

Particularly lately, I really believe what she's doing is a very non-presidential thing. A president has to be as much neutral as possible to all political parties. I also don't like the assertiveness she exercises. A president has to be a conciliatory figure, sort of a go-between person. She is far from being that person.

Do you believe she stands any chance in the EU Presidential election?

Frankly, I believe she doesn't. I know some speculation on that have surfaced already, but she has a minimal chance in succeeding.

With nearly a year past from the 2012 Lithuanian Parliament election, the ruling Social Democrats enjoy incredible public support, at 29 percent at a recent poll. What is the explanation for this?

Indeed, it is a very pleasant surprise. Usually, a year or so after an election the winning party's support drops significantly. In this case, I attribute the success to a number of Social Democrat Party's stalwarts who always tend to score well in polls. I believe people feel that Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevicius is a very open, sincere and good-natured man. And as everything comes in comparison, perhaps the people see themselves that he does not have a tiny bit of the arrogance and the I-know-everything attitude that his predecessor [Conservative Andrius Kubilius] had. Look, he acknowledges his shift in opinion on some issues. But this comes to him very naturally, as if underlying his human nature. Other Social Democrat leaders, like Juozas Olekas and Vytenis Andriukaitis - the latter has exerted Sizif-like efforts in overhauling the current health system - also are very strong and have deserved people's confidence. Unlike other parties, our party is not arrogant, angry or constantly seeking enemies. I think people see that.

I remember when conducting an interview for a Palanga newspaper with former Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius, that there were two of his advisers next to him, with me sitting in front of them. Meanwhile, for a similar interview, Algirdas Butkevicius showed up alone and sat next to me.

Well, you see, it tells a lot, and even journalists log in the differences.

As a party insider, can you reveal how likely the party leadership decides on the fate on the Visaginas Nuclear Power Plant?

I believe it will not pursue the project. My position throughout the years - since the debates on the LEO nuclear project [pursued by the ruling Social Democrats during 2004-2008] and up to the present discussions on the Hitachi Ltd. project - has not wavered: such a nuclear project would not do any good to Lithuania.

Won't we become geo-strategically weaker and more vulnerable having abandoned the project?

No, I am sure we won't. We do have really sufficient capabilities of satisfying the electric power need through the future electric transmission interconnection links and renewables.

Should the project be tested again by the nation in a plebiscite, provided the government resolves to take on it?

I believe this kind of a new referendum stands no chance of winning. And that would definitely hammer the last nail in the plant's coffin. So it would be very risky to put it up for the nation's judgement.

What is your take on introduction of the euro in Lithuania?

I stand for it, but, nevertheless, I see some drawbacks as well. Between the two options, I believe not introducing the euro would do more harm to Lithuania than having the currency.

Since we're meeting in Palanga, which is often dubbed Lithuania's summer capital, let me ask you how you like it this season? Have you noticed anything different here on this visit?

In fact, it is my second visit here this summer. Since I've always been very keen on sports, for me, therefore, the biggest thing is the advancing construction of the universal sports hall. Generally speaking, Palanga has been lately becoming nicer and more interesting. However, a lot still has to be done in eradicating a distinct seasonality. I wish the mayor of Palanga, instead of going to Liepaja, on the Latvian side for spa treatments and amusement, which is something he admitted in an interview, would rather put more effort in luring more foreigners - and Latvians - here in winter to the spas Palanga already has, and perhaps build some new ones, capable of drawing headlines over the border. As I am a tennis zealot, I really miss in the resort some modern indoor tennis courts. I was in Silute [in southwestern Lithuania] a couple of weeks ago and was pleasantly surprised to find that it has an indoor tennis facility. That is really nice.

By the way, you look very agile and spry for a 71-year-old. What is the secret of your youthfulness?

I have been very fascinated with an active lifestyle throughout my life and perhaps that is one of the reasons.

