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## 'POLISH QUESTION' IN LITHUANIA AND PROBLEMS OF POLISH-LITHUANIAN RELATIONS AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

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*This article tracks how relations between two neighbouring states of the Baltic region, Poland and Lithuania, developed over the last decades. These relations cannot be described in unambiguous terms. On the one hand, common aspirations for European integration created conditions for rapprochement and cooperation. On the other, the partnership has been complicated by disagreements and mutual claims. The main problem is the situation of the correspondent ethnic minorities in the two countries: Poles in Lithuania and Lithuanians in Poland. According to the Polish authorities, the interests of Lithuania's Polish residents are not safeguarded, and their rights are infringed. Similar complaints are voiced by Vilnius regarding the situation of ethnic Lithuanians in Poland. These contradictions are partly smoothed by common political interests: cooperation within the North Atlantic Alliance, defiance of the notorious 'threat from the East' and joint support for the pro-Western opposition in the neighbouring Belarus.*

**Keywords:** Poland, Lithuania, International Relations, ethnic minorities

### Prehistory

One of the problems the Baltic countries faced after they gained their independence in 1991, was the establishment of ties with the neighbouring states. In this context, settling relations with the Russian Federation was the most difficult task. Lithuania faced an equally challenging task of establishing bilateral relations with Poland.

Relations between Poland and Lithuania have a long and uneasy history. These countries made up a united entity in the period between the middle of the sixteenth century (from the union of Lublin of 1569 on) and the late eighteenth century within Rzecz Pospolita. The position of the two parts of this associa-

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tion — the Kingdom of Poland and the Great Principality of Lithuania — was not equal. Poland certainly dominated both politically and culturally. The Lithuanian nobility was largely ‘polonized’. Nevertheless, this Polish domination sometimes caused discontent in Lithuania. One manifestation of such discontent took place during the war between Poland and Sweden between 1656 and 1658 when the Lithuanian hetman Janusz Radziwiłł with a part of the Lithuanian magnates sided with the Swedes [2, s. 102 — 103].

The Polish national movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pursued the goal of not only reaching independence of the proper Polish lands but also restoring Rzecz Pospolita in its borders of the eighteenth century: the slogan “Rzecz Pospolita between the two seas” (*Rzeczpospolita od morza do morza*) was immensely popular. The Polish leaders were trying to solve that problem, at least to some extent, after the restoration of Polish independence in late 1918. As for Lithuania, the interest of Warsaw was, first of all, in the district of Wilno with its numerous Polish residents. The Lithuanian territory between 1918 and 1920 was an arena of armed clashes with the participation of the Lithuanian formations, the Polish troops and the pro-Soviet forces. The city of Wilno (Vilnius) was under the control of the Poles from April 1919 on. During the offensive of the Red Army against the Poles on July 14, 1920, Wilno was taken by the troops of the Western front. In accordance with the Soviet-Lithuanian peace treaty, signed in Moscow two days before, the representatives of the Red Army command concluded a treaty on August 6 with the Lithuanian command on the transfer of the city to Lithuania.

On August 27, the Lithuanian troops entered Wilno. But in September, the Polish troops during their counter-offensive moved back to Lithuania. Under the mediation of the Western powers, which were trying to prevent a Polish-Lithuanian clash, on September 30 negotiations between the Polish and the Lithuanian representatives were started in Suwałki, which resulted on October 7 in signing an agreement. The demarcation line, drawn according to its conditions, left Wilno under Lithuanian control [19, s. 155 — 160; 29, l. 168 — 172]. But between October 8 and 9 the Polish formations, made up mainly of the Lithuanian natives, under the command of general Lucjan Żeligowski, broke the agreement and captured Wilno. Soon on the Lithuanian territory, occupied by the Poles, a new state — “Middle Lithuania” (*Litwa Środkowa*) was proclaimed [18, s. 145 — 155].

On January 8, 1922, a plebiscite on the issue of reunification with Poland was held on the territory of this entity. While ethnic Lithuanians and Jews boycotted the plebiscite, the local Poles voted in favour of reunification. On the base of this vote, the district of Wilno was joined to Poland. The corresponding decree was issued by the Polish Sejm (Diet) on February 22, 1922. In March 1923, the Polish eastern border was recognized by the Great Powers. Some 65,000 Lithuanians resided in the territory, annexed by Poland [19, s. 187 — 199]. In 1926, the province (*województwo*) of Wilno as a part of Poland was formed out of the lands of former Middle Lithuania. The Poles made up 59.7 % of its population [2, s. 130]. The border issue continued to be a stumbling block for the normalization of the

Polish-Lithuanian relations in the 1920—1930s. Diplomatic relations between the two states were established only in 1938 when Lithuania had to give in to strong Polish pressure. The Lithuanian party tried to put the issue of the position of the Lithuanian minority on the agenda but to no avail [19, s. 288—298]. In Lithuania, the district of Wilno was never recognized as a part of Poland. The Lithuanian Constitution determined Vilnius as the capital of the Lithuanian Republic, and the date of October 9 was declared a day of mourning. In Lithuania, the events of the early 1920s have been regarded as a national tragedy until today [2, s. 130; 5, s. 116—124].

