

Lithuania: Sitkunai, Vilnius and Jamming

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In previous month's I've reported on the September 2008 EDXC Conference in Vaasa, Finland and the trip afterwards to Estonia and Latvia. Now we reach Lithuania, our third and final Baltic State where we visit the Sitkunai transmitter site and the capital Vilnius.

Our group of DXers, three from UK, two from Japan and two from Finland checked out of the comfortable Garden Palace hotel in Riga, Latvia and bade farewell to Finns Kari Kivekäs & Petri Mattila who had accompanied us on parts of the tour through Estonia and Latvia. The 2pm coach from Riga bus station then sped us southwards towards Kaunas in Lithuania, with a comfort stop en route at Panevėžys, the fifth largest city in Lithuania. Once again our tour organiser, Risto Vahakainu of the Finnish DX Association, produced cans of beer, "Gin long drink" and snacks to sustain us on the coach! Although the "Baltic States" are often conveniently grouped together, they are completely different in many ways – crossing the border into Lithuania the rural landscape noticeably changed with small farms and individual cows tethered on roadside verges, my abiding memory of the passing scenery from the our coach. Lithuania is a predominantly Catholic country, compared to Latvia and Estonia to the north, and has more in common with Poland with which it was united in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between 1569 and 1795.



Above: Sitkunai aerials field at sunset – an aerial plan is at <http://www.zilionis.lt/rtv/qth/sit/sit-widearea.php>

Before reaching Kaunas, the coach made an unscheduled stop on the Klaipeda-Kaunas motorway near Sitkunai where Rimantas Pleikys and Sigita Žilionis were kindly waiting with two cars to drive us the short distance to the Sitkunai transmitter site. Rimantas is the Project Coordinator for Radio Baltic Waves and former Minister of Communications of the Republic of Lithuania. Sigita is a broadcasting consultant and brokers airtime, including from the Sitkunai site, on both shortwave and mediumwave. The Sitkunai transmitter site is owned by the national transmitter operator LRTC and has two active mediumwave transmitters. One is a 500 kW Russian Vihr (installed in 1977) used on 666 (for Lieutvos R1) or alternatively 1386 kHz for relays.



Above: Sign on the Sitkunai gatepost.
 Left: Yours Truly and the Continental SW transmitter.

The other mediumwave transmitter is a 150 kW Russian Shtorm (installed in 1964) on 1557 kHz (for relays). In addition, there is also one active 100 kW Continental shortwave transmitter that came into service on 1st April 1999. Of course when we visited in September we did not know that Radio Vilnius, who lease time on this transmitter from LRTC, were planning to

cease shortwave programmes from 1st January 2009 (see DX News January for details). The shortwave transmitter is also used for various relays from Sitkunai that have included IRIB Iran, IBB's Radio Free Asia, The Mighty KBC and Radio Racyja in Polish to Belarus. Currently only KBC and Radio Free Asia are being relayed on shortwave, but Radio Racyja may resume broadcasts. There is a table of broadcasts from the Sitkunai site (plus the 612 kHz Vilnius site) at <http://www.zilionis.lt/rtv/radio-am.php?e>.

Right: Rimantas points out the aerials to our party with the 1386 kHz MW aerial behind us.

Inside the entrance hall of the transmitter building we were told about the history of the site – on the wall there were old photos as well as a poster commemorating 75 years since the first Lithuanian National Radio station went on air in Kaunas in 1926. But construction of the station we were at in Sitkunai only started in 1939 and it wasn't used as a transmitter site until the late 1940s by the Lithuanian Soviet Republic. The empty transmitter building housed German occupying troops 1941-1944 and was then used as a primary school before reverting to its intended use. The transmitter hall itself was quite grand with a large chandelier, decorative rugs and potted plants! Plus of course all the cabinets for the transmitters mentioned above. In addition to the active transmitters there's also a back-up 150 kW transmitter for 666 kW plus 50 kW



decommissioned shortwave transmitter, both of 1950 vintage. We were pleased to see the hot air blasting from the vents cooling the transmitters was not wasted, but was being used to dry trays and strings of mushrooms!



Outside in the antenna fields dusk was approaching but we could still see five MW masts, two shortwave masts and six shortwave towers. Four of the towers still had SW aerials strung between them, the other two (to the south of the transmitter building) were no longer used. The two shortwave masts supported a curtain array beaming 310° to North America built in 2000. The highest mast is the 257-metre high medium wave mast used for 1386 kHz. Full details of the transmitters & aerials are on Sigita's website at: <http://www.zilionis.lt/rtv/qth/sit/index.php?e>.



