„The Baltic Times“ interviu su PLB pirmininke Dalia Henke

Mėnraščio *The Baltic Times rugsėjo 22–spalio 5 d. numeryje išspausdintame interviu Pasaulio Lietuvių Bendruomenės pirmininkė Dalia Henke dalijasi mintimis apie savo kaip organizacijos vadovės pareigas, svarbiausius PLB uždavinius, stiprėjantį kraštų lietuvių bendruomenių tarpusavio bendradarbiavimą ir ryšius su Lietuvos institucijomis, naujųjų technologijų amžiaus diktuojamus pokyčius.*

PLB President: 'Lithuania's exodus plays into our hands, not the state's'

Linas Jegelevicius

Calling the chairmanship of the Lithuanian World Community (PLB) a "great honour," Dalia Henke, the president, has to work hard to oversee its operations in 44 countries worldwide. "I feel responsible for doing what I can with my nine board members to serve the PLB and the world Lithuanian community in the most effective way. The PLB is the voice of Lithuanians living abroad and, contrary to public belief in some quarters in Lithuania, those who have left the country have not turned their back on Lithuania," she emphasised in an interview for ***The Baltic Times***.

Dalia Henke, president of the Lithuanian World Community (PLB).

Can you tell me, please, what changes the Lithuanian World Community (PLB) has been through lately with you standing at its helm?

The Lithuanian World Community (PLB) represents Lithuanian citizens living abroad. It deals primarily with issues confronting people who have left Lithuania and between those who have stayed. We believe that all people who have left Lithuania, whether it be for a shorter or a longer period of time, still have an interest in the country of their parents and grandparents. The desire to remain in contact, to preserve cultural identity, and to give children a chance to learn more about the country of their mothers or fathers is of critical importance. Unfortunately, some Lithuanians have had to give up their Lithuanian citizenship, for example if they marry abroad, despite having been born in Lithuania and still considering themselves Lithuanian. We have fought hard to find a resolution to this issue. A referendum would have shelved any possibility of dual citizenship. Such a result would have been unacceptable to Lithuanians living abroad. In our view, dual citizenship is important for Lithuania too, in order to broaden the total number of Lithuanians at home and worldwide. Furthermore, we have improved co-operation amongst international Lithuanian communities and between them and the PLB. With the use of modern communication channels, we are able to communicate faster and more effectively. Our monthly online newsletter offers a new level of transparency of proceedings within the PLB Board, which is working hard to strengthen the reputation of the Lithuanian World Community.

How challenging and time-consuming has the stint been for you?

Being the president of the Lithuanian World Community is a great honour. I feel responsible for doing what I can with my nine board members to serve the PLB and the world Lithuanian community in a most effective way. The PLB is the voice of Lithuanians living abroad who want to remain part of Lithuania. Contrary to public belief in some quarters in Lithuania, those who have left the country have not turned their back on Lithuania, but have left to learn more about other countries, people, and culture and have been and will remain representatives of modern Lithuania. Being at the top of the PLB requires creating a sustainable network of contacts to allow us to develop educational, cultural, and political platforms to ensure the engagement of Lithuanians living abroad and to assure them that their children will get a good chance to learn about Lithuania even if they live hundreds or thousands of miles away. My job, in conjunction with the role of my colleagues, is to maintain good relations with all 44 country associations. It's true that this involves a lot of travelling, as well as keeping an open mind about the specific interests and requirements of the Lithuanian community in a given country. In April, I gave up my regular job, since the top job at PLB requires my full attention. We have formed a good team with all board members and exchange our views on a regular basis. One important part of my work is to maintain our contacts within Lithuanian institutions and to represent the interests of Lithuanians abroad.

PLB has been a major influencer throughout the times, but the notion is its influence on Lithuanian politics has dwindled considerably recently with the old generation of Lithuanians dying out and with the modern IT technologies replacing the communication and decision-making process. Is this assessment right?

Are you referring to political influence? The PLB is the body which represents the interests of roughly 1.5 million Lithuanians who currently live abroad. We live in challenging times. For example, Lithuanians in South America struggle to maintain the language and cultural traditions. In Europe, Brexit is a good example which illustrates that the PLB has a role to play in communicating the concerns and worries of Lithuanians living in the UK to both Lithuania and the British Lithuanian community. The economic crisis in Spain and the inability of the political system to produce a stable government to address the economic questions of the day is another example, with direct implications for Lithuanians living and working in this Mediterranean country. The question, what contribution Lithuania is making to the progress of Europe, can be closely linked to the political, legal, and social implications which Lithuanians experience in their daily lives. Modern technology, particularly social media, makes it easy to keep in contact, to generate interest, to keep people informed and involved — particularly with younger people, who use these platforms in preference to reading newspapers or journals — to provide a higher level of transparency and to open the decision-making process to more people interested in our cause.

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Can you take us through the Lithuanian communities worldwide and highlight their recent accomplishments and talk about the setbacks they have had?

