

Lithuanians keep cool

The vice president of embattled Lithuania, Bronius Kuzmickas, walked into my New York office looking calm and dignified — certainly not like a leader of a nation that is under the daily threat of takeover by the Soviet Army. Nor, for that matter, someone who might soon find himself behind bars.

The Lithuanians are keeping remarkably cool in the face of mounting Soviet threats and provocations to violence, including recent occupation by Red Army troops of key government buildings and wildcat strikes by ethnic Russian factory and transport workers.

Last weekend, the war of nerves between Moscow and Lithuania intensified when Mikhail Gorbachev threatened to cut off the republic's supplies of oil, gas, coal and raw materials. So far, this has not happened, but the valves could be turned off at any time.

Such a blockade, admitted Kuzmickas, would be a "catastrophe." Lithuania, he noted, had two to three months of fuel reserves. Other sources say the republic's supplies would last no more than three weeks. After that, the lights would go out and all transport would stop.

There are rumors that certain nations in Western Europe and Scandinavia have promised to rush to Lithuania's rescue. I doubt this strongly. The Soviet Baltic Fleet could quickly blockade Lithuania's coast and cut it off from the outside world, as the grim-faced Kuzmickas admitted.

At the same time, says Kuzmickas, Moscow is now forming a parallel Lithuanian government in neighboring Byelorussia. This puppet regime would be moved into the government buildings that have been taken over by Soviet troops and then quickly recognized by Moscow as the official government.

So the test of wills goes on, with Lithuania giving a bit of ground here and there while Moscow refrains, as of this writing, from implementing its threatened blockade.

Lithuanians are still hoping the West will somehow pressure Moscow into accepting their indepen-

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dence. This is likely a vain hope.

Kuzmickas was given the cold shoulder in Ottawa and shunned by the Canadian government. Joe Clark, that champion of freedom and human rights in nations that don't have much trade with Canada, stopped for a moment to shake Kuzmickas' hand and then ran the other way. It's so much easier picking on South Africa.

If the Soviets get mad at Ottawa, they might cut off imports of Canadian wheat. And who wants to face angry farmers?

The response in Washington has been stronger, but still tempered. Congress has expressed anger and is threatening to slow down economic and arms reduction talks with Moscow. President George Bush clearly wishes Lithuania would sink into the Baltic and stop getting in the way of his romance with Gorbachev. But he must also listen to angry Americans who don't want to see tiny Lithuania bullied by the Soviets. Moscow also hears these rumbles of American anger and is consequently being more cautious in Lithuania.

At the same time, however, the politically powerful American Jewish community is, according to sources in New York, exerting pressure on Bush not to allow the fracas in Lithuania to cool U.S.-Soviet relations. Moscow is allowing up to one million Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel in exchange for U.S. economic support and political accommodation.

And among American Jews, there is bitter hostility to Lithuanians dating back to World War II.

And there are more problems dating from earlier this century: The port of Klaipeda, formerly Memel, which the Soviets say they will never relinquish; the isolated region around Kaliningrad, once German Konigsberg; and still active claims by Poland to parts of Lithuania. As Kuzmickas pointed out, if there ever is a readjustment in Poland's western border, the region it seized from Germany in 1945, Poland will likely in turn go after parts of not only Lithuania but Byelorussia and Ukraine, over which it has historical claims. In other words, a nasty and dangerous mess.

"We are keeping calm and avoiding any provocations," says Kuzmickas, who believes, in the end, that Moscow will eventually agree to an amicable separation from Lithuania. "But we cannot discount military action at any time or the arrest of Lithuanian leaders."

Was Kuzmickas offended or dismayed by Ottawa's icy reception and Clark's brush-off?

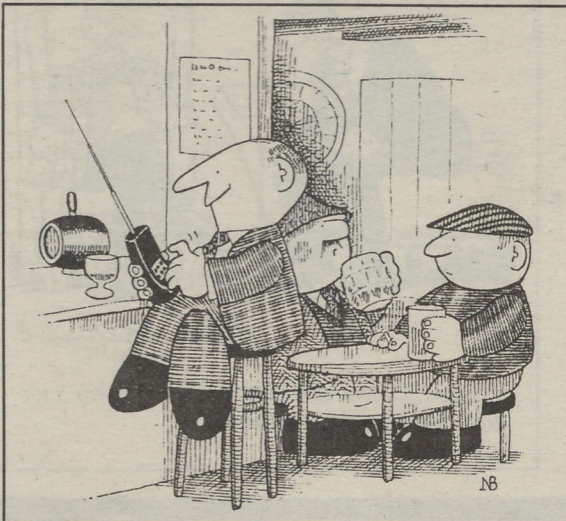
"No, my mission was simply to be listened to and understood ... in that I was successful."

Kuzmickas, as I told him, was as good a diplomat as a vice president. Behind his dignified reserve, I thought, just for a moment, that I saw a flicker of hurt and anger.

"Never mind our government," I told him. "All Canadians admire and respect Lithuanians for their courage and intelligence."

Just for a moment, he smiled.

Punch



"Of course, every village has got its global village idiot nowadays."