

# LITHUANIAN IDENTITY: BETWEEN THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND THE HERITAGE OF THE GREAT DUCHY OF LITHUANIA

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This article deals with the influence of the heritage of the Great Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) on the contemporary development of Lithuanian identity, emphasizing the reasons of its actualization. The actualizing of the GDL is closely connected with the processes of globalization, euro-integration and geopolitical alternations. The author affirms that the historical heritage of the GDL helps Lithuania, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine to integrate into the space of Eastern Europe and the supposed national tolerance in the GDL is peculiar manifestation of the democratic tradition in this area.

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## Introduction

Still in the time of Soviet Union, two intellectuals, Czech Milan Kundera and Hungarian Gorgy Konrad, separately published their essays about Central Europe, the tragic fate of its nations and herewith uniqueness concerning both Western and Eastern Europe. Lithuanians succeeded in this sense while they had baroque architecture of Vilnius and the Latin alphabet. Thus they were ranked among the Eastern edge of Central Europe. The conception of the Eastern and Central Europe, formulated after the World War II by Polish historian and politician Oscar Halecky, ought to remind contemporary Western political elite about the fate of Poland, Lithuania and Hungary as of the defenders of “Christian world’s” bastion still in XVI–XVII centuries. Attempting to orientate itself towards the West geopolitically, the mentioned above regions have always collided with its East neighbors historically. Even the present image of a Lithuanian is “nourishing” by the historical past in the Belarusian and Ukrainian consciousness.

Though the inhabitants in the West side of Lithuania had lived better in the States of “people’s democratic” after the World War II, not only the Soviet occupation in 1940s has predetermined the “tragic fate”. The Lithuanians have been “protected” in the course of history: a serf by the lord, a free farmer by the State that had bought the bargained quota of the harvest and animals in the interwar Lithuania, a kolkhoz member by the Soviet government that had paid him the pennies allowing him to steal. Capitalism

minimized that protection and many people lost it. On the one hand, the contemporary greatest Lithuanian emigration shows that people are escaping from the Lithuanian democratic institutions and Lithuanian free economy as they were renewing the history of emigration in XIX–XX centuries. On the other hand, globalization and euro-integration “devour” traditional Lithuanian culture. The first who understood it was the Lithuanian bureaucracy adapting to “the new rules of the game” of the European Union (EU) rather easily. Young people have also adapted but not the elder generation, who make up almost the greatest number of the electors. The intellectuals of the country attempt to create new forms of identity, one of which is the actualization of the heritage of GDL/ Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

### The topicality of the GDL

There is a significant interest in the heritage of Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the space of Lithuanian political and cultural life. In my opinion, it can be linked with the actualization of the historical region of the GDL in the strategy of geopolitical slips, with the erosion of the traditional Lithuanian identity and with attempts to construct the new identity configurations. Unfortunately, the traditional model of the national identity, which has dominated for more than a hundred years, is disappearing and fragmenting in a particular way the images of both the reality and the past. During the movement “Sąjūdis” in 1988 even the biggest pessimists did not expect for such a perspective. In the world, which is bound up with the processes of globalization the national historical discourse, that was formed in XIX–XX centuries, has disappeared and it gets substituted by the ideological (mostly liberal) or regional (of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as of others EU states) evaluation and comparison of the historical experience. In such context it is remarkable how the new spheres and ways of the research are arising. The development of European identity has been based on such necessary conditions as democracy, free market and European law. Under these circumstances the national historical memory assumes rather broader context; the new national identity forms develop in the process of globalization. After Lithuania entered the EU and NATO, it is more important what unites the nations, not separates, in the common cultural level. In other words, the preference has been given to the unity (*Beziehungsgeschichte*) instead of separateness. Having looked at the geopolitical geographical-territorial location of the GDL, we notice that it almost corresponds to the map of the eastern region of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Lithuania, Latvia (searching the analogies with the duchy of Kursh), Ukraine, Belarus, partially Moldova are the States where there is an attempt to introduce the models of democratic governing and free market, that are now initiated by the administration of the USA and the OSCE. The ex-ambassador of the USA in Lithuania Steven Mull said in an interview: “While Lithuania attempts to support democratic potencies in Belarus, Ukraine and in the states of the Black Sea region, I often remember the achievements and the strength of Lithuania as a multinational state. The USA are supporting and prompting wonderful Lithuanian politics in this direction. However I do not agree this purpose is to amortize the influence

