



## Lithuania and Poland: Lost in Translation<sup>1</sup>

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Lithuanian–Polish relations, though far from being perfect in the political sense, are on a very good level in economic terms. This awkward situation is not only a hard task for policy makers, but may also influence future generations and their vision regarding the cooperation between Poland and Lithuania. The bilateral relations of Poland and Lithuania, therefore, have become hostage to the complicated history of both nations and their respective complex inner political situations.

When some outside commentators try to describe Polish-Lithuanian relations, they often use words such as *family squabble*, a *syndrome of big brother* or even a somewhat harsher term like *bad blood*. Actual obstacles on both sides are relatively easy to solve, however when spiced up with some history, ideology and resentment, they become unbearable and hard to manage. Nonetheless, describing them as something similar to the Balkan wars in the 1990s<sup>2</sup> goes beyond the boundaries of common sense.

It is true that the public discourse in both Lithuania and Poland has become increasingly sensitive, though there is hardly any substance to it except bilateral accusations either based on arrogance or on ignorance. The contemporary conflict is deeply rooted in the history of both nations and countries. It is not a secret that one of the key factors shaping Lithuanian identity is language. Therefore it is of great importance to understand that education and language policy touches not only the Polish, but also the Russian and other ethnic minorities in Poland. Looking at the past, Poles and Lithuanians often forget

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<<http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/node/270>>.

<sup>2</sup> “Bad blood: Polish - Lithuanian ties are ancient but increasingly acrimonious”,  
<<http://www.economist.com/node/21549987>>.

how their education and language policy reflects not only the 1920s but also the Soviet period.

Even in the early 1990s, when Lithuania was re-establishing its independence, Poland served as a temporary working place to the new Lithuanian government. At the same time, when Lithuania voted in a referendum, the Polish minority supported the Russian-inspired idea of creating a Lithuanian Autonomy within the Soviet Union – Poles often tend to forget this “detail”.

If a non-partisan observer wonders why the strategic partners could end up with such a psychosis of emotions and irrationality, the above-mentioned facts might be helpful in initially understanding the situation. Nonetheless, trying to avoid the variety of interpretations, the formula of Harold Lasswell “who gets what, when and how” seems like a proper start.

### **Who benefits?**

While politicians argue and the media aggravates the conflict, the most triggering issue is whether this artificial animosity might overspill into the Polish and Lithuanian societies. The surveys indicate that the positive attitude towards Lithuanians in Poland in recent years has spiralled down, while the negative attitude has increased by more than five per cent. That is a worrisome signal and an open question on whether both Poland and Lithuania are going in the right direction.

Obviously the media is eager to focus on controversial phrases by top officials and while commenting on even routine accidents as of an ethnic origin. While personalities do play a role, newspapers track and report every word spoken by top politicians (Presidents Dalia Grybauskaitė and Bronisław Komorowski, Prime Ministers Donald Tusk and Andrius Kubilius and Ministers of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski and Audronius Ažubalis). However, the Polish-Lithuanian challenge is vastly influenced by two groups of factors, external and internal.

It is not a novelty to name a party especially interested in the clash between Poland and Lithuania – Russia. Not implying any conspiracy theories, it is obvious that Russia was hardly happy to have a strong alliance between Poland and Lithuania in the EU, once even called the only remaining “cold war warriors”<sup>3</sup>, not to mention the firm joint position on Ukraine in 2004 and Georgia in 2008. Having a dialogue of the two strategic partners could be problematic for Russia especially taking in to account quite similar long-term goals in the foreign policy of Lithuania and Poland.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Leonard, Nicu Popescu, “A Power Audit of EU 27-Russia relations”. ECFR, 2007.  
<[http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary\\_pr\\_russia\\_power\\_audit](http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_pr_russia_power_audit)>.

The Ancient Roman Emperors rule “*divide et impere*” used by Russia for a long time was, and still is, cost-efficient in dismantling the Lithuanian and Polish alliance. Moreover, one can also assume that Russia uses its assets in Lithuania to present itself in a positive light (the broad presence of the Russian media, mass events presenting Russian pop-stars)<sup>4</sup>.