For example, in Palanga I never drive, but try instead to walk and ride a bike as much as possible. In any weather. Also I swim a lot in the Baltic Sea, even in winter, until recently, but I took the advice recently from my doctor and stopped taking the dips. Over the 20 last years, what I call the culture of swimming, has changed in Palanga. Before, people would wade into the water and start swimming. Nowadays, people get into it up their waist and stand idly, or jump over the waves at best. C'mon, one has to swim when in the sea! □

Keeping politics outside of business

Distinguished, self-proclaimed development experts among the expat crowd were overheard last weekend at a Riga watering hole, one frequented by locals and expats alike, in heated discussion over politics. This issue? Former politician 'the bulldozer' Ainars Slesers and his recent suggestion that he wants to return to politics, to get this country moving ahead.

Let's take a moment to consider this.

One side of the discussion - call them the 'S camp' - proclaimed an admiration for Mr. Slesers because he is "someone with ideas," and that "he says he wants to work for Latvia's best interests." (don't all politicians say this?) 'S camp' added that "nobody else in this country has any ideas."

The opposing camp remained skeptical. One person, Mr. Slesers or not, marching into politics to push the country ahead? Absurd!

Let's remember how things were with Mr. Slesers playing a leading role in politics, using his influence on local and national politics, and mixing this with his business. Many of his ideas benefited himself, and his friends and business associates, or were poorly-thought out schemes. And when it came to actually improving Riga city life, there is little positive of note, and much to regret.

And what were his ideas? Pushing for a high-rise office tower in a residentially-zoned neighborhood in Riga, against the city development plan, for close associates; giving others below market rent, without a public tender, for rights to build a floating entertainment center on the right bank of the Daugava River in Old Town. Then there was the need to rush and build the 'North Bridge' across the Daugava River, to save Latvia's economy. This is just some of his work.

'The bulldozer' tried to do pretty much what he wanted, regardless of rules or others' ideas. It's not surprising that he was recently voted as the politician voters least wanted to see return to public life - along with Andris Skele, one frequently mentioned in the same breath.

But the issue isn't about Mr. Slesers. It's about the general mixing of politics and business, resulting corruption and misuse of public money in Latvia. This is crony capitalism. Latvia doesn't need its budget and EU-money going towards

politically decided projects, for insiders' benefit. Estonia has done well in this regard, in keeping the two separate.

Good ideas are pushed aside, while those with them simply leave the country for elsewhere. Meritocracy is having a difficult time developing in Latvia.

Business needs fair market conditions, access to capital, not interference from politicians.

The discussion that evening was also about generating, and implementing good ideas - and who has them - for the country, to improve the economy and the standard of living. Latvia is not short of ideas. These come from foreigners in Latvia, too. And considering that Latvia's GDP for this year is projected at US\$ 39.4 billion (PPP), the country seems to be doing fine with Mr. Slesers, and Mr. Skele for that matter, out of public office.

This summer's World Latvian Economic and Innovation Forum is an example of the intensity of interest today in improving Latvia's competitiveness through innovation. The recently formed group Latvijas Atistibai (for Latvia's development) with former Prime Minister Einars Repse joins numerous business start-up incubators and initiatives scattered around the country that have the same goal. Ideas are to be found in universities and small companies. Not all will be winners, and Latvia shouldn't be a

country of app-developers, but the trend is noteworthy.

Problems companies face include access to larger markets, and sufficient talent remaining in the country. And some company managements need to improve their attitude, and understanding in how to work with foreign customers to develop long-term relationships.

Latvia also needs to stop relying on EU money as the solution for growth. There should be improved communication and cooperation within industry, and with the government Latvia. The government needs to fund R&D directly - through university grants, corporate awards - through open and transparent public tenders, to promote basic science and applied engineering in Latvia, then leave it to the private sector to utilize the discoveries.

Successful societies are built on ideas, ingenuity, teamwork and trust, not on criminal behavior in government and industry. We're all for Mr. Slesers to propose his wonderful ideas, but do it from the private sector, where he has to compete with everyone else, without unfair advantage. We don't need one Mr. Slesers, but instead the conditions for hundreds, thousands of entrepreneurs.

Oh, and when the 'S camp' was asked what are some of Mr. Slesers' good ideas, they couldn't name any. □