of Russia. In my opinion, the interest of all of us is to support the development of democracy in as many countries as possible, including Russia” (Savukynas 2005: 11). The project of the GDL historical region partially resembles the idea of the Baltic-Black Seas region; this idea was spreading ten years ago but due to the indecision of the political elite it did not have any clear perspective. Though, for example, the actualization of the historical heritage of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire in the contemporary Central and Eastern Europe plays an important role in the integration processes of this region.

A solid book published some years ago and devoted to the historical and contemporary conception of the European idea and its reception in Lithuania has confirmed the necessity of the political imperative during integration to EU. There emerged a requirement to seek the strategy for further activity of the Lithuanian political elite, more or less taking part in the turnings in the development of global politics. Lithuanian society has become consumer-oriented and, according to the Lithuanian ex-euro-negotiator Petras Auštrevičius, it came to a stage of the jumping “economization of self-consciousness” (Auštrevičius 2002: 74). Herewith national, regional and local identities, that sometimes take some unexpected manifold configurations, are forming. In such context, history, that has constantly pretended to be the spreader of the “objective truth”, becomes increasingly a discipline which defends or criticizes the new realities, discovering necessary and proper arguments in its factual arsenal. So it partially resembles the conception of history formulated by Russian “formalists” school. One of the theorists of this school, Boris Eichenbaum, wrote: “We are researching a motion in time while the motion is a dynamic process which does not have to be resolved and never breaks, so that is why it does not have any real time in itself and cannot be measured by it. The historical research reveals the dynamics of events, the laws which are valid not only within the framework of an epoch to be created but everywhere and ever. History is a peculiar sketch in which nothing repeats, therefore does not vanish, and only changes. So that is why historical analogies are not only possible, they are even necessary <...>” (Эйхенбаум 1926: 8–9).

Lithuanian socio-cultural changes in the context of globalization have direct influence on the alternation of the historical-social consciousness. Historical experience and the institutions which educate its understanding select various methodological and professional research strategies. Contemporary sociologists agree that identities are constructed and reconstructed during social interactions. Certainly, historical tradition and contemporary social context are of particular importance to “success” of this construction. The historian of culture and publicist Virginijus Savukynas emphasizes the necessity for the establishment of the new identity and says that it is “quite in character for contemporary Lithuanians to have the identity of ‘eternal Jew’ who is banished but has still not achieved his object and who will hardly ever do it. This is particular transformative condition when old identity forms have been obsolete and the new ones are still to seek. It is presumptive that one of the viable identity forms could be grounded by the idea and cultural heritage of the GDL/Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth” (Savukynas 2005: 6). The heritage of the GDL can be an important aspect of the integration of Lithuanians and other neighboring nations. In the historical mass-consciousness the

