

SOME COMMENTS ON POLISH-LITHUANIAN TENSIONS

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Tensions concerning Polish minorities in Lithuania, and Polish-Lithuanian relations, have just taken a turn for the worse. It is becoming increasingly clear that relations are at their worst now than at any other point in the last twenty years. Emotions have become more intense, and the shadows of the past have returned. Escalation of these tensions is becoming a serious problem, as they are fuelled by expressions of nationalism on both sides of the border. I am worried by this state of affairs, and that is why I would like to comment the matter again.

My recent letter to the periodical "Przegląd", (a translation of which was promoted through the Lithuanian portal), was not an exhaustive statement. It was written as a temporary reaction to, what are in my opinion, stereotyped and one-sided views on Polish-Lithuanian relations; so, it was a brief and simplified text out of necessity. I would like to elaborate on this issue and add some crucial comments.

Lithuania and its affairs are not completely unknown to me. I was born in Vilnius and spent a large part of my childhood in Panevėžys - the centre of ethnic Lithuania. In 1993-1996 I was a lecturer in the Polish studies department at Vilnius University. The department was established on the initiative of Jerzy Giedroyc at that time. Later on, I returned to Lithuania many times. I got to know a lot of people of diverse nationalities, with whom I came into closer and closer contact. I am increasingly worried about the conflict between Poland and Lithuania which seems to be sharpening in its intensity. This conflict touches upon the situation of the Polish minority in Lithuania.

In raising this important issue again, I would like to point out some crucial elements that influence the present situation, and also seem to close the way to reaching agreement. My point of view is from the Polish side, and I try to

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recognize dangerous tendencies primarily in Poland. However, there is no doubt that there are sore spots on both sides, and I leave the Lithuanian view to those Lithuanians from whom I expect unbiased and critical comments. When we refer to this matter, it is worth remembering the statement of that great Lithuanian historian Egidijus Aleksandravičius made at the opening of the International Dialogue Centre in Krasnogruda: a Polish nationalist is needed for Lithuanian nationalism, as that nationalist justifies its presence. It should not be misunderstood as an attempt to create conditions for development of the nationalism on both sides.

The first thing I would like to say is that, we should not demonize the Polish minority in Lithuania; each minority is diverse and presents different convictions, just like everywhere else. The Polish minority is loyal to the Lithuanian state in many respects. However, it is more deeply rooted than other minorities. In the Vilnius Region it is an autochthonous minority, which has existed there for many centuries. As such, it is not a minority of Polish emigrants, and that is why it is understood in a different light for the Lithuanian, Belorussian, and Russian inhabitants of this territory. Therefore, I think that Polish minority rights should be considered as equal to those of the Lithuanian citizens. This requires breaking down those deeply rooted views, many times resuscitated, about unique 'borderline' realities, a motif strengthened by resentments of both cultural and political domination on this territory. Within the territory of the Polish minority, myths about the Poles' 'paternalistic' stance toward Lithuania and its citizens, and about the fundamental influence of Polish culture have become deeply rooted. And instead of reinforcing feeling of shared heritage community (in a way that includes the significance of the Polish culture), Lithuanians often find this insulting, which of course arouses and strengthens anti-Polish attitudes and acts of aggression.

Secondly, retaining one's identity is undoubtedly a praiseworthy behaviour. Institutions, organizations, and Polish schools should preserve the Polish identity. Nonetheless, in the case of minorities, loyalty towards a country is also a very important matter. Genuine loyalty, not merely the tendency to compromise, should be learnt. The same goes for the development of an intelligent relationship to Polish traditions, especially those on the borderline of multicultural and multiethnic identities. Anachronistic emotional patriotism, grand words, and gestures are never good ways to strengthen identity. In addition, it is not good

to treat one's home country as a foreign land towards which different pressures and forces should be applied. Paradoxically, such impulses may take younger generations away from the Polish national identity. Acknowledging that such views are anachronistic in a unifying Europe, especially at a time when a state of permanent tension seems to be manifest in Polish-Lithuanian relations, tendencies weakening attachments to cultural roots may appear. The more so because assimilation is not as easy as it seems. It has different aspects in a multiethnic context. Cultural assimilation does not only result from repressive actions, but can also be a convenient and in many ways justifiable choice.

