

Alf Vanags 1942-2016

It is with deep sadness that we received the news of the sudden death of Alf Vanags, Director of the Baltic International Centre for Economic Policy Studies (BICEPS) and former Eurofaculty and SSE Riga faculty member. Prior to coming to Riga he held academic positions at Queen Mary & Westfield College London University. Alf was one of the founding editors of the Baltic Journal of Economics and served as its Managing Editor at the time of passing away. As Director of BICEPS he was one of the founders of the FREE Network (Forum for Research in Eastern Europe and Emerging Economies).

When Alf, after almost 50 years, came back to the Riga he had left as a two-year old refugee he could hardly have imagined the impact he – as educator and even more important as founding director of the Baltic International Centre for Economic Policy Studies (BICEPS) – would have on the reborn Republic in the more than 20 years to come. Pursuing an academic career in UK with stints in China, Canada and Australia, the Eurofaculty project at the University of Latvia eventually lured him back to his native Latvia providing him with an opportunity to educate a new generation of Latvian economists.

Eurofaculty with its pioneering spirit suited Alf and his enthusiasm extremely well. It allowed him to flourish in way that would not have been possible in UK academia. It was not only Alf who flourished at Eurofaculty. Alf made his students grow and eventually flourish through an unorthodox mix of highly qualified education combined with social activities such as inviting all his students to his apartment where home cooked meatballs were served.

Even though most of today's leading Latvian economists who are in the 30s and early 40s were Alf's students, his impact is even greater through his work at BICEPS. Alf and BICEPS were almost synonyms from the inception of BICEPS in the early 2000s to Alf's very last day in life. Joining the BICEPS team were several generations of young researchers, who all grew in the fertile and very special BICEPS environment created by Alf and with the slogan "Once you are in, you can never get out".

Through Alf, BICEPS played an important role as virtually the only independent voice in the Latvian economic policy debate. A look into the policy papers produced at BICEPS reveals Alf's broad competence. The topics range from regulatory issues in the telecom sector, through labour market policy, to venture capital. Legendary were the inflation reports co-authored with his long-term colleague and friend Morten Hansen – in particular the one written at the eve of the Latvian economic crisis and where Alf at the press conference labelled Latvia a "banana republic". With or without the banana republic, Alf's analysis was always theoretically well underpinned. Through his strong integrity, sharpness and straightforwardness, his analyses were not always appreciated by the Latvian policy makers. Moreover, history showed that he more or less always was right.

Alf's dedication to his work, in particular at BICEPS was very high. Nevertheless it did not prevent him from enjoying what he called "the good life" – good food and

drink in company of friends. Part of experiencing good life was also having a good conversation. A typical conversation could involve some serious economics, a bit of politics, Alf reporting on his recent experience flying with airBaltic and the tantrum following it, a bit of horse racing and finally where to have the best Peking duck. It was never boring – Alf’s wit and intelligence always made it entertaining. It was quite often also somewhat of an intellectual challenge since Alf liked to challenge every view and sometimes wanted to be in opposition just for the sake of it. But he was not a rebel without a cause. His youthful rebelliousness was his way of learning and taking things forward no matter the occasion. It was also to a large extent how we, his friends, colleagues, and students learnt from him.

Like all of us, Alf had another more fragile side. He was maybe better than most of us in terms of hiding, using his wit and good sense of humour. But it was there with all its depth, however rarely seen. It was at one of those rare moments, we ended up discussing the Four Last Songs by Richard Strauss. We even agreed on the soprano whose performance of the Songs was the best. Now I do not remember whether it was Schwarzkopf, Fleming or Norman. What I do remember, however, is that September with words by Hermann Hesse was the one of the four songs that Alf loved the most:

*The garden mourns.
Cool rain sinks into the flowers.
The summer shivers
quietly to its end.*

...

*He stands for a long time at the roses.
Longing for a rest.
Slowly he closes
his big tired eyes.*

We are all grateful that we have been plants in the garden of Alf.

Anders Paalzow
Chairman, BICEPS
Rector, SSE Riga