

Leaving history behind? Poles and Lithuanians in the year 2001

The Polish membership in NATO, the Poland's support for the Lithuanian membership of NATO, the forthcoming membership of Lithuania and Poland in the EU, are building up the new institutional infrastructure of the Polish-Lithuanian relationship. Historical awareness and myths notwithstanding, it is the historic change in Europe after 1989, new international involvement of Lithuania and Poland, and the new political orientations in both independent countries that are making the strategic partnership of both nations possible and desirable.

However, Poles and Lithuanians have not referred to themselves as "us" for more than a hundred years now. Since that time both nations have viewed each other as "alien" or at least as "different". Owing to vivid historical memory of societies, remote events and characters are often closer to the members of such societies, they seem to be more important, and finally they are often remembered better than events that occurred or people who lived in much more recent past or even contemporary ones. This capability of historical memory seems to exert significant influence on the way contemporary Poles see Lithuanians and the relations with Lithuania. This capability also manifests itself in mutual relations between other nations.

Upon signing the Polish – Lithuanian Treaty in the spring of 1994, politicians on both sides decided to get rid of that entanglement and declared to abandon historical arguments, which they deemed to be the domain of professional historians. Upon signing the Treaty President Lech Wałęsa stated that *Poles and Lithuanians are the nations entangled in history. We should overcome this entanglement. /.../ Therefore it would be of benefit to leave historical research to historians* – and his Lithuanian counterpart Algirdas Brazauskas definitely agreed.¹ The politicians sitting at both sides of the negotiating table shared the view that any references made to the past could introduce elements of destruction and tension.

The Treaty was followed by numerous agreements: a very important free trade Agreement of 1995, then the agreement on the creation of the international battalion signed in 1997. The same year abounded in many new Polish – Lithuanian

¹ *Lithuania*, 1994, 2(11) – 3(12), 131 – 134.

institutions: the Consultation Committee of the Presidents of both republics, the governmental Cooperation Council and the common Assembly of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania and the Sejm of the Polish Republic. Moreover, Poland promised to support Lithuanians in their efforts to join NATO and the European Union and Poland has never abandoned its policy of support.

However, as early as 1998, during an autumn meeting of Polish and Lithuanian intellectuals, outstanding Lithuanian analyst drew everyone's attention to the fact that mutual amicable relations exist mainly in the sphere of declarations, symbolism and celebrations. Permanent good relations between the politicians of both countries do not extend to the relations between both societies. According to the analyst, from this perspective Polish elaborate gestures of support for Lithuanian NATO and EU aspirations seemed inadequate to Polish capabilities to influence those structures².

Politicians, even if they notice particular shortcomings of bilateral relations, are far from such pessimistic assessments. *Our relations should be set as a model to be followed by other nations* – that is the opinion of the Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Antanas Valionis published in a Polish quarterly³. His Polish opposite number Wladyslaw Bartoszewski agreed with him and upon his last visit to Vilnius (April 2001), particularly during his televised statement, highlighted, on numerous occasions, the exceptionally positive nature of Polish – Lithuanian relations. These statements are striking if we look back at the situation prior to 1994. At that time nobody even attempted to convince anyone that Poles and Lithuanians excelled (positively for good measure) in dealing with historic backlogs.

The tactics of taking a future-oriented attitude would thus seem to have yielded blessed fruit in the form of “exceptionally good relations”, “strategic partnership”, and “the model for other nations”.

However, there are still two flaws marring this optimistic picture. The issues of inadequate ties between non-governmental organizations and the lack of youth exchange programs or mutual tourism have been debated (the issue touched upon

² Raimundas Lopata, “Rozwoj stosunkow Polsko - Litewskich po 1990 roku [Development of Lithuanian-Polish Relations after 1990],” *Pozostawione historii. Litwini o Polsce i Polakach* (ed. by Katarzyna Korzeniewska, Vladas Sirutavičius), Krakow: Znak, 1999, p. 138 - 140

³ *Litwa i Polska na drodze w XXI wiek [Lithuania and Poland on the Path to the 21th Century]*, Lithuania, 1(38)/2001, p. 56

also by Ambassador Eufemia Teichman).⁴ There is no need to convince anyone that those areas are crucial to overcoming stereotypes. Back in November 1998, at the meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly, its Polish chairman Jan Król suggested “launching systematic studies concerning mutual social and media-presented views”; so far the proposal, however, has not been implemented. Meanwhile public opinion polls reveal, despite the fact that the number of those Poles who dislike Lithuanians has slightly decreased since 1994, that our Lithuanian neighbors are still listed, along with Germans, among the nations toward which the Poles have more negative rather than positive feelings.⁵ Lithuanians like Poles less than Russians and much less than Germans, and they only like Western neighbors more than their basketball adversaries (Serbs, Croats, Slovenians), with whom they have little contact except for sport.⁶ There is a radical disproportion between a relatively positive attitude towards Lithuania as declared by Polish politicians and relatively negative feelings towards Lithuanians as declared by the Polish society at large.

