

THE „IMPERIAL“ DIPLOMACY OF LITHUANIA*

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The forthcoming membership of Lithuania in NATO and the EU prompts a review of the foreign policy priorities of Lithuania, adjusting to the new political realities and fresh opportunities. It has apparently been decided what Lithuania will do upon becoming a part of the European Union and NATO: first of all, relations with Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the countries of South Caucasus will be developed. The essential difference between the new and the old foreign policy priorities is easy to spot when comparing them. If before, seeking to gain membership in the EU and NATO, the Lithuanian state was primarily preoccupied with itself, then the development of relations with the above-mentioned states constitutes a qualitative change in the foreign policy: perhaps for the first time since the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Lithuania is seeking to become a regional state, and its foreign policy is acquiring the features of an “imperial policy”. Therefore, in discussing the prospects of this kind of foreign policy, it is not unjustified to turn to the past – to the times of “imperial” Lithuania.

The Grand Duchy is the Lithuanian state which existed the longest, but it does not at all mean that during the entire period between the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries that this state conducted imperial policies and used the instruments of imperial diplomacy. If imperial policies are understood as policies oriented towards the expansion of the state’s influence and territories at the expense of other states in the region, we might as well introduce a new periodisation of the whole history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in this regard:

Stage I – from the establishment of the GDL until the first half of the fourteenth century;

* The author left the text that was read during the conference unchanged, adding only the necessary references to the literature and sources.

Stage II – from the first half of the fourteenth century until the first half of the sixteenth century; and

Stage III – from the first half of the sixteenth century until the collapse of the GDL at the end of the eighteenth century.

At least a brief characterisation of the first and the third stage is necessary in order to justify this type periodisation of the history of the imperial policies of the GDL and to clarify why, under this scheme, only the second period is considered to be a classical example of imperial policies.

For a historian who researches the history of the Middle Ages, it is evident that mature policies do not form immediately after establishing a state. The example of the Mindaugas' state gives a particularly good illustration of the validity of this statement. Although the anniversary of Mindaugas' coronation was solemnly marked this year, a closer examination of the policies of Mindaugas and his followers readily show that the christening and the coronation of Mindaugas was partly accidental, and that until the very end of the thirteenth century, the Lithuanian state did not have any clearly expressed foreign policy priorities, that it acted under the political influence of the South-Western Rus and was part of the system of post-Kyivan Rus.¹

It would also be difficult to call the policies of the GDL from the beginning of the sixteenth century “imperial”, albeit for entirely different reasons. First of all, in the aftermath of the final loss of Smolensk in 1514, the imperial policies of the GDL were checked by the Moscow threat. The Lithuanian state was forced to concentrate all of its resources for its protection and was thus lacking the power and the opportunities for influencing the outside.² Naturally, the foreign policy during this long period contained some elements of imperial policies as well. Nonetheless, these were rather exceptions to the rule in the whole of history of the state.

Thus, if we want to talk about the imperial policy and diplomacy of

¹ Cf. Alvydas Nikžentaitis, *Nuo Daumanto iki Gedimino. Iki krikščioniškos Lietuvos visuomenės bruožai* (Acta historica Universitatis Klaipedensis V), 113–114.

² Cf. Edvardas Gudavičius, *Lietuvos istorija: Nuo seniausių laikų iki 1569 metų* (Vilnius, 1999, V. 1), 513–522.

Lithuania, we have to focus on the second stage between the first half of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century. As is well known, this period in particular was marked by the rapid territorial expansion of the GDL, whereby Lithuania occupied the area between the Baltic and the Black seas. The statistical Lithuanian is perhaps proudest of this period when discussing the past achievements of the state, although, truly, he may not even be aware that the aspirations of the GDL were far greater and that only a few of the political aims were successfully realised.