During the campaign in Western Ukraine and Belarus in the fall of 1939, the Soviet troops occupied the district of Wilno, which was then transferred to Lithuania. In 1940, Vilnius became the capital of Lithuania, which became a Soviet republic. The border issue was settled by an agreement between the Soviet Union and Poland signed on August 16, 1945. During the first postwar years, resettlement of ethnic Poles from Lithuania was not so massive as that from the former Polish districts of Ukraine and Belarus. But lots of Poles had to leave also that republic: some 200,000 people, including 108,000 residents of Vilnius, withdrew between 1944 and 1948. The next wave of expatriation, between 1955 and 1959, covered more than 46,000 people [6, s. 19—25]. The ethnic policy of the Lithuanian Soviet administration in the late nineteen-forties and the early nineteen-fifties was clearly discriminating towards the local Poles. From 1949 on, Polish schools were closed in Lithuania, and the publication of Polish books and periodicals was discontinued. The Poles were forced out from almost all leading positions. The ‘Polish question’ in Lithuania drew the attention of the central authorities. In October 1950, the Central Committee of the CPSU issued a decree “Measures on the Improvement of the Work among the Polish Population of the Lithuanian SSR”, which provided removal of the most clearly discriminating elements from the republican ethnic policy [3, s. 159—161]. In 1951 the Poles in Lithuania were granted cultural autonomy [15, s. 69].

### **The 1990s: Lithuanian independence and the ‘Polish question’**

By the late 1980s, the number of ethnic Poles in Lithuania was some 258,000 people (257,994 according to the All-Union census of 1989), which amounted to 7% of the whole population of the republic. Unlike the Russians, who were concentrated mainly in three towns of the republic (Vilnius, Klaipeda, and Visaginas), the Poles dwelt compactly in the countryside in the South-East of Lithuania. They dominated the population of the two districts — that of Šalčininkai (in Polish Gmina rejonowa Soleczniki) — 32,891 people according to the census of 1989, or 79.9% of the residents, and that of Vilnius (in Polish Gmina rejonowa Wilno, Wileńszczyzna) — 59,812 people, or 63.5%. In Vilnius proper, the Poles (108,239 people) made up 18.8% of the citizens. There were large Polish minorities in the districts of Trakai (Troki) — 19,365 people, 23.8%, and Švenčionys (Świencany) — 10,934 people, 28.7% [6, s. 31—32; 14, l. 88—90]. Under the census of 1989, 85% of the Lithuanian Poles indicated Polish as their

mother tongue, while Russian was the mother tongue for 9.2 % of them and Lithuanian — for five %. According to the data from the late 1990s, 73 % of the Poles said that their *lingua mentalis* was Polish, and 77.6 % spoke Polish at home [15, s. 76]. In 1990, the “Union of the Poles in Lithuania” (Związek Polaków na Litwie) was formed as a structure, which represented the interests of the local Polish residents [27, s. 73].

Up to the late 1980s, as long as Poland stayed within the socialist block, the Polish officials did not raise any controversial issues in the relations with the USSR, including border questions. But after the communists in Poland lost their power and the Soviet Union ceased to exist, the leaders of the newly independent Lithuania had reasons to fear that the issues of the border with Poland and the position of the Polish minority in Lithuania could be put on the agenda again. In the late nineteen-eighties and the early nineteen-nineties the Poles, especially intellectuals, haunted South Lithuania in search of vestiges of the Polish legacy. In Lithuania, such visits were not always perceived with understanding, since the externally cultural character of these trips inspired suspicions of doubtful intentions. Besides, there were reasons for concern that the Poles could demand restitution for the property which had previously belonged to them in the territory of the district of Wilno and which they had lost after the district had been joined to Lithuania. Some Polish politicians recalled joint historical past of Poland and Lithuania and started to discuss the possibility of establishing a kind of ‘special relations’ with Lithuania. Such trends also caused alertness in Lithuania even among the politicians who sympathized with Poland, since the behaviour of the Poles seemed to demonstrate a paternalistic attitude towards the Lithuanians [22, s. 10–12].

