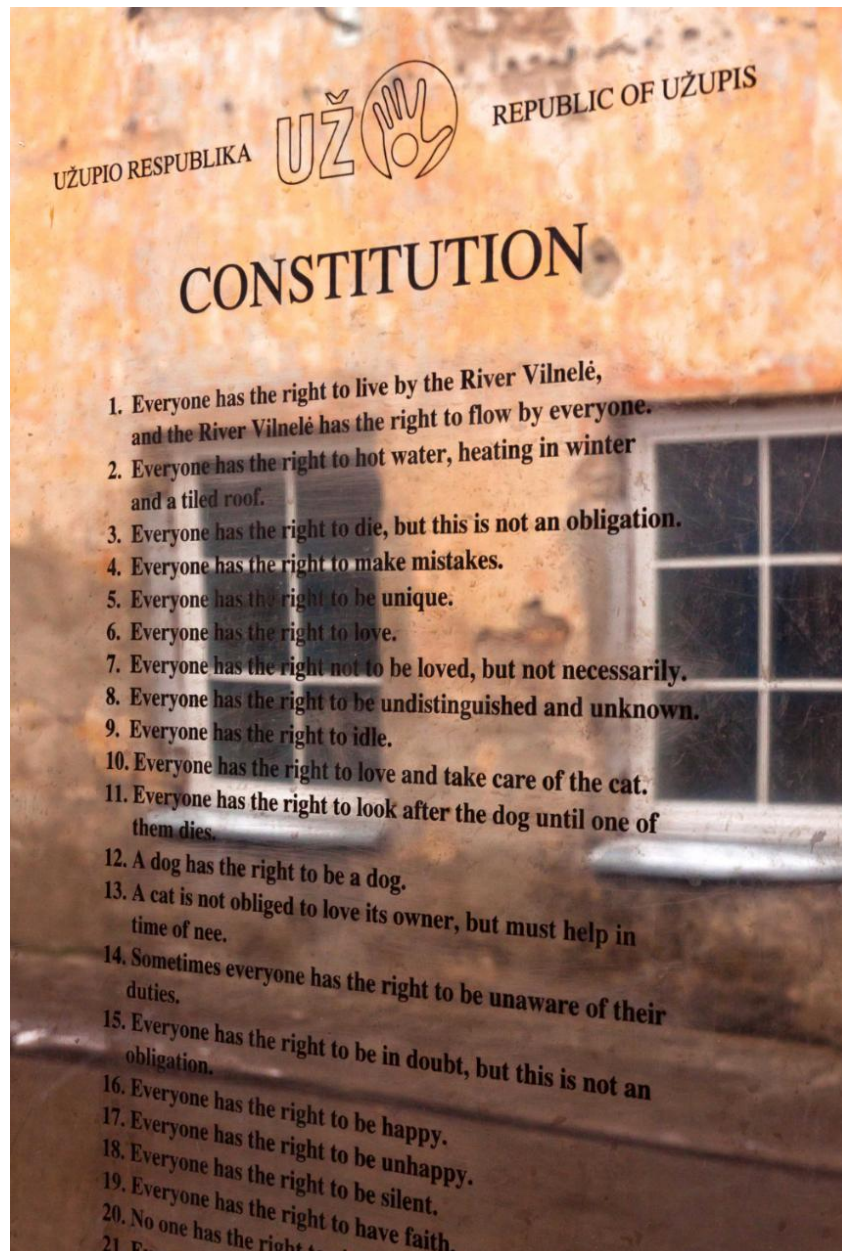


## Just Back: Inside Uzupis, Lithuania's free-thinking republic

*Joanna Griffin wins £200 for her tale about an independent corner of Vilnius and its bizarre constitution*

I sit in a courtyard café in the neighbourhood of Uzupis, a tiny self-proclaimed republic across the river from the ornate churches and alleyways of Senamiestis, the medieval old town of Vilnius, Lithuania's capital. "A dog has the right to be a dog." I contemplate this item of its quirky 41-point constitution as I watch a young woman on the next table feed scraps of her substantial pizza to a small poodle sitting in her lap. He eyes the cold wheat-beer on the table and I wonder for a moment whether his constitutional freedoms might even stretch to that.



Uzupis celebrates its annual independence day on April 1 Credit: Alamy

It is evening and the sand-coloured stone and tumbling geraniums of this Bohemian enclave are set ablaze by the late northern sun of a Baltic midsummer. From my vantage point beneath a yellow canopy, behind a tall glass of Svyturys beer, I watch locals and visitors alike, strolling in the evening warmth and pausing to read the constitution, mounted in 26 languages along a stone wall. Their elaborate scripts – from Belarusian

to Yiddish – are etched into mirrored plaques which reflect the crumbling ochre and terracotta of the tall houses opposite.

Once home to a Jewish population decimated by the Holocaust, and subsequently left in a state of neglect by the Soviets, this creative community of artists, musicians and intellectuals declared independence from Lithuania in 1997.

Now home to around 7,000 people, it has a president, small army, four flags – one for each season – and celebrates its annual independence day on April 1.