The PLB was registered in the US after it was founded in Germany in 1949. The community in the US was the original driving force for setting up the Lithuanian World Community. The US community is well organised, substantially funded, and can look back to a long tradition of community organisation. The Canadian community is also long-established and stable and co-operates with American counterparts on a regular basis. Australia, on the other side of the globe, has strong communities primarily based in Melbourne and Sydney. Although assimilation into Australian society is well advanced, due to most emigration there from Lithuania occurring immediately after World War Two, it does not stop them from continuing to value and practice Lithuanian traditions. Lithuanians have settled in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Colombia. Even the second and third generation are able to communicate in Lithuanian to some extent. Russia is the home of thousands of Lithuanians. Their situation can be described in the context of Russian economic development. In Europe, Lithuanians have settled in all countries. There is a constant influx of new members. There are also Lithuanian communities in Israel, Turkey, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Belarus, and Japan. All communities have specific issues to deal with. One important question is whether the interest of second and third generations to maintain links to Lithuania is strong enough to learn the language and celebrate Lithuanian holidays. In some countries, funding is not as easy as in others. All these communities are run by volunteers and their commitment and engagement is outstanding. Lithuanians abroad are constantly debating how to run their communities in the most efficient and effective ways.

What are the chief ambitions of the activities that you are focusing on these days?

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What are the chief ambitions of the activities that you are focusing on these days?

The continued exodus of Lithuanians has strengthened the role of the Lithuanian World Community in representing the interest of those Lithuanian living abroad. Our national communities enjoy increased interest with membership figures going up. Our main focus for the next three years has been defined by our general assembly, the PLB Parliament (PLB Seimas), which approved 12 resolutions to be carried out before the next Parliament in 2018. These resolutions cover a broad spectrum of issues which define our work programme. For example, we want to make sure that Lithuanians abroad can keep their citizenship even if they apply for the citizenship of their new home country. We want the possibility for our expatriate electorate to vote not in the traditional way, by registering at the embassy and applying for voting slips, but to use Internet voting. Our Baltic neighbours in Estonia have already introduced this system which allows many

more citizens to express their political preference in an easy foolproof way. Furthermore, we support all efforts to strengthen democracy in Lithuania, its independence, and territorial integrity. We are active in promoting a positive image of Lithuania in the world. We support the founding of Lithuanian expatriate communities in new countries. A major project for the PLB will be to coordinate and promote celebrations for the 100th anniversary of Lithuania's independence. Last but not least, we are currently conducting a worldwide campaign to ask Lithuanians abroad to participate in the general election in October in Lithuania. Our campaign includes information about how each of the candidates stand on a variety of political issues. To underline the importance of taking part in national elections, the PLB communities in Ireland, United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Norway, and Sweden have organised round table discussions with candidates from Lithuania. For those who are unable to participate in these events we will be streaming the proceedings on the Internet.

Although you've put a lot of effort into paving the way for dual citizenship enactment, the endeavour has failed at the end of the day. Why?

We do not regard the current situation as a failure. We succeeded in stopping a referendum which would not have provided a sustainable solution. It has been the job of the PLB for many years to improve relationships between those who live in Lithuania and Lithuanian institutions and those Lithuanians who live abroad. We are one people and the groups should not be divided. Having said this, we should not forget the children of Lithuanians abroad and offer them the attractive option to become Lithuanian citizens in their own right.

When do you believe, and how, importantly, dual citizenship could be enacted in Lithuania?

As in the case of all questions with legal implications, we expect that the notion of "dual citizenship" will require solid analysis and debate among the electorate. I am convinced that the engagement of those living abroad for Lithuania, for its culture, and its progress as a modern European country, will mean the creation of a country which is open-minded and interested in the way its own people flourish outside its physical borders, while still maintaining its language and traditions. Just imagine that the world is changing even further — into a better and more interesting place, where Lithuanian citizens can be found both in Lithuania and abroad. We believe in maintaining good relations with all Lithuanians to be able

to foster this ideal.

If you can be honest, what are your biggest disappointments about Lithuanian legislature and politics?

I am always honest. I am a mother of two children and it would be unwise to play tricks on you! The PLB is recognised as the voice and platform representing the interests of Lithuanian citizens living abroad. However, we have to recognise the fact that there are still very many Lithuanians who are leaving Lithuania every day. More are leaving than returning home. This phenomenon is strengthening the role and relevance of the PLB — we understand that many other countries offer good training, careers, and business opportunities for qualified foreigners and better salaries than Lithuanians can earn at home. Lithuanians have a good reputation abroad since they are usually well qualified and eager to work. The Lithuanian legislature's failure to adequately deal with these facts and to fully recognise the value Lithuanians abroad can bring to their home country and their continuing role as citizens of Lithuania is disappointing.

How much has the new generation of emigres integrated with the local senior generation Lithuanian emigrant communities? Where is the line drawn between the new and old generations?

We live in a period of transition. Many Lithuanians have now decided to move abroad either temporarily or permanently so that they can be successful somewhere else or because of personal relationships or for education, career-building, or entrepreneurship. This contrasts with earlier emigration for mainly political reasons, where there was little choice in the matter. Unlike earlier emigrants, today's Lithuanians living abroad can come back any time and can keep in touch with their families at home, even though going to live abroad has been and is always a big decision. It requires courage, dedication, and open-mindedness: all ingredients which could be useful in Lithuania as well. Modern communication technologies are the dividing line between the old and the new generation. The new generation lives in the age of social media. Their links are international and broad.

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