As the movement for independence of Lithuania was rising, relations between the central Lithuanian authorities and the ethnic Poles in Lithuania started to aggravate. The development of Lithuanian nationalism in the late 1980s in the background of the independence movement caused concerns from the local Poles that their rights in independent Lithuania could be infringed. For instance, a negative reaction from ethnic Poles was caused by the Lithuanian language law of November 18, 1988, which proclaimed Lithuanian the only official language in the republic, while many Poles did not speak Lithuanian well enough [28, s. 148–150]. The Poles were active participants of the “Unity” organisation (“Yedinstvo” in Russian, or “Jedność” in Polish) which stood against the secession of Lithuania. Under voting for the independence declaration of March 11, 1990, in the Supreme Soviet of Lithuania, three of the Polish deputies of the Soviet voted for the declaration, while six persons abstained [24, s. 245]. The Lithuanian independence declaration found no support from the bodies of local self-government in the Polish districts. On May 23, 1990, the district of Šalčininkai proclaimed itself a Polish national district where the constitution of the Lithuanian SSR remained in force. On May 22, 1991, at the conference of the representatives of the districts of Vilnius and Šalčininkai, a decision on proclaiming the districts a Polish autonomous region was made. Intentions of creating a Polish Soviet republic out of two districts of Lithuania and adjacent Belaru-

sian portions of land, inhabited by the Poles, with its own symbols, like the flag, coat of arms and anthem, were discussed. On March 17, 1991, the local Polish self-government in the districts of Vilnius and Šalčininkai was allowed to hold a referendum on preserving the Soviet Union, the event which was forbidden in other parts of Lithuania [10, p. 401].

The attitude of the Lithuanian authorities towards the Polish minority was not unambiguous. The position of the Polish Union in Lithuania and of the Polish faction of the republican Supreme Soviet in January 1991, when they condemned the violent actions of the union leadership in Vilnius, had a positive consequence for the Poles. On January 29, the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet adopted amendments to the “Law on the Ethnic Minorities”, which was favourable for the Poles. The amendments expanded the language rights of minorities in the field of education and public activities [15, s. 67]. But the following actions of the Polish bodies of self-government entailed oppressive measures. After the events of August 1991, the Supreme Soviet accused the chair of the Šalčininkai district council Czesław Wysocki and his deputy Adam Monkiewicz of supporting the attempt of a state coup and suspended the authority of the council. The district councils of Vilnius and Šalčininkai were dissolved by the decision of the Supreme Soviet on September 4 on the accusation of separatism and violation of the Lithuanian constitution and legislation. Nine days later the Soviets introduced a direct administrative rule in these districts for the term of six months<sup>1</sup>. A lawsuit was opened against seven persons, members of the presidium of the Šalčininkai district council and deputies of the Supreme Council. Three of them — Wysocki, Monkiewicz and Katunov — escaped abroad [6, s. 167—168].

Separatism in the Polish districts of Lithuania was rather pro-Soviet and was not connected with Poland. Accordingly, it had no support from the Polish officials, neither had the idea of a Polish territorial autonomy in the post-Soviet space [12]. On the contrary, the Lithuanian independence movement and the declaration of independence in March 1990 were perceived with sympathy in Poland [21, s. 51]. At the end of March of the same year, Poland and Lithuania exchanged visits of parliamentary delegations. In May and June, the Lithuanian foreign minister Algirdas Saudargas and the prime minister of Lithuania Kazimiera Prunskiene paid official visits to Warsaw. Poland stood out in support of Lithuania after the bloody events of January 13, 1991, in Vilnius and condemned the actions of the Soviet leadership. The Polish foreign minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski, together with his Czechoslovak and Hungarian colleagues, signed a declaration supporting the independence of the Baltic republics [10, s. 400]. Minister Saudargas after the events of January in Vilnius stayed in Warsaw with the authority to form a government in exile in case of necessity [12]. After the failure of the “August coup” in Moscow, the Nordic states were

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<sup>1</sup> Deputy Announces Dissolution of Local Councils, 1991, Radio Vilnius Network. 4 September 1991, *Foreign Broadcast International Service*, Daily Report: Soviet Union, 6 September 1991, p. 71; Postanovlenie Verkhovnogo Soveta Litovskoy Respubliki o pryamom pravlenii v Vilniuskom i Šal'chininkaiskom rayonakh i v posiolke Snechkus Ignalinskogo rayona, 1991, *Ekho Litvy*, 14 September 1991.

the first to recognize the independence of the Baltic countries. Poland followed suit soon. On September 5, 1991, diplomatic relations were established between Poland and Lithuania. The Lithuanian embassy in Warsaw was opened in October and the Polish one in Vilnius in November. In January 1992, the consular convention was signed [21, s. 51].

