskis wanted the world to overcome what he called the culture of oblivion, when "uncomfortable", painful, complicated events are intentionally forgotten - instead, he urged to unearth these painful pages of the history, analyze them, uncover the complex context of those issues, in order to learn from them, which would then contribute to developing a greater moral sensitivity and a healthier society. I believe that this conference will help to bring some of the important subjects out of the oblivion, and also I would like to wish for all of the participants during these couple of days to experience that open, thorough and enriching discussion in the Donskian spirit.