Left: Rimantas tells us the history of the studio at Sitkunai – (left to right) Michael Murray, Rimantas Pleikys, Toshi Ohtake, Juha Solasaari & Risto Vahakainu

Back inside the transmitter building, we visited the small radio studio there. It was from here in January 1991 that appeals to the outside world were broadcast when the newly independent Lithuania was under threat from the Soviet Army. Lithuania had declared independence from the Soviet Union in March 1990, but this was not recognised by the USSR which imposed an economic embargo on Lithuania. The independence declaration was suspended after two months and Soviet troop numbers in Lithuania were increased. In January 1991 after a breakdown in independence talks, Soviet troops tried to suppress the Lithuanian media and attacked the TV station in Vilnius on 13th January, killing fourteen citizens (see below). The same day, a plea for help was broadcast from the Kaunas TV station and this was broadcast to the world in many languages from this small studio at the Sitkunai transmitter site. Rimantas Pleikys played us a reel-to-reel tape of this moving broadcast made from the studio we were in. In September 1991 the Soviet Union finally recognised Lithuania's independence and the last Soviet troops withdrew in 1993. Soviet troops had been in Lithuania since 1944.

Following our engrossing visit to Sitkunai, we stopped at a traditional Lithuanian restaurant and tried some very filling and greasy potato dumplings (cepelinai) stuffed with mincemeat – apparently a Lithuanian speciality. Then Rimantas and Sigita drove our party down to the capital, Vilnius and to the hotel we had booked. However the Russian receptionist at the Comfort hotel denied all knowledge of the booking - fortunately the nearby Panorama Hotel had some rooms available still, so we didn't have to sleep on the streets of the Lithuanian capital that night!



The following morning, we visited the Vilnius TV Tower, the site of the tragic deaths on 13th January 1991 as Lithuanian citizens tried to defend the TV station from Soviet troops and tanks. Outside a marble plaque and several wooden memorial crosses commemorate the fourteen citizens killed and seven hundred injured by Soviet bullets or tanks that night. One Soviet paratrooper was killed by nationalist fire. The last picture broadcast from the TV station that night was that of a Soviet soldier running towards the camera and switching it off. In the building at the base of the tower there is also a mural picturing the events of 13th January 1991 and the faces of those killed.

The 326.5 metre high concrete TV tower was completed in 1980 and is the tallest building in Lithuania (but not as tall as the 368 metre TV tower in Riga we had visited two days previously!) We ascended the lift to the concrete saucer which houses the many radio and TV transmitters. Included amongst the transmitters was one still transmitting on the old

Soviet OIRT VHF band 71.81 & 68.24 MHz carrying European Radio for Belarus (ERB) – Vilnius is quite close to the Belarus border. There was also a transmitter for BBC World Service on 95.5 MHz. And there is an experimental DAB transmitter transmitting from the tower which we had heard quite well on Sigita's car radio driving towards Vilnius the previous evening. In a room off the transmitter hall TV technicians monitored and switched the TV channels broadcast from the tower. We then ascended to the "Milky Way" cafe for coffee – a revolving restaurant which does a complete rotation in forty-five minutes, usually only rotating in the evening, but it was started-up especially for us! Unfortunately the view from the revolving restaurant was a bit milky as it was a misty morning!

Right: 71.81 MHz VHF transmitter in the tower.

In the afternoon Sigita was our guide on a walking tour of the sights of the old city of Vilnius. A feast of Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and classical buildings around its medieval centre with a multitude of churches of all denominations – we could see why it's known as the "City of a Hundred Churches"! The historic centre of Vilnius is a UNESCO World Heritage site and we could not do it justice in one afternoon. Later, Dave and I bade farewell to our fellow DXers. We had booked an extra night in Vilnius, so were able to return to the old town and explore further the following morning. There was also time that afternoon to see the statue of musician Frank Zappa(!) before heading to the former KGB building in Vilnius that now houses the "Museum of Genocide Victims". The museum



records the repression by, and the resistance against, the occupying Soviet (and Nazi) regimes 1940-1990. The basement of the building is the KGB prison, retained as it was when the KGB left it in 1991. Despite all the splendid architecture of Vilnius, it was this museum that left the biggest impression on my visit to the Lithuanian capital. Further details can be found at: http://www.muziejai.lt/Vilnius/genocido_auku_muziejus.en.htm.

For our final evening in Vilnius, Dave & I, together with Sigitas Žilionis, were kindly invited to the home of Rimantas Pleikys and his wife for supper. En route, we visited Sigitas' home to see his collection of old radio (see Collector's Corner last month) and also stopped by the site of a former jamming station in the city (now the HQ of the telecommunications regulator). At Rimantas' flat we saw the 50-minute long documentary film on jamming, "Empire of Noise" which he had directed. Rimantas also wrote a book, published in 1998, on the subject, simply titled "Jamming" and has a website also: <http://www.radiojamming.info/> where there are photographs, recordings and archive documents.

The following morning Dave visited some more historic churches and other buildings in the old town area of Vilnius before Rimantas drove us to the airport for our flight back to England. Our thanks to Rimantas Pleikys and Sigitas Žilionis for their hospitality in Lithuania and to Risto Vahakainu from the Finnish DX Association for arranging the excellent trip through Finland and down through Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. (Alan Pennington)

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