On the other hand, oppressive measures against the Polish self-government bodies in Lithuania caused a negative reaction in Warsaw and led to the aggravation of tensions in mutual relations between Poland and Lithuania. In September 1991, the commission for the foreign relation of the Polish Diet and Senate sent an application to the Lithuanian party, asking to suspend the implementation of these decisions and to find a compromise solution to the problem. In March 1992, the Polish Foreign Ministry issued a note of protest on that issue [30]. The Poles were also anxious about intentions to expand the boundaries of the city of Vilnius at the expense of the territories of the districts of Vilnius and Trakai: it was treated as a purpose to dwindle the percentage of the Poles in these districts and deprive them of the possibility to elect a larger number of their representatives into the parliament and the local administrations [20, s. 68—72]. Finally, the new Lithuanian citizenship law also met discontent in Poland. According to that law, the persons who did not apply for Lithuanian citizenship before November 2, 1991, would not get full political and economic rights. That law, however, did not entail any conflict since by that time some 87 % of the Lithuanian Poles applied for Lithuanian citizenship. The law itself was later mitigated: those who did not submit a written application for renunciation of Lithuanian citizenship would receive it automatically [16, s. 102—104]. In Lithuania, Polish criticism was met with definite discontent. Lithuanians charged the Polish authorities with discrimination against the Lithuanian minority in the North-East of Poland, which numbered some 20 or 30 thousand people. Attention was drawn, in particular, to insufficient development of school education in the native language for Lithuanian children in Poland and the absence of programmes in the Lithuanian language on the Polish radio and TV<sup>2</sup>. In late November, the Lithuanian defence minister Audrys Butkevičius called Poland “the greatest threat” to Lithuania<sup>3</sup>.

In spite of the crisis in bilateral relations, some positive developments were visible. On January 13, 1992, a Polish-Lithuanian declaration on friendly relations and neighbourly cooperation was signed. The principal element of this declaration for the Lithuanian party was that Poland recognized the inviolability of the postwar borders. For the Poles, at the same time, the obligation of the parties to conduct the ethnic domestic policy in accordance with the norms, established by the OSCE, was especially sufficient [25, s. 224]. In general, however, the Polish-Lithuanian relations stayed in a frozen condition almost up to the end of the year. Since the Lithuanian independence was recognized by the world community, Polish support was no longer so important. The rightists, who held power

<sup>2</sup> Zayavlenie pravitel'stva respubliky, 1991, *Ekho Litvy*, 3 October 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Poland Termed “Greatest Threat”, 1991, *FBIS-SOV*, 27 November 1991, p. 36.



in Lithuania, continued to treat Poland with extreme distrust and preferred North European orientation in their foreign policy. The chair of the Supreme Soviet of Lithuania Vytautas Landsbergis used to say that the Lithuanian way to Europe lay rather via Scandinavia than via Poland [10, p. 402].

Changes for the better in Polish-Lithuanian relations began at the turn of 1992 and 1993. In the autumn of 1992, the Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (transformed from the independent Communist Party of Lithuania) won parliamentary elections in the country, and in early 1993 its leader Algirdas Brazauskas was elected president of the Lithuanian Republic. The artificial character of the “Northern” political orientation for Lithuania, which had always tended more toward Central Europe, was evident to the new leaders of the country [21, s. 53]. Aspiration for sooner integration into the European economic and military-political structures, for joining the NATO and the European Union (while no Northern country was at that time member of the EU, since Finland and Sweden joined in only in 1995) was also in favour of changing political orientation. In this respect, Polish and Lithuanian aspirations coincided. Finally, as Lithuania, like other post-Soviet states, experienced a serious social-economic crisis in nineteen-nineties, the Polish example of conducting successful market reforms seemed quite attractive [13, p. 213].

The Polish leaders, for their part, clearly realized the absence of any prospects in trying to raise territorial issues in relations with Lithuania. In June 1992, an agreement between Poland and Belarus was signed, which provided recognition by the Polish party of the existing borders between the two states and fixed the absence of any territorial claims against Belarus [15, s. 112]. The Lithuanian districts, inhabited by ethnic Poles, had no access to the Polish border, so potential Polish claims upon these lands would affect Belarusian territories. In these circumstances Russia, connected with Belarus by agreements within the CIS, would not stay aside. Besides, the Poles also realized that attempts to put a revision of the postwar borders in the East on the agenda could entail a reaction from Germany, which in such a situation could raise the issue of state affiliation of its former lands (Silesia, Pomerania and a part of Prussia), transferred to Poland after the war. Finally, one of the conditions of admission of any state into the EU and NATO was an absence of territorial problems in relations with the neighbouring states. The Polish leaders would not be satisfied if the process of integration of their country into these structures was hampered because of such problems.