In the course of the fourteenth century, primarily during the many negotiations with Hungarian, Czech and Polish kings regarding the christening of Lithuania, the Lithuanian side was raising a whole range of political requests. The attempts at realising and not merely declaring these requests allow for their characterisation as the foreign policy priorities of the GDL. Let me list the most important of them:

- 1) Making peace with the German Order;
- 2) Creation of a separate church province in Lithuania;
- 3) Transference of the German Order to the borderline of the Russian and Tatar lands and handover of part of the territories in its possession;
- 4) Recognition of the right of the GDL to conquer all Russian lands.³

If we venture to assess the claims raised and the likelihood of their success, we may surely get the impression that their realisation was impossible. Should the Lithuanian side then be considered to have been dreamers without a sense of reality? Apparently, this was not the case, especially if we take into consideration the somewhat larger context.

In solving the puzzle as to whether the political plans of the GDL in relation to the christening of Lithuania were realistic or not, it is worth turning back to 1323-1324, taking note of way which already then was proposed for the resolution of the issues of relations to the German Order and the christening of Lithuania. One of the contemporary advisers of Gediminas recommended that the sovereign of Lithuania, in seeking solutions to im-

³ Jerzy Wyrozumski, *Kazimierz Wielki* (Wrocław, 1982), 88 -97; Edvardas Gudavičius, "Lietuvos krikščionybės priėmimo politinė problema", in *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis: 1987 metai* (Vilnius, 1988) 14 -22.

portant political aims, turn not to the archbishop of Riga, who himself had difficulties in defending against the Livonian Order, but to much more powerful sovereigns, such as Czech or Hungarian kings.⁴ Taking into account the power of these two states, the demands of the GDL dukes were not that utopian. However, was the realisation of the political programme of the GDL really connected to the intervention of these two states?

There is no space for presenting in this short report all the arguments which would allow for at least a hypothetical talk about such political orientation of the GDL. However, the very course of negotiations in 1351 and 1358 shows that this possibility should not be rejected. In any case, Poland was not acting alone during the negotiations – behind its back stood Hungary and the Czech Kingdom, i.e. precisely those states with which the realisation of the political aims of the GDL was linked already at the end of the fourteenth century. The vestiges of Hungary were clearly observable in 1373 as well, i.e. during the time when this state was connected to Poland through a personal union. The case of 1349 is perhaps more complex, but even here, taking into account the closer relations between Polish and Czech kingdoms after the Namslav agreement, it cannot be excluded that the much more powerful Czech kingdom was behind Poland at that time as well. A certain interest on the part of Czechs in the christening of the GDL is confirmed not only by the negotiations of 1358 but also by the previous actions of this state. Czech rulers participated in the military campaigns against Lithuania in 1329, 1337 and 1345, and the Czech king Jan Lucembursky himself christened the Samogitian nobility captured during the Samogitian operation in 1329. Therefore, it is possible to at least hypothetically maintain that Poland's role in the fourteenth century negotiations regarding the christening was that of an intermediary only, which could be confirmed by the earlier-made remark on the rather limited contacts between Poland and the GDL until the very end of the fourteenth century.

By the second half of the fourteenth century, the possibilities for negotiations with Hungary and the Czech kingdom were exhausted without actually finding a partner for the realisation of the political programme of the GDL. In 1382, the GDL managed to reach an agreement regarding the christening

⁴ *Gedimino laiškai*, eds. V. T. Pašutas and I. V. Štal (Vilnius 1966), 141.

with the German Order, but its terms were far from satisfying to the maximalist aspirations of the rulers of the GDL: according to the 1382 Dubysos agreement, which never actually became effective, promised to relinquish Samogitia to the Order in exchange for the christening⁵. The critical situation that had formed prompted a feverish search for more advantageous options. The option of the Orthodox christening of the GDL and the formation of a union with Moscow in the ninth decade of the fourteenth century should also be viewed in this context. It would follow from the historical development of events in fourteenth century that the union with Poland was an accidental choice and not a logical outcome of events consequent to the relations between the GDL and the Polish kingdom in the fourteenth century.⁶

The choice of Poland as a strategic partner was not the worst option for the GDL. The German Order was defeated with the help of the Polish Kingdom, thereby eliminating a competitor in the conquest of the whole Russia.