Thirdly, serious comparisons with Polish minorities in other countries are not undertaken. It is as if only the Polish minority has been threatened and repressed in a particular way only in Lithuania. On the contrary, Polish - autochthons in Belarus, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic are in arguably more difficult situations. The problems of minority groups of Polish emigrants are even worse. All in all, minority issues elsewhere are not as good as they might at first appear. Take the strongly accentuated spelling of Polish surnames (for example, in France, Czech Republic, Germany and English-speaking countries). So, if we still want to take up this dispute, it is worth behaving in a consistent manner.

Fourthly, I have a feeling that not much is being done to shape the Polish lobby in Lithuania. From my private meetings and contacts, I know how much could be done in this direction. For example, it is worth instigating joint cultural or scientific projects. Many Lithuanians (historians, specialists in literature, sociologists) eagerly take part in such events. Having had the experience of directing many grants and taking part in many scientific sessions in which the cooperation of Lithuanian researchers was significant, I would dare to suggest that cooperation is not only possible, but also necessary. Discussion around the subjects which show differences between Poland and Lithuania, and different assessments of the past are also needed. I am concerned about the fate of the Polish studies department (Centre of Polish Studies) at Vilnius University, which does not play the role that Giedroyc dreamt of; it is not at a present place for common Polish-Lithuanian activities. I would suggest that the blame for this state of affairs lies with both sides. The university authorities perceive the Polish studies department as one of many foreign philologies, and the Polish side does not particularly care about the dynamic between Polish and Lithuanian culture.

After all, the Polish studies department at Vilnius University, alongside the Lithuanian and Belarusian studies departments, should take an interest in the promotion of studies concerning the contemporary value of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's heritage. Modern and supernational border studies may be built on those solid foundations. In doing this, Polish studies would also become more interesting for the Lithuanian students.

Next, devoting more attention to the curriculum in Polish schools is an extremely important issue. I am not referring to the introduction of the Lithuanian language to some subjects (the current problem does not concern the presence of the language presence, but the range and form of teaching it). It is worth remembering that the curriculum cannot be a copy of national and Lithuanian schools' programmes. The choice of a path somewhere in between is an extremely important step. Enhancing national identity is not the only responsibility of Polish schools. Important above all else is formulating an easy comprehension of cultural identity that is not in opposition to civil duties towards the home country. It is a wide and important educational issue. If the media and schools strengthen stereotypical ways of thinking, there is no incentive for the development of critical thinking. I believe that in schools – not only Polish ones – subjects should be introduced that concern the culture and history of the borderland as a unique place of coexistence and mutual influence of ethnicities and cultures. It is worth talking about the different interpretations of history, different emphases, and diverse hierarchies of values, and treating them not as conflicts, but rather as differences in points of view; that is, to talk about the two sides of this history (the Polish and the Lithuanian one). Maybe, it is worth creating a 'protocol of divergences', which would facilitate the uptake of discussion, and show that the argument of force is not necessary just because one's views differ from another's. When I was working at Vilnius University, I wrote a textbook for Polish schools in Lithuania (published in two editions). My relationship with the Lithuanian Ministry of Education staff was very good, and they were open-minded in their relationship with our ideas. I think that such a relationship should be maintained at all times. Textbook commissions should become more active and their focus should be especially on the character of multicultural and multiethnic heritage.

As I am writing this, I think that avoiding conflicts and rhetoric from the point of view of force is a fundamental issue. As far as giving back land, the

spelling of surnames, and writing bilingual signs are concerned, one should first hear the other side of the argument, and not simply treat it as anti-Polish “phobia”. A very difficult, but important dialogue concerning all these matters should be undertaken as a matter of course, without the need for an immediate prompt (as it is now, under the influence of the school strike). The dialogue should be long term and led in many directions. One should not exaggerate differences, especially those that are secondary or feigned. I do not think that presenting one’s arguments in an obstinate way is good idea, it is better to look for compromises wherever they are possible, without the need for external arbitration (this includes the orthography of Polish surnames and the bilingualism of the signs). Undoubtedly, the more serious problem concerns school issues, where a calm, not dispassionate consideration of the range of incorporation and the significance of the Lithuanian language in the curriculum is needed. And as I mentioned above, the different overall philosophy is also an essential issue.

More and more often I read in the Polish press moderate statements which advert to the pointlessness of the Polish-Lithuanian dispute. Articles written by Jan Widacki, Ludwik Stomma, Bronisław Łagowski, and others create a good ground upon which to reach an agreement. It is worth strengthening this ground, and referring again to the ideas set out by George Giedroyc in the Paris journal ‘Culture’.