In January 1993, prime ministers of Poland and Lithuania Hanna Suchocka and Bronislovas Liubus agreed upon starting negotiations on the conclusion of an interstate agreement. The issue of estimating the events of the early 1920s was a stumbling block for its conclusion. The Lithuanian party demanded to include the point which would qualify the occupation of Vilnius by the formations of general L. Żeligowski and the subsequent unification of Middle Lithuania with Poland as a violation of international law. Though Brazauskas used to tell Polish journalists that he did not attach much importance to the events that had happened some 70 years before, the Lithuanian leaders could not ignore the public opinion in their country. While the Polish politicians held on to the opinion that “such a



one-sided interpretation of historical events should not be included in the agreement” [11, p. 318—320]. They could not agree with the argument that Vilnius (Wilno), which had played such an important part in the history of Poland and the Polish culture and was associated with such names as Tadeusz Kościuszko, Adam Mickiewicz, and Eusebiusz Słowacki (professor of the university of Wilno, farther of the outstanding Polish poet Juliusz Słowacki), had been occupied and forcefully joined to Poland [2, s. 124—125]. The Lithuanian author Tomas Venclova noted: “The Poles had no doubts in their moral rights upon Vilnius — for them, it was the city of great enlighteners and poets... The Polish insurgents had lost their lives for it” [1, s. 216].

All these factors resulted in the delay of the conclusion of the Polish-Lithuanian agreement. By 1994 Poland had signed bilateral agreements with all its other neighbour states — Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. These agreements guaranteed, among other things, inviolability of the existing borders, and mutual refusal from any territorial claims. They obliged each party to observe the rights of the ethnic minorities. Lithuania was the only country, adjacent to Poland, which stayed without such an agreement with Poland. It was only in late 1993 that the case started moving forward. In part, it was connected with the formation of the leftist government in Poland with whom Brazauskas and his party comrades could communicate easier [21, s. 53]. Also fear of the notorious ‘Russian menace’ played its part. The success of the Liberal-Democratic party in the parliamentary elections in Russia was interpreted by its western neighbours as consolidation of the positions of nationalists which was allegedly fraught with the intensification of the ‘hard line’ in the policies of the Kremlin.

In early 1994, the Polish-Lithuanian negotiations were renewed, and by spring the text of the “Treaty Between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Lithuania on Friendly Relations and Neighbourly Cooperation” (“Traktat między Rzeczpospolitą Polską i Republiką Litewską o przyjaznych stosunkach i dobrosąsiedzkiej współpracy”) was ready. As for estimating the events of the early 1920s, it was decided to include it in a separate declaration which would be signed along with the treaty. But, since the parties failed to agree on the contents of the declaration, they decided to abstain from it all and include a statement on historical aspects of the bilateral relations in the preamble of the treaty. The very contents of the document was standard and did not differ much from the agreements, signed by Poland with other neighbouring states before. Clause 2 of the agreement ran that the parties “recognize the existent border between them and around their correspondent territories inviolable and undertake an obligation to respect without reservation sovereignty and territorial integrity of each other” (§1) and that they “acknowledge, that they do not have and will not have in future any territorial claims against each other” (§2). The agreement was signed by the prime ministers of the two countries on March 18, 1994, while presidents Lech Wałęsa and Algirdas Brazauskas signed it on April 26, during a visit of the Polish president to Lithuania [11, p. 321].

In Lithuania, the treaty underwent criticism from the rightists. There was some discontent with the agreement in Poland too. For instance, the “Civil Committee on the Defence of the Poles in the District of Vilnius” considered that the treaty

did not guarantee there would be no discrimination of the Lithuanian Poles by Lithuanians, and did not provide restitution of land and other property in Lithuania to ethnic Poles and did not have a clause of recognition by the Lithuanian authorities of the Polish university in Vilnius<sup>4</sup> (the Polish university with three departments had been active in Vilnius since February 1991 but without registration [6, s. 267—270]). In general, however, public opinion in Poland perceived the agreement quite benevolently. President Wałęsa during his visit to Lithuania in April 1994 stated at a meeting with the representatives of the local Polish diaspora: “The Lithuanian state is your state. Its welfare is your welfare. Be worthy citizens of it. Take care of your homeland”<sup>5</sup>.

Some contradictions appeared during the discussion of the treaty in the parliaments of both states on the issue of the recognition of the existing borders. The Polish party referred to the Polish-Soviet agreement of August 16, 1945. The Lithuanians, however, put that point in question proceeding from the argument that unification of Lithuania with the Soviet Union had been illegal and therefore the agreements, concluded on behalf of Lithuania by the Soviet Union, could not be in force. The Lithuanian politicians based their recognition of the borders on the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Helsinki of 1975, which contained a clause on the inviolability of the postwar borders in Europe. The agreement was ratified by the parliaments of both countries on October 13, 1994: the Polish diet approved the agreement unanimously, the Lithuanian one — by the majority of 91 votes against 19. Meanwhile, 38 Lithuanian deputies signed a special declaration, which stated that the agreement could not be the base for recognition that Poland had possessed Vilnius in the interwar period legally [11, p. 322].