GDL or historical Lithuania obtains various configurations: the “Lithuanian steppes” have been treated by Jews as the Eastern borders of the GDL; a descendant of the noblemen in XIX century considers Lithuania as the provinces of Vilnius, Kaunas, Gardinas (Grodno) and Minsk; the ethnic Lithuanian in the beginning of the XX century considers Lithuania as the whole of the persons speaking Lithuanian and the countrymen, who had been denationalized due to the political and historical circumstances, living in the neighboring lands. Lithuanians, nevertheless, have the most powerful component of the heritage of the GDL as in their historical mass-consciousness the myth about Vytautas Magnus, whose warriors watered their horses in the Black Sea, is still alive. Anyway, Lithuanians are the closest neighbors to Belarusians and Ukrainians psychologically and historically. Ukrainians rather often attempt and in their own way “imitate” Lithuanians in politics and economics; Belarusians treat their visits to Vilnius as to Western Europe. True, the close geopolitical Lvov–Grodno–Vilnius axis still has not become the democratic space of Kiev, Minsk and Vilnius, but it is clear that this historical region must develop in the frame of historical identity. Lithuania as the other neighboring states faces similar problems, i.e. backwardness of industry, demographic crisis and emigration, lack of national political vision. The geopolitical project of the GDL as a state or a region means possibility to approach and to co-operate closer with historically neighboring nations, regardless of different economical development, political orientation and national mentality. Perhaps, it is utopia but utopias often become reality in recent years. Not accidentally, during the Orange Revolution, during the government crisis, Presidents of Poland and Lithuania were invited to regulate it. It can be evaluated as the allusion to the historical past of the GDL and the Ukrainian nation.

We can raise a rhetorical question, how much could be relevant the heritage of the GDL in the projects of Lithuanian identity self-creation? If we agree one way or another that the nations are the “imaginary community” created by national ideologies, we can easily construct the new identities today as well. However, the problem still remains: what and how to do in order this tradition to become a part of theirs. Education and development of the information field cannot help very much as the cultural self-training demands some efforts from the society and an individual and that is problematic in a consumer society. We can treat the heritage of the GDL as the attempt to understand other cultures, histories of nations but such understanding and experience can come from the present. Mass Lithuanian emigration shows that our countrymen became acquainted with the cultures of Western Europe and USA in different ways and this is possibility for Lithuanians to form the features of tolerance and multiculturalism, and to approach to other cultures.

Contemporary history of the GDL heritage and its actualization is also a peculiar attempt of historians who share liberal attitudes to “discover” their own tradition. One of historians, while discussing a recent conference of Lithuanian historians and the problems analyzed there, maintained honestly that an alternative for the national narrative can be the liberal one, supplemented with the multi-perspective standpoint which, in few words, expresses the same practical attitude towards the past from the present positions. “Probably the most important criterion, followed by the participants of

the mentioned conference, evaluating in one or another way particular historiography was such: to what degree the works of researchers in the past help to solve the problems accumulated in the post-communist societies. The second “parameter” is following: to what degree these historiographies are “monolithic”, i.e. concentrated to the history of one or dominating ethos and whether they are attempting to reflect the view of the whole society” (Kuolys 2005: 2–5). An important aspect of the heritage of the GDL is the attempt of political strategists and social critics to turn it into the means of civil education, peculiar tradition to be followed. True, such examples have been abstracted from the political ethos of nobility, emphasizing its “republican tradition and the former principle of the equilibrium between the central power, the nation and the citizen, resting on the tradition of political culture” (Beresnevičiūtė-Nosalova 2001: 209).

The actualization of the GDL heritage is closely connected with the principles of the creation of civil society which has gradually become dominating in the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. This is a peculiar kind of political liberalism, which declares the interests of separate social groups diminishing the part of a state in the social space. American philosopher Adam Seligman affirms that “the tradition of Western parliamentarian, liberal democracy have always considered the priority of the civil society and the autonomy regarding the state whereas the states of Central and Eastern Europe had been characterized as subordinating the interests of civil society to the state’s ones. At present this tradition is thoroughly transforming. The creation of the new constitutions, the establishment of the free political parties and the development of market economy enforce the politicians, the intellectuals and even the citizens of Eastern Europe to rethink the very structural social and political suppositions. According to some observers, what has been formed in the contemporary Europe is nothing else as an experiment attempting to create a civil society as the collective whole independent of State control” (Seligman 2002: 18–19). Criticizing this normative theory, Seligman considers that the social dislocation, the fear of decentralization, the decline of the living standard, the disbelief in theories which could express the common social interest reduce the theory of the “civil society” to one of many other contemporary social theories. In this context the historical heritage of the GDL can be estimated as a fresh source of the country’s civil tradition. Inquiring about the civil values and principles effected upon the society of the Grand Duchy, i.e. about *communitas Magni Ducatus*, we could bind a firmer civil connection between the restored state and the citizenship of noble Republic; this connection would be undoubtedly important for the growing democracy of our society. “A sterile history, indifferent to values and imitating the neutrality of natural sciences could never bind any civil dialog with the society. By the way, a serious research of the relationship between history and civil society is possible only after we return the values into the public discourse as the civil society is firstly the collection of normative values and ideals where the most important things are individual liberty, social solidarity, justice and public welfare” (Kuolys 2005: 3), maintains Darius Kuolys, one of the creators of civil ideology. Naturally, a historian as the narrator plays an important role in this project at grounding historically the postulates of this liberal ideology. Professional historian is directly connected with urgent