It would seem that the circle of officials responsible for foreign policy in the GDL should have been less complex than it is in present states, but this impression could form only in ignorance of the particularities of medieval states. Apart from the institutions of the Grand Duke and, later, the Council of Lords, the interests of the dynasty itself should not be underestimated. The role of dynastic politics has been sufficiently highlighted in examining the relations between the Polish kingdom and the GDL but has not received enough attention in the context of the realisation of the policy priorities of the GDL. It is quite possible that, having properly assessed the dynastic politics, we may state the realisation of yet another foreign policy priority, namely, the inclusion of part of Prussia into the Polish kingdom (not into the GDL).

Discussions of the imperial diplomacy of the GDL often view its manifestations in relation to the incorporation of new territories. This focus of

⁵ Edvardas Gudavičius, "Lietuvos krikščionybės priėmimo politinė problema", 14 – 22.

⁶ Alvydas Nikžentaitis, "Wielkie Księstwo Liteskie, Królestwo Polskie i państwo zakonu krzyżackiego w XIV wieku", in *Prusy i Inflanty średniowieczem a nowożytnością. Państwo – społeczeństwo – kultura*, eds. B. Dybas and D. Makilla (Torun, 2003), 9 – 16.

attention on military conquests is not mistaken but should not be exclusive either. Other goals existed besides the military ones. For example, in the second part of the fourteenth century, there were a number of military conflicts between the GDL and Poland which were by no means territorial. The worsening in the relations with Poland resulted from the GDL's attempts to direct the trade routes from Western Europe to the Russian lands through the territories of the GDL. This episode should not be considered accidental because the commercialisation of the foreign policy of the GDL is noticeable from the beginning of the fourteenth century: in 1338, the first trade agreement in GDL history was signed with Livonia, prior to which an agreement had been made regarding the safety of merchants travelling from Livonia to the GDL during the military conflicts between Lithuania and the German Order. These sporadic facts are complemented by the economisation of Lithuania's war with the German knights, where the main goal of many campaigns was not conquest but pillaging and, especially, taking war hostages into captivity in order to subsequently sell or release them for monetary compensations. The culmination of this peculiar slave trade in the Baltic region was reached after the Grunwald battle. The ransom for the hostages of war stipulated in a secret protocol signed between the two warring parties was greater than the sum of reparations for damages inflicted by the German Order on Poland and Lithuania.⁷

The foreign policy of the GDL is a rather complex subject which has not been studied much so far and which could warrant more than one monograph. However, a report on the imperial diplomacy of the GDL made in a conference on the foreign policy of modern Lithuania requires raising one more question: how can the experience of the old diplomacy of Lithuania be useful for the contemporary foreign policy of Lithuania, which is still being formed.

Many parallels and examples can of course be brought up in assessing the past and the present. For example, the shift to broader, "imperial" foreign policy priorities in the foreign policy of the old, as well as the new,

⁷ Alvydas Nikžentaitis, "Prisoners of War in Lithuania and the Teutonic Order State (1283 -1409)", in *Der Deutsche Orden in der Zeit der Kalmarer Union*, ed. Zenon Hubert Nowak (Torun, 1999), 193 –209.

Lithuania takes place only after stabilising the situations within the country. However, this is not the most useful moment in relation to the formation of new foreign policy priorities with regard to Ukraine, Belarus and, to some extent, Moldova. What is far more important to the future foreign policy of Lithuania is the assessment of Lithuanian imperialism in the neighbouring countries. The construction of the occupation of the old Lithuania as a certain “golden age” in the contemporary Ukraine or the claims to the cultural heritage of the GDL made in Belarus provide a sufficiently firm basis for the development of qualitatively new relations between Lithuania and these two states. Historians should not be ignored in forming the new policy priorities with regard to Belarus and Ukraine but should work together with the diplomats of Lithuania, only the nature of their work ought to be essentially different. Leaving the day-to-day relations with the neighbours to the diplomats, historians should preoccupy themselves with the transformation of the cultural memory of Lithuania and, perhaps, the whole post-GDL region. As the research of the recent years shows, history plays a significant role here.⁸ Although cultural memory is not at all the same as history, perhaps historians should cross the Rubicon in the name of democracy in the neighbouring countries with which we share a common past, and not only examine but also create new cultural memory. For Lithuania’s sake ...*

⁸ Cf. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (4th Edition, München, 2002).

* Reference to lines in the national anthem of Lithuania. – Transl. note