The further development of the relations between Poland and Lithuania seemed quite favourable. First of all, it concerned trade-economic ties (a trade agreement was concluded in late February 1992). Poland and Lithuania cooperated within the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Euroregions “Baltic” and “Niemen”. Earlier both states became members of NATO and cooperated in the military field. A Polish-Lithuanian agreement on military cooperation came into force in the middle of 1993. It coordinated activities on border security, cooperation in professional education, military scientific investigations, and control over the airspace. Within the framework of the programme “Partnership for peace”, the Lithuanian military formations took part in the maneuvers “Cooperative Bridge” in Poland in September 1994, while the Polish ones — in the maneuvers “Amber Hope” in Lithuania in June 1995 [11, p. 323—324].

In the mid-1990s, the development of the Polish-Lithuanian relations continued. In February 1995, Lithuanian president Brazauskas paid a visit to Poland. On March 5 of the same year, an agreement on the state border was signed, and on September 16 — the one of cross-border cooperation. Bilateral negotiations

<sup>4</sup> PKOPW Objects to Polish-Lithuanian Treaty, 1994, *Foreign Broadcast International Service*, Daily Report: East Europe, 18 March 1994, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Zavershilsya vizit prezidenta Respubliki Pol'skoy Lecha Wałęsy v Litvu, 1994, *Ekho Litvy*, 28 April 1994.

of that period concerned such issues as the formation of a Polish-Lithuanian battalion, free trade, the procedure of border crossing, and cooperation in the field of shipping. On March 5–6, 1996, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, President of Poland, visited Lithuania. During his visit, he stressed the importance of developing relations with Lithuania. In his speech in the Lithuanian Diet, he stated: “Without secure Lithuania there will be no secure Poland. Without secure Poland and Lithuania there is no secure Europe” (“Bez bezpiecznej Litwy nie będzie bezpiecznej Polski. Bez bezpiecznej Polski i Litwy nie może być bezpiecznej Europy”). A new meeting of the Polish and the Lithuanian presidents took place on September 19, 1996, in Gdynia. It resulted in the signing of a joint declaration on confirmation of friendly relations. A Polish-Lithuanian free trade agreement was signed on June 27, 1996, and came into force on January 1, 1997 [25, s. 225–228]. On June 25, 1997, the defence ministers of Poland and Lithuania Stanisław Dobrzański and Česlovas Stankiecičius signed an agreement on the formation of a joint military contingent, which came into force on December 3 of the same year [25, s. 233]. In September 1997 during a visit of the Polish prime-minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz to Lithuania, the first session of “the Polish-Lithuanian Inter-governmental Committee for Cross-Border Cooperation” took place [21, s. 55]. President Kwaśniewski, making a speech on February 16, 1998, on the celebration of the eightieth anniversary of the restoration of the Lithuanian statehood stated that “Lithuania and Poland are today closer to each other than ever before” (“Litwa i Polska są dziś sobie bliższe niż kiedykolwiek”) [25, s. 237].

Reasons for some differences appeared from time to time in connection with the issues concerning ethnic minorities. For instance, the project of expanding the city limits of Vilnius, which had been considered before and had been a source of discontent for the local Poles, was eventually implemented. On April 24, 1996, the law “On alteration of the limits of the administrative self-government territories of the city of Vilnius and the districts of Vilnius and Trakai” was adopted by the Lithuanian diet and signed by president Brazauskas. The area joined to the city proved much smaller than had been intended in 1991: some 10,500 hectares instead of 28,000. But even that caused protests by the Polish general public. The Polish Union in Lithuania organized several rallies, where demands to alter the decisions unfavourable to the local Poles were voiced [24, s. 251–252]. On the other hand, in Lithuania signs of discontent were expressed because of the fact that ethnic Lithuanians in Poland were still unable to study at school in their mother tongue and that the Polish authorities refused to make Lithuanian an official language in the areas where Lithuanian residents dominated [11, p. 325] (in Poland the Lithuanian population is concentrated mainly in the powiat (district) of Seiny of the province of Podlasie, dominating in the gmina (municipality) of Puńsk [2, s. 132].