It is rather easy to play the game of Russian minorities in Latvia and partly in Estonia; however Lithuania having a bit more than five per cent of ethnic Russians hardly fits into the narrative of nationalistic Baltic countries<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, trying to enforce this narrative and portraying Lithuania as a country which seemingly violates human rights, Moscow needs an alliance of the Polish and Russian of minorities in Lithuania.

On the other hand Poland, as one of Lithuania's biggest neighbours and strategic partners, is practically not present in the Lithuanian hemisphere. While during the communist period, Lithuanian intelligentsia read Polish books, watched Polish television and treated Poland as a window to the West, now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Lithuanians have troubles in finding and accessing Polish television and Polish books are hard to find in bookshops. This fact is also interesting from the point of view of the presence of the Polish minority. Does it mean that there is a lack of general public voice in Lithuania willing to change this situation? It is also a very important question about the level and quality of connection between Poland and its minority in Lithuania.

In the internal discourse one must take in to account how the political scene looks in the two respective countries. Lithuania's ruling coalition is built from four different parties, which makes it extremely vulnerable for any divisions or turbulence in internal policy. The government basically cannot allow itself to lose one or two votes which hold the majority.

The Polish Political scene is more stable as the main division line is between the liberal-conservatives (Civic Platform) and the right-wing conservatives (Law and Justice). On the other hand in the last 20 years, Poland has not tried to internally discuss how to support the Polish minorities and what can be expected from them? Polish politicians talking about Vilnius, Lviv but also Grodno (in Belarus) are used to naming them with common words like the “eastern borderlands”<sup>6</sup>. This is unfortunately done without reflection that the “eastern borderlands” may be considered by neighbouring Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine as a willingness to regain lost territories. It should be remembered

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<sup>4</sup> Vilius Ivanauskas, “Silent Indoctrination: Russian artists’ visits”.  
<<http://www.lithuaniatribune.com/2012/02/06/silent-indoctrination-russian-artists-visits>>.

<sup>5</sup> Existence of “non-citizens” in Baltic states is disgrace to today’s Europe,  
<<http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?pg=6&id=316506>>.

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kresy>>.

however that this is done to address the older electorate in Poland, and not because Poland has a special hidden agenda towards these territories.

On the Lithuanian side, the most visible player among ethnic minorities is Valdemar Tomasevski, a leader of the biggest political ethnic party – the AWPL (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania) and one of the twelve Lithuanian members in the European Parliament. In the eyes of Lithuanian society, AWPL has no other political agenda except the issues of bilingual topographic signs, Polish names in passports and education in “Polish Schools”. Even the delegation of Polish journalists visiting Lithuania in November 2011 noticed that besides this agenda, there is hardly any other visible issue on the AWPL programme. This seems to be problematic not only for the Polish minority in Lithuania but also for Poland and its vision of policy towards minorities.

At the same time, it is well known that representatives of the Polish minority are present in other political parties in Lithuania. The question is, are they not particularly interested in activities of their minority in their respective parties, or do they see other challenges for Lithuanian society?

Polish-Lithuanian relations again have the chance to become hostage to an election campaign. Those who expect that the problem might be solved once the structure of the coalition changes, might be disappointed, because the coalition of Social Democrats was in power before 2008 and hardly any substantial improvement in the “frozen agenda” was noticed. Especially when this issue is addressed in the annual speech about the Polish Foreign Policy for 2012 given by the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, then our partners from the Lithuanian side may feel that someone is trying to drive their policy from the second row. When there is a lack of trust and dialogue, such statements may bring us further from the right solution in bilateral policy.

Nonetheless, parliamentary elections in Lithuania are expected in October 2012 (or even earlier in July 2012) and it is no wonder that politicians like Tomasevski are going to play hard and use the momentum to the fullest extent possible to mobilize and maximize public support in the hope of creating more leverage in his wedge issue style of politics.

