

VLADIMIR IUSHKIN: *Dnevnik sovetnika prem'ër-ministra* [Diary of the advisor to the Prime Minister]. Varrak. Tallinn 2016. 552 pp. ISBN 9789985338315.

Diaries are a crucial source for historians, but professionals have to be careful with this genre. Overwhelming enthusiasm must be replaced with the cautious assertion that inspiring lines of a protagonist deliver just one more perspective to add to their research – a diary, after all, represents just the viewpoint of an individual. The nature of a diary is naturally different from a memoir, and as such, the book reviewed makes a significant addition to other examples of person-centred non-scientific publications covering the end of *perestroika* in the Estonian SSR and the first years of re-independent Estonia.¹

Vladimir Iushkin's diary covers a period of 22 months from April 1990 to January 1992, when he acted as an advisor to Edgar Savisaar, the leading Estonian politician of the period, first as Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Estonian SSR, and later as Prime Minister, but also already during *perestroika* as one of the leading figures of the Estonian Popular Front, *Rahvarinne*. Iushkin, himself a Muscovite with a background in engineering and military industry management, moved to Estonia for personal reasons and actually mastered only a little Estonian. It is remarkable that the diary is currently published in Russian alongside with a translation into Estonian,² and is supplied with a CD containing a large number of documents mentioned in the book. While the diary itself already contains important extracts of the memos, communiques, articles, treaties and endless working drafts, the reader can easily explore all 478 documents in detail. It is also noteworthy that there are around 600 individuals mentioned in the book, each of whom is supplied with a note regarding their position at the time, as well as an index of names.

It is difficult to determine the precise duties of Iushkin as an advisor to Savisaar. According to the latter's definition, Iushkin was the government's *éminence grise* for the relations with its Eastern neighbour (p. 447). Iushkin's main area of activity was indeed the relations between Tallinn and Moscow – the communication of Savisaar's government with the circles of both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. Over the course of 550 pages, Iushkin chronicles the disintegration and dissolution of the Soviet Union, depicting significant developments in the region and describing Estonia's

¹ See e.g. EDGAR SAVISAAR: Peaminister. Eesti lähi ajalugu 1990–1992 [Prime Minister. Contemporary history of Estonia, 1990–1992], Tartu 2005; MART LAAR: Pööre. Mälestusi I [Turnaround. Memoirs I], Tallinn 2015; LARS PETER FREDÉN: Tagasitulekud: Rootsi julgeolekupoliitika ja Balti riikide iseseisvuse uus algus [Returns. Swedish security policy and the new begin of the independence of the Baltic states], Tallinn 2009.

² VLADIMIR JUŠKIN: Peaministri nõuniku päevik [Diary of the advisor to the Prime Minister], Tallinn 2016.

policies vis-a-vis the USSR and the Russian Federation. The simplified strategy of these days can be summed up with a statement Iushkin made in Leningrad in spring 1990: “We have the same enemy – i.e. the centre” (p. 41). For almost a year and a half, Savisaar’s government establishes close ties with Yeltsin and Leningrad’s leader Anatolii Sobchak, trying to reduce Gorbachev’s influence and make Estonia’s independence as smooth and bloodless as possible.

Another one of Iushkin’s battlefields was internal policies, especially those targeting the Russian-speaking groups. The period saw a remarkable rise of separatist activity in North-Eastern Estonia, moreover, pro-USSR members of the Tallinn Supreme Soviet were active opponents of Savisaar, the Soviet military was still present in Estonia even in 1992 with approximately 45,000 men and leading industrial plants and factories were ruled by directors of Russian origin, often vocal against Savisaar as well. All of these united made up the *Interdvizhenie*, which, however, weakened during the described period.

The diary, although published a quarter-century after the described events, still manages to provide an attentive reading because many of the topics addressed remain on the agenda of the Estonian government today: the compensation of the state to churches for damages during Soviet occupation (p. 79), the government’s struggle to sufficiently inform Estonian Russians about its activities and policies (p. 148), the demands of odious Russian politicians like Vladimir Zhirinovskii to return Poland and Finland (and, of course, the Baltic states) to Russia (p. 418), etc.