### **New millennium — old issues**

Issues related to the position of the Polish minority in Lithuania and the Lithuanian minority in Poland, as well as the assessment of the difficult moments of the historical past until the end of the 2000s, did not have a significant impact on

the development of Polish-Lithuanian relations. Difficulties in relations between Lithuania, as well as Latvia and Estonia, on the one hand, and the Russian Federation, on the other hand, are largely related to their accession to NATO [17, s. 203–222], and pushed the Lithuanian-Polish contradictions into the background. Bilateral cooperation continued to develop in various fields, chiefly in the military-political one, especially after the accession of both states to NATO: Poland joined NATO in 1999, during the first eastward expansion of the alliance, and Lithuania in 2004, during the second expansion. On February 2, 2001, a new Polish-Lithuanian agreement on cooperation in the field of defence was signed. The Polish-Lithuanian battalion of peacekeeping forces LITPOLBAT was formed in 1998 and operated until its disbandment in April 2008. During the existence of the battalion, its employees took part in peace operations in Kosovo, Lebanon and Syria [21, s. 59–61]. Polish pilots systematically participated in the protection of the airspace of Lithuania and other Baltic countries as part of the NATO Air Policing operation. In 2008, Poland and Lithuania together with Latvia, Estonia, and Ukraine supported Georgia during the events in South Ossetia [4, s. 128].

In 2009, however, there was some cooling of the relations between Poland and Lithuania. This was due to the dissatisfaction that arose in Poland following the failure to respect the rights of ethnic Poles in Lithuania to the full, contrary to the agreements reached in the 1990s. This opinion was reflected in the report of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Vilnius. The point was particularly about the problems of education in the Polish language, the status of Polish as a local language, bilingual street signs, citizenship provisions that were unfavourable for ethnic minorities, and the percentage threshold for parliamentary elections. The report said, “with regard to the numerous problems of the Polish public, which have long remained unresolved, the Lithuanian authorities resort to the proven principle of delaying the adoption of final positive decisions for the Poles. In official communications, they invariably declare their good will, which, unfortunately, is not backed up by appropriate actions” (*W przypadku wielu zagadnień, stanowiących od lat nierozwiązane problemy polskiej społeczności, władze litewskie stosują wypróbowaną zasadę przeciągania w czasie podejmowania ostatecznych, pozytywnych dla Polaków, decyzji. W relacjach oficjalnych niezmiennie deklarują dobrą wolę, niestety nepopartą odpowiednimi działaniami*) [26, s. 72–73]. One of the signs of the cooling of bilateral relations was the suspension of the activities of the Polish-Lithuanian Intergovernmental Council, which had met regularly since the late 1990s [24, s. 201]. The state of Polish-Lithuanian relations was also affected by the reforms in the field of schooling, which began to take place in Lithuania in 2011. The key point of these transformations was the more active introduction of the Lithuanian language into the educational process in schools, where representatives of ethnic minorities studied. In particular, courses in the history and geography of Lithuania, and lessons on patriotic education were to be held exclusively in Lithuanian. The Polish public feared that the adoption of a new school charter, which was planned for 2013, could be the beginning of the end of the Polish school in Lithuania. Disputes and contradictions also arose on other issues, such as the withdrawal of the Polish party from the nuclear power plant construction project in Lithuania, and the

financing of the stay of Polish pilots in Lithuania in connection with the NATO mission. The Polish authorities referred to the provisions of the 1994 agreement and the obligations of the Lithuanian side in relation to the local Poles accepted in accordance with it and expressed dissatisfaction with their failure to comply [7, s. 225–226].

The increase in interethnic tension was also noticeable in relation to monuments and national symbols and acts of vandalism. In particular, the Polish Mausoleum of the mother and the heart of son in Rasos Cemetery in Vilnius was vandalised three times. In 2011, the inscription “Piłsudski = Hitler” appeared on it [6, s. 187]. On November 24, 2012, the walls of the mausoleum were covered with inscriptions offensive to the Poles (“Death to the Poles”, “Beware of the bomb”, “Tomaševski<sup>6</sup>, stop harming Lithuania, otherwise your place is here”, etc.) [16, s. 193–194]. Some local Poles, however, sometimes behaved no better. There was an incident when, at the end of 2013, several Poles wiped the stairs with a Lithuanian flag at the Vilnius cemetery next to the mausoleum of Piłsudski. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland and the Union of Poles in Lithuania condemned this act of vandalism [26, s. 76]. Public opinion polls conducted in Lithuania in 2014 showed that more than 25 % of Lithuanians perceived Poland as a hostile state. Poland ranked second after Russia as an ‘enemy’ of Lithuania [26, s. 81]. In 2013, however, both sides took certain steps to overcome the contradictions. In February 2013, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius visited Poland and met with his Polish counterpart Radosław Sikorski. This was the first meeting at such a level since 2009. Linkevičius assured that the Lithuanian authorities would try to resolve issues related to the situation of ethnic minorities. In Lithuania, a working group was formed from representatives of several ministries, whose task was to find compromise solutions, including on the issue of a law on national minorities. In February of the same year, Prime Minister of Lithuania Butkevičius arrived in Warsaw. During the visit, he expressed hope for positive developments in bilateral relations. During the negotiations, a number of projects were discussed — cooperation in the energy sector, transport including the Rail Baltica project, cooperation within the framework of the Eastern Partnership [26, s. 77]. At this time, the problem of Lithuanian schools in Poland arose. In Puńsk, local authorities were preparing to close three Lithuanian schools that had too few students. Prime Minister Butkevičius said that he was counting on a positive step on the part of the Polish authorities in this matter. The Lithuanian side expressed its readiness to take part in the financing of Lithuanian-language schools in Poland [26, s. 77]. In the same year, a number of high-level meetings took place as part of various events, during which various issues were discussed and suggestions were made for changes for the better in various areas.

