CHAPTER 7

“The Man of Greatest Compromise” – Ernestas Galvanauskas and Smetona

In 1942, commenting on Owen Norem's draft text for his book *Timeless Lithuania*, Antanas Smetona asked the author to eliminate his proposed characterization of Ernestas Galvanauskas as “brilliant,” since the sentence could mislead the reader. But we could conclude that Smeona disliked the word “brilliant” more than the sentence. Smetona's relations with Ernestas Galvanauskas over the years were clearly not harmonious.

The two were acquainted since the time of the 1905 Lithuanian Seimas, where Galvanauskas (born in the village of Vabalninkas in 1882), already a graduate of the St. Petersburg Mining Institute, seemed to be a young, strong, future Lithuanian leader. A member of the Lithuanian Democratic Party, he had organized units of the peasant union. But after the Seimas, Smetona's and Galvanauskas's paths went different directions. Arrested and imprisoned by the tsarist authorities, Galvanauskas lived illegally; in 1908 he emigrated to Belgium. He finished the Technical University in Liège and also the Electro-technical Institute. He did not seek work in Russia; he worked on the railroad in Serbia. In 1918 he was in Paris, where he was invited to join the Lithuanian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. He served as the delegation's secretary, and later he immersed himself in Lithuania's internal life, serving as minister in a number of governments. In 1919–1920 and 1922–1924 Galvanauskas was Prime Minister of Lithuania, and from just that time Smetona gradually developed a rather complicated opinion of him.

When Galvanauskas was a prominent member of the cabinet in the early 1920s, Smetona, now an oppositional journalist, raised the problem of Lithuania's isolation in international relations, emphasizing that it did not have good relations with its neighbors – even Latvia laughed at it. A particular target of criticism was the plan for federating Lithuania with Poland, known by the name of the Belgian mediator Paul Hymans, under discussion in 1921–1922. Hymans thought to resolve the Vilnius Question by forming a Lithuanian-Polish federal state, with Lithuania's capital in Vilnius but with both Polish and Lithuanian as official languages. Lithuania would be made of two cantons, Vilnius and Kaunas. In his articles Smetona asserted that this “project would lead Lithuania further into Poland than the Union of Lublin had”: Lithuania would become a province of Poland. Smetona insisted that Poland had to return Vilnius and
Grodno to Lithuania, and to withdraw behind the Curzon line; it would then be possible to negotiate. Smetona thought it most doubtful that under the Hymans proposal it would be possible to bring the Polish-speaking citizenry of Vilnius back to the Lithuanian nationality.

Juozas Purickis and Galvanauskas, who were conducting those negotiations under Prime Minister Kazys Grinius, came in for special criticism. Somehow most people came to believe that Galvanauskas was yielding to Poland’s plans. The reasoning was that Galvanauskas’s wife was French, and France was supporting Poland everywhere. Therefore she was anti-Lithuanian. As a result of his wife’s nationality, therefore, Galvanauskas might well be representing Poland’s interests. Passions rose to the point that a Committee for the Salvation of Lithuania, a group of unclear membership, put a bomb near the window of Galvanauskas’s home. Galvanauskas was injured, but he survived. In the end, both Poland and Lithuania rejected the plan, and the debate died.

In his journalistic writing of the early 1920s, Smetona insisted that to raise the Vilnius Question to the international level and to resolve it, there was only one alternative – to obtain the aid of Soviet Russia, ignoring its internal order. Lithuania had no other allies, especially after the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors in 1923 to recognize Vilnius as Polish. Smetona urged relying on Russia and Germany, who would be interested in Lithuania’s independence. Lithuania should maintain “a certain contact” with Russia, cooperate with it in cultural spheres, and seek useful economic cooperation. Lithuania “cannot close itself off from Russia by an impenetrable wall.” Historian Liudas Truska is correct that with Lithuania’s finding itself in complete isolation because of the Vilnius conflict, no government had any choice.

In January 1923 Galvanauskas, then Prime Minister and knowing that Smetona and Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius through their activity in the Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union knew a great deal about the Klaipėda [German – Memel] region, designated Smetona as the plenipotentiary of the Lithuanian government in the Klaipėda region. Annexing the Klaipėda region was one of the most important triumphs of the young country, a sort of compensation for the painful loss of Vilnius. The Lithuanian government needed an experienced man and politician, capable of solving the problem of incorporating the region into Lithuania, and therefore Galvanauskas chose Smetona.

Smetona took up his new duties enthusiastically. The situation was complicated because the Conference of Ambassadors buried Kaunas in protests, threats, and notes. It was necessary to coordinate the relations of the insurgents with the local authorities in Klaipėda and to settle relations in Paris. According to Bronius K. Balutis, when Smetona came to Klaipėda,