One could argue that the impact of political changes must be long-term and public opinion polls have certain limitations. It certainly applies to the issue of national minorities, and mainly to the Polish minority in Lithuania, which is proportionately much larger than the Lithuanian minority in Poland, and more visible historically. While discussing minority issues, Polish and Lithuanian public statements abound in with terms such as: “problem”, “difficulties” or “obstacles”. The issue of Polish Lithuanians is characterized by dynamism and a kind of polymorphism: following the debate on the obligatory final secondary level examination in Polish and another commotion over the issue of land recovery, the controversy over the spelling of surnames has become another evident problem.

Both problems: minority issue and less positive toward the Lithuanians among Polish ordinary citizens than politicians call for an explanation by reference to historic imagination. Let us heed the fact that in many statements delivered by Polish elements of the Jagellonian myth are present. They were inculcated in them in the process of socializing and history education: all Poles who graduated from the

⁴ Lithuania, 1(38)/2001

⁵ Michał Strzeszewski, *Polska i świat* [Poland and the World], *Nowa rzeczywistość. Oceny i opinie 1989 – 1999*, (ed. by Krzysztof Zagorski, Michał Strzeszewski) Warszawa: CBOS – Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, 2000, p. 209

⁶ On the scale from 1 to 7, Lithuanians like most the Swedish (5,45), while the Roma Gypsies are most disliked (2,47). Russians (4,49), Ukrainians (4,74), **Poles (4,24)**, Croats (3,62) and Serbs (3,56) are in between. Data from: www.cbos.pl/cbos.pl.htm, CBOS report 165, *Attitudes of Poles, Czechs, Hungarians and Lithuanians toward Other Nations*, November 2000.

12th grade know about the existence of Lithuania and they know that it is an important place of some kind for the Poles. Minister Bartoszewski confessed publicly to Lithuanians the same kind of devotion and associations in April this year. Prior to that, unionist associations were also revealed by some commentators of a leading Polish political daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* upon the creation of the common Polish – Lithuanian Parliamentary Assembly in 1997.⁷ Let us leave a broader and more profound analysis of those statements to sociologists and texts analysts. The purpose is to reveal that the Jagellonian era still constitutes a reference point for the Polish political elite and for some it is still the basic line of thinking about Poland and Lithuania. One should bear in mind that the Jagellonian point of reference is a viewpoint reserved to representatives of some social groups, mostly to politicians, intellectuals, civil servants, clergy.

At this point we come to another “shadow” cast over the Polish –Lithuanian relations, namely the problem of the Polish minority in Lithuania. The problem is associated with a different way of collective representation of the history of Poland than the one discussed above. We are not talking about the historical awareness or knowledge here. Poles at large, but also some politicians, have different historical conceptions regarding Lithuania from those persisting in the minds of the elite. The historic Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth is not a key value here. We are taking about a myth. The key value here is that of the Borderland (*Kresy*), i.e. the territory that “used to be Poland”. For the Polish public and part of the political elite the presence of the Polish minority (e.g. in Lithuania) is a symbol of the idea of the Bordeland (*Kresy*). The realization of the *Kresy* idea of the Polish history has been reflected in activities of public institutions. The biggest and most active of them - Fundacja “Wspólnota Polska” - supports Polish diaspora world-wide (including Polish minority in Lithuania). The social impact of the myth has never been an object of a systematic research. However, it has sparked off social activity on many occasions, such as, for example, charity actions for the Polish children living in the Vilnius area in the autumn of 2000, presenting Lithuania to the Polish public in the way objected by the Lithuanian Embassy.⁸ It is the strong impact of the *Kresy* myth in Poland that could be one reason why, in spite of good mutual relations being constantly publicised, the issue of the Polish minority – additionally highlighted by

⁷ *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 44, 1999/02/21, 7

⁸ *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 241, 2000/10/14 – 2000/10/15, 20

the media – still prevents beneficial relations between the states from taking roots among the public at large.

It should be stressed that the above description stands merely for some of Polish historical opinions bearing reference to Lithuania. It is a simplified description. For instance, it does not allow for the differences between political parties and ideologies within the political elite. The view adopted in this description intentionally narrows the perspective: real political objectives and interests are only indirectly visible. The description is supposed to present the context of the articulation of those political interests as well as the objectives and the ways of their realization to be discussed during this conference. To conclude: not only myth and historical memory count. Indeed, common political objectives and their implementation by Lithuania and Poland exert an ever growing impact on historical memory and national myth – making alike.