New grounds for the Polish-Lithuanian rapprochement have appeared since 2014 in connection with the developments in Ukraine. Poland and Lithuania strongly supported the coup d’état and the seizure of power by nationalist anti-Russian forces in that country. Finally, Poland and Lithuania have been particularly active in supporting the opposition movement in Belarus. Since the be-

<sup>6</sup> Valdemar Tomaševski (Waldemar Tomaszewski) — leader of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania.

ginning of the unrest in Minsk in August 2020, the Lithuanian authorities have called on European states to impose sanctions against the President of Belarus A. G. Lukashenko and demanded new free and democratic elections on behalf of the EU<sup>7</sup>. Poland, along with the Baltic countries, has taken the most irreconcilable position in relation to the legitimate authorities of Belarus. Hot appeals for support of the Belarusian opposition are heard here, NEXTA broadcasts, and the readiness to support the protesters in every conceivable way is expressed at the state level. Poland's support for the Belarusian opposition is not only moral. Poland is actively helping oppositional Belarusian media. There is also information that the so-called "Black Spiders" — the Central Psychological Action Group of the Polish Army, based in the city of Bydgoszcz, could remotely participate in inciting protests in Belarus. There was also funding. On August 14, 2020, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki promised to allocate 50 million złotych (over \$ 13 million) for various programmes related to Belarus. This is not counting at least 140 million euros that Poland has already invested in the "development of Belarusian democracy" over the past decades<sup>8</sup>.

On September 17, 2020, Polish-Lithuanian consultations were held in Vilnius, in which the Prime Ministers of both states M. Morawiecki and S. Skvernelis took part, and in which the "Belarusian issue" was the main one. In a joint declaration, the parties stressed that they "support the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Belarus, as well as desire of the Belarusians to live in a free and democratic country ruled by the leaders elected in free and fair elections". The declaration condemned "unwillingness of the country's leaders to take into account legitimate expectations of the civil society, violence and other forms of coercion against the citizens" and called for "speedy holding of free and democratic presidential elections"<sup>9</sup>.

## Conclusion

Bilateral relations between the two neighbouring states, Poland and Lithuania, developed ambiguously in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. On the one hand, the difficult memory of the past, primarily of the events of the past century, is affected. The Lithuanians remained resentful for the occupation and annexation of Vilnius and for the military-political pressure that Poland exerted on Lithuania in the interwar period. The Poles, for their part, did not forget about the forced "depolonization" of Vilnius in the Soviet era and the loss of their property in Lithuania. The main problem was mutual claims regarding the unsettled situation of the diasporas — the Polish diaspora in Lithuania, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Vystrel v nogu. Dve strany Evrosoyuza reshili podderzhat' belorusskuyu oppozitsiyu. Chem oni riskuyut? *Lenta.Ru*, URL: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2020/09/18/sosedushki/> (accessed 20.07.2022).

<sup>8</sup> Zampolity iz Pospolitoj: kak Pol'sha podderzhivaet belorusskuyu oppozitsiyu. Pomoshch' protestuyushchim granichit s vmeshatel'stvom vo vnutrennie dela Belorusii 2020, *Izvestiya*, September 6.

<sup>9</sup> Pomoshch' «druga». Pol'sha i Litva hotyat «stabilizirovat'» Belorussiyu za chuzhie den'gi, 2020, *Ukraina.Ru*, URL: <https://ukraina.ru/20200918/1028953759.html> (accessed 20.07.2022).



Lithuanian in Poland. At the same time, however, the existence of common interests — trade, economic and military-political interests within the EU, NATO, and regional cooperation — helped if not to completely resolve the existing contradictions but at least to smooth them out to some extent. A significant factor in the rapprochement not only of Poland and Lithuania but also of almost all the states of Central Europe and the Baltic States has been and remains anti-Russian trends in the policies of these states and fears of the notorious ‘threat from the East’. The US leadership is deeply interested in the unity of the states of this region in its strategy of “containment” of Russia. Specifically, Poland and Lithuania are also united by a common position on the Belarusian issue: the authorities and special services of these two states supported in an especially active way the anti-government protests in Belarus during the last coup attempt in that country.

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