The book provides readers with nuanced psychological profiles of the actors, some scenes even emphasise the author’s literary talent. For instance, when Iushkin describes his discussion of an urgent matter with Arnold Rüütel, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet who resided in the presidential palace once built for authoritarian ruler Konstantin Päts in the calm and picturesque park of *Kadriorg*. When Iushkin arrives, Rüütel feels himself comfortable in a brand-new *Ford* parked in the yard. It turns out, Rüütel does not want to leave, but just tests the feeling of the new car (pp. 80–81). Prior to a meeting with Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Anatolii Sobchak brags that he purchased a fancy dress for his wife on his recent trip to Hollywood – now she can wear one *comme il faut* (p. 116). Or take the episode when Savisaar learns that he is not listed among the speakers for a huge public event, angrily claiming that he refuses to participate in the event anyway while he “fractured all the pens in the room” (p. 487). All of these little scenes allow us to look at the figures depicted as human beings and not just as “political animals”.

The period imposed an intense workload on everyone involved in the state-building process. Nevertheless, readers can find plenty of humorous situations in the diary. Once Iushkin concludes that “they don’t know the Estonians in the Kremlin” explaining this with the situation when

Gorbachev tried to pronounce the surname of a member of the Soviet Congress of Peoples' Deputies, Hardo Aasmäe and eventually failed (p. 111). In another story Savisaar, while on a state visit to Tbilisi, requests from one of his advisors at least 20 toasts for the dinner the following evening – Georgian Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua had given the Estonian delegation a very warm-hearted welcome dinner with many courses, but it was Savisaar who had to respond all the time to the many toasts of his host (p. 169). In early 1991, the atmosphere in the days before the referendum on the future of the Soviet Union was thought to be so tense that the member of the Estonian Supreme Soviet, Rein Veidemann asked Iushkin to use his ties to Savisaar in order to buy for 15,000 dollars the rights to show the French erotic movie “Emmanuelle” on national TV – this would help a lot to reduce the tension among the population (p. 284). During a state visit to Moldova, Prime Minister Mircea Druk during a conversation with Iushkin remarks that “you ask so precise questions that if you were not on Edgar’s team, I would decide that you work for the KGB” (p. 344).

Iushkin’s diary is an astonishing read for those interested in the relations between the USSR and its republics during the very last stage of the first socialist country in the world. The book, however, has little to offer with respect to Estonian internal politics, with the exception of the aforementioned matters of Russian-speakers. Iushkin is a good observer. Due to his origins, he remains a Russian among Estonians. Thus, on the occasion of the Soviet recognition of the independence of Estonia in September 1991, he notes in his diary:

“I can only imagine what an Estonian experiences today: my wife, mother-in-law, my friends – they waited decades for this to happen. They waited and believed, at all costs. They waited in Estonia, in Siberia, in many countries of the world. This is why their feelings today differ so sharply from mine. I envy them” (p. 483).

Still in early February 1991 Iushkin sincerely wondered why Estonian politicians were not able to stay united against the joint enemy Moscow (p. 301). Thus, there is a gap between him and the Estonians, clearly outlined in his diary, but this perspective of an “outsider” allows him to describe the Estonian and Russian political landscapes, while staying on the fringe of both, and observing them from a distance. Two decades following the described events, Iushkin remains one of the leading scholars in Estonia, researching Russia and its foreign and military policies. Nowadays he runs a budget-sponsored³ one-man-think-tank and contributes often to the media.⁴ Of course, the diary cannot and does not aim at providing a comprehensive

³ Mihkelson ja Tsahkna said siiski katuseraha: eelarves on see SDE real [Mihkelson and Tsahkna nevertheless got parliamentary money - in the budget its from the SDE]. ERR uudised, 5.12.2017, URL: <https://www.err.ee/646794/mihkelson-ja-tсахkna-said-siiski-katuseraha-eelarves-on-see-sde-real> (Accessed 17.2.2018).

⁴ Iushkin writes regularly for the Estonian daily *Postimees*, and other outlets such as *Eesti Ekspress*, *Diplomaatia*, *Maaailma Vaade*. He runs a weekly Russian-language

view of the events in 1990–1992 in this part of the world. Nevertheless, it still provides notable insights into the events and the protagonists, is an accurate and detailed account of what he had been part of – and even more, this publication gives an example of a very well edited book.

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analytical broadcast on Radio 4 along with his long-time colleague and friend Rai-vo Vare, himself a former minister of Savisaar’s cabinet.