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## LITHUANIAN-POLISH BILATERAL UNDERSTANDING - A PERSONAL GLIMPSE FROM WARSAW

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Thank you for the analytical study, the link to which you sent to me and which – as I have been already informed – will be published in the academic journal "Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review". I have read this report quite thoroughly, and, despite the significant value of its content, I would like to stress and point out some general, controversial issues.

As you probably know, I was one of those who signed the letter of Polish intellectuals to the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs in support of the liberal Lithuanian intellectuals in their aspirations to ease and repair Polish-Lithuanian relations, and to base them on the common (although rarely interpreted in the same way) tradition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its glorious past as one of the most tolerant and powerful states in Europe of its time.

I have some colleagues and friends among the milieu of Lithuanian historians, and I do not have many colleagues and friends among the Lithuanian Poles. Most of the Poles are simply Lithuanian historians of Polish origin. But in my opinion, with respect to nearly all issues so perfectly covered and presented in your report study, the truth, alas, is not on the side of Lithuanians and the Lithuanian government.

In the 70s, during the Soviet times, in spite of the declared "equality and egalitarianism", the Polish minority was one of the most degraded minorities in the Vilnius region. On the other hand, the Polish minority prevailed over any other minority in Vilnius and its surroundings. Nevertheless, this minority was able to survive under the communist rule. After Lithuania had restored its independence, the process of Lithuanization of the Polish minority proceeded at a very fast pace. Lithuanians perceived this process as a great success,

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which is understandable and reasonable from the Lithuanian point of view. I recall my visit on the cemetery in a small town of Aukštota situated north of Vilnius, where for the first time the inscriptions on the latest graves read *Dovgailas*, whereas the inscriptions dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> cc. read *Dowgiałło*. It was really hard for any Pole to accept this new Lithuanization, although I was conscious of the fact that this might be interpreted as a normalization of the entire situation in Lithuania.

On the other hand, after Lithuania had restored its independence and despite the weakening position of the Polish minority in Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian relations flourished and developed at the official level. Alas, all that is going on now is simply the direct consequence of the Lithuanian policy towards Lithuanian Poles implemented not only in the past twenty years, but much earlier. As a historian, I am convinced and I know it perfectly that, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> c., the modern Lithuanian identity was built on the death of Polish-Lithuanian friendship, which had to be buried and cut off just to create an opportunity for the formation of a modern Lithuanian nation. The question is as follows: should this policy be a constant element of our relations after over a century? By this I refer not so much to Lithuanian-Polish relations on the official level, but rather to the stance of the Lithuanian Republic concerning its Polish minority. Even historians on both sides agree that it is ridiculous and absurd and leads to nowhere.

After signing the aforementioned letter to the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, as I could personally realize and feel it on my own skin, I was treated as a traitor of the Polish matter. Just after our letter was popularized, I received hundreds of letters from Poles both from Lithuania and Poland, who generally accused our group of Polish academicians of incompetence and lack of knowledge about what is going on in Lithuania. At that moment I realized that the contemporary Polish movement would not hold their horses and would not stop their activities. They are striving to attach international importance to the whole situation, taking the standpoint of strong Polish nationalist feelings or patriotism. I would not like to give my own assessment of this approach, but it seems reasonable and understandable from the Polish point of view. These tensions also make and put strong pressure on the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Therefore, Minister Sikorski's point of view, and his sphere of maneuvering is very narrow. The elections are approaching, and patriotic slogans can be read on the banners of all Polish political parties.

In this light, it has to be acknowledged that, in comparison with other foreign countries, and especially with Belarus or Ukraine, Polish education in Lithuanian Republic is and has been at the highest level even since the Soviet times. Lithuania also takes pride in the biggest number of Polish schools. But in my opinion, there is no way out other than to find a certain 'modus vivendi' with the Polish minority needs.

Bronius Makauskas, a colleague and close friend of mine, could have his name in his Polish passport written the way he wants it in Lithuanian (there is no other pronunciation of his name in this passport), and would rather not use the name Bronisław Makowski, without any pressure from Polish authorities. If so, at least two versions of writing Polish names should be allowed in Lithuania, for example: Lešekas Zoštautas alongside Leszek Zasztowt.

I understand the specific and unique character of the Lithuanian language, but if I am a German in Poland, my name might be easily written in official documents as, for example, Lars Zastow, or Lenny Zaschtoff. Likewise, geographical names should also be allowed an alternative spelling, as is the case of Lower Silesia (Dolny Śląsk; Niederschlesien), or Puńsk (Punsko valsčius). Thus in Poland, in places inhabited by a mixed population, all official signposts are written in both languages, and in relevant cases, in Polish and Lithuanian, respectively. The growing hostile attitude provokes outrageous nationalist attacks, as happened on the Polish territory in Punska, where Lithuanian signposts were destroyed by local ultra-Poles. Undoubtedly, such situations should be condemned by both sides.

In my opinion, the same, open approach should be applied to many issues, including issues concerning the property of the land around Vilnius; however, this article is not the right place and time for this sort of discussion.

I use my personal experience to write these remarks. Presenting my considerations, I also allow myself to add some historical and personal details. As a historian and grandson of Aleksander Zasztowt from Vilnius, who was one of Mykolas Romeris' closest friends and executor of his testament written at the end of the World War One, I always advocate cooperation between Poland and Lithuania. But even always being pro-Lithuanian, I have to admit that Poles in Lithuania do not have the same, equal rights as Lithuanians, nor as Lithuanians in Poland. Regrettably, Poles in Lithuania are people of a second category, deprived of many citizens' rights – if not implemented by the gen-

eral law of the Lithuanian Republic, which is democratic, then exercised by local and regional authorities on a daily basis.

Mykolas Romeris referred to himself as a Lithuanian. My grandfather Aleksander defined himself as a Pole. Let people be what they want to be and what they want to acknowledge themselves. As a wise professor once said, nationality is a matter of choice: one might choose it at one's own discretion. But no one should press others to change their nationality thereby fulfilling the almighty will of the majority. In my opinion, this is the heart of the matter.

On the other hand, I think that we should always have in our minds that, when the Republic of Lithuania had bad relations with the Republic of Poland, both countries lost a lot, and became an object of the external game of the superpowers. We are sentenced to cooperate with each other, and we have to do so even if we do not like each other.

Finally, a few words have to be said concerning the crucial issue of language: being a citizen of a particular country, one should know its language. From my viewpoint, this also applies to the Lithuanian Poles. As we have heard, the younger generation of Poles is bilingual. This seems to be a good step forward.