problems of the present, i.e. has been enforced to do those things which he had indirectly avoided in Soviet time, i.e. to turn his work into an ideology. According to historian Alvydas Nikžentaitis, “the largest problem is that the civil society of Lithuania is only at the beginning of creation. The concurrent of this process is an attempt to degrade the ground of the ethnic nationalism till now dominating in Lithuania. We should estimate exactly in this way the discussions about the conceptions of Lithuanian history. I mean an attempt to enlarge the conception of Lithuanian history, supplementing it with the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which till now was treated as non-Lithuanian one and the polemic about influence of one of the creators of ethnic nationalism Jonas Basanavičius on contemporary worldview of Lithuanian citizens <...>” (Nikžentaitis 2006: 16). In this context a liberal historian overvalues the national historical Lithuanian tradition in contemporary epoch. But undoubtedly it is a new creation of the national civil identity which could reduce the historical tension of Lithuanian mentality under the disjunction of Mine/Other’s.

The government of the GDL has been (maybe not always reasonably) characterized as tolerant to various national communities. An example of such tolerant state-life has emerged for instance in the description of a German traveler Lutheran Samuel Kiechel who visited Vilnius in 1586: “Without the Lutherans there are as well other various religions and sects such as Papists, Calvinists, Jesuits, Ruthenians or Muscovites, Zwillingians and Judaists who have their synagogues and communities. Here we can also meet the Pagans or Tatars who, as the representatives of other religions, groups or sects, make use of *libertatum conscientiae* which is not restricted by nobody here” (Саганович 1998: 196). It can be taken as one of many examples to our politicians and citizens who encounter emigrants of various races and cultures, and who will attempt to get on with them in the nearest future.

## Conclusions

The heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) provides our nation some possibilities to shape the new Lithuanian identity forms. Lithuanian cultural manifoldness and feudal democracy broaden traditions of historical coexistence of Lithuanians and other neighboring nations. If political and cultural elite is able and wants to represent interests of the nation, it must constantly inquire into the self-creation strategies of various cultures, to ponder on the processes of modernization and social condition in Lithuania. That is why reflections on historical experience would be praiseworthy.

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## LIETUVIŲ TAPATUMAS: TARP VIDURIO IR RYTŲ EUROPOS ISTORINĖS PATIRTIES BEI LIETUVOS DIDŽIOSIOS KUNIGAIKŠTYSTĖS PAVELDO

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Santrauka

Nagrinėjama Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės (LDK) paveldo įtaka dabartinei lietuvių tapatumo raidai, akcentuojamos jo aktualumo priežastys. Šiuolaikinėje epochoje LDK aktualumas susijęs su globalizacijos, eurointegracijos procesais, geopolitiniais pokyčiais. Teigiama, kad LDK istorinis paveldas padeda Lietuvai, Lenkijai, Baltarusijai ir Ukrainai integruotis į Rytų Europos erdvę, o tariamoji tautinė tolerancija LDK valstybėje yra savotiška demokratinės tradicijos šiame areale apraiška.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** geopolitika, Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės istorija ir kultūra, Lietuvos kultūros istorija, nacionalinis tapatumas.

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