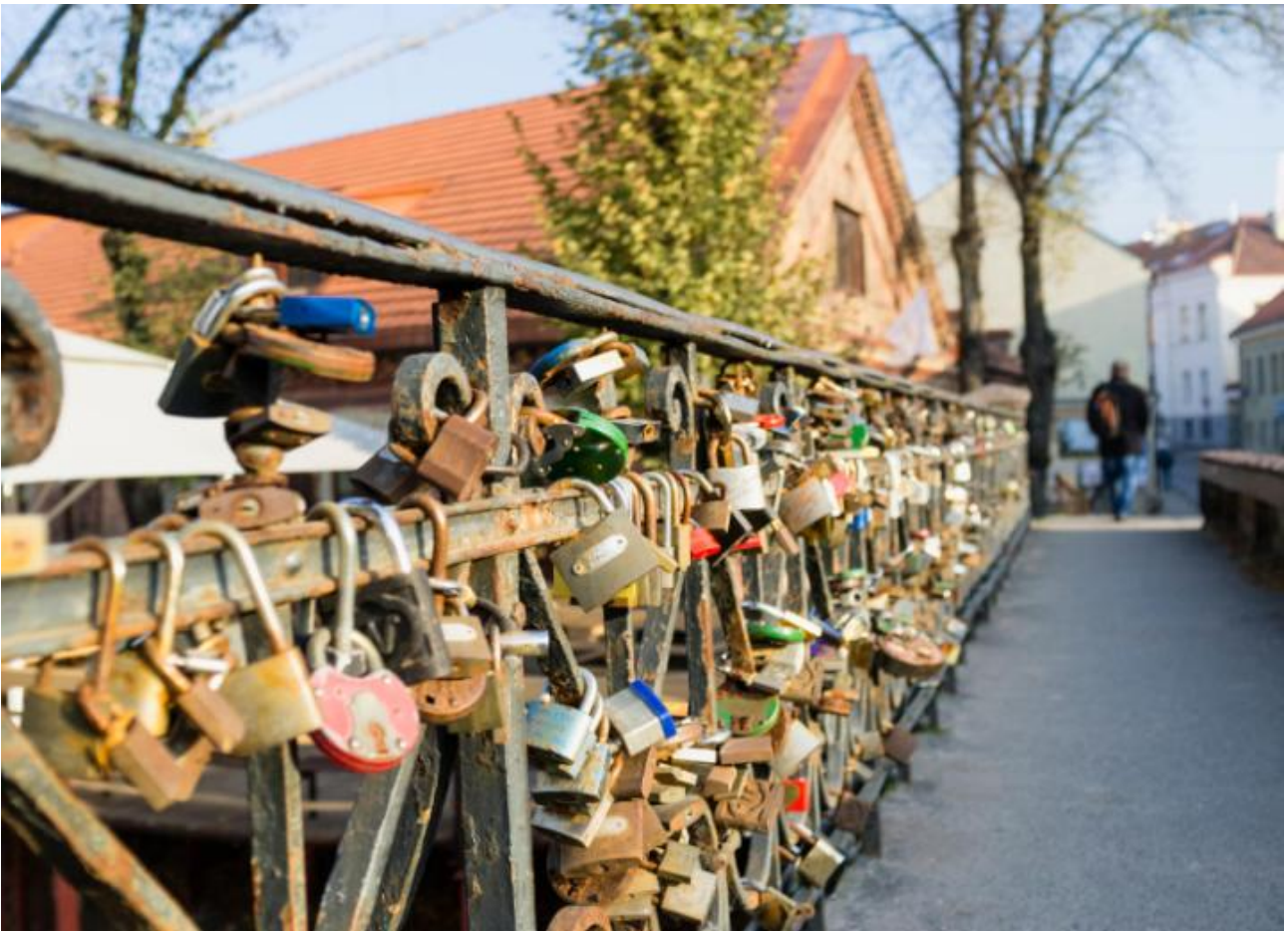


Uzupis art gallery Credit: alamy

Tonight, there is little sign of its post-Soviet neglect and notoriety as an abandoned corner of the city. As if in defiance of its oppressive history, the neighbourhood is alive with chatter and good-natured debate. The small courtyard steadily fills and people stand and wait for seats to become free. Waiters rush to erect small tables against the green wooden shutters of the adjoining grocery store and customers jostle their tables and chairs to make room.

I listen to a group of Canadians discuss recent events in international politics, and I catch the dancing cadence of Italian as it drifts across from a nearby table. The constitution might be tongue-in-cheek but the underlying sentiment of tolerance and inclusion is serious, reflected this evening in this small café.





Love locks on one of the bridges to Uzupis, from Vilnius Credit: alamy

As dusk falls, candles are lit and strings of tiny lights are illuminated. In the half-light, a fat dun-coloured cat slinks among the tables, searching for scraps and shunning any attempts at affection, fully enjoying his constitutional lack of obligation to love his owner.

As for me, I sit back and bask in my own clearly documented rights to idleness and anonymity. But perhaps, most importantly, I indulge in item number 14. "Sometimes everyone has the right to be unaware of their duties."

I'll raise my glass to that.

### **Enter the next round**

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