The coalition of Polish Electoral Action in Lithuania (AWPL) and the Russian Alliance called the “Block of Valdemar Tomasevski” is another fact. Both AWPL and the Russians are barely able to overcome the necessary five per cent threshold needed to go to the election separately. One needs to agree that an ethnicity-based party is a bizarre occurrence within a democratic society. Moreover, the alliance between Poles and Russians looks like a bit of a misunderstanding and naturally raises fears that if not Warsaw, then at least the AWPL could be a convenient instrument for Russia. Knowing the history of Lithuania, this concern seems reasonable.

Whatever the case is, it clearly indicates the need for both Lithuania and Poland to seek dialogue and understanding rather than just emotional judgements.

### **Forced Peace?**

Sensitive issues in the bilateral Lithuanian–Polish agenda do exist. It seems like the most triggering issue currently is the amended education law.

The changes made in the Lithuanian education law, meant to normalise the education situation, were not revolutionary changes. The Lithuanian language, history and geography should be taught in Lithuanian regardless of whether the school is for the “Polish” minority or any other. Neither the Belarusian, nor Jewish, nor even the Russian minorities had a problem with the new education law<sup>7</sup>.

Unfortunately, the heritage of communist times in Lithuania was also a special condition for teaching minorities in their own languages. The decreasing number of youth both in Lithuanian society as well as in ethnic minorities has triggered the reforms in the education sector and some of the Polish pupils are actually choosing Lithuanian schools themselves<sup>8</sup>. However, the main problem is not the law itself, but the dynamics of its introduction and short “*vacatio legis*”. Which make schools, pupils, teachers and parents, especially those in the provinces, not ready for the changes.

And again – it is only a dialogue which could erase the fear and increase understanding.

There are other issues like Polish names in passports and bilingual topographic signs which were rather close to being solved. Some Polish experts claim the policy of understanding and patience hasn’t been effective and didn’t show any results until 2007, and therefore needed to be changed. However one has to ask whether there has been any progress since the policy of understanding and patience was exchanged for a more offensive one which pushes Lithuanians to the wall? For example, 51 percent of Lithuanians in 2008 didn’t care about bilingual signs, while 80 percent are currently strictly against. Would anyone call this effective?

There is, however, a question as to what extent the strategic partnership of Poland and Lithuania was filled with substance and how much was political theatre? Does this frozen agenda consist of real issues and problems which the ordinary ethnic Pole in Lithuania faces? One might just analyse the unemployment rate or investment per capita in Salcininkai, Vilnius district,

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Kirvelytė, „Mažumų pilietiškumo įvairovė“. <<http://www.atgimimas.lt/Aktualijos/Mazumu-pilietiskumo-ivairove>>.

<sup>8</sup> Almost a half of Polish pupils (according to the data of the Ministry of Education of Lithuania).

Trakai and Svencionys, where the majority of Poles live. For example, the unemployment rate in Salcininkai is 15.5 per cent, while the average in the Vilnius County is 10.71 per cent<sup>9</sup>. The difference in direct foreign investment per capita is striking – the average in Salcininkai compared to Vilnius County is 570 times lower<sup>10</sup>! In addition, one might ask whether any representative of the Vilnius region has addressed the poor socioeconomic situation and living standards, the lack of investment and infrastructure in the regions of Vilnius rather than the issue of education.

### **Translation not needed if trust is present**

While Poland becomes more offensive, Lithuania naturally takes a defensive stand. Demands would hardly be effective and will only lead to the never-ending claims for reciprocity discrediting both countries. There were ideas for an intermediary and the High Commissioner on National Minorities at the OSCE was suggested for this role. Nonetheless, no intermediary or translator is needed if both parties agree upon dialogue.

Poland, while shaping its policy towards Lithuania, should take into account its own experience in relations with its neighbours. As an objectively bigger country, Poland should take into consideration all the historical facts but also some deeply-rooted anxieties and resentments of its neighbouring countries. This is difficult but seems necessary that part of the Polish political establishment understands it<sup>11</sup>.

It is not a question of “who steps down”, but it should rather be a joint effort to find common goals out of the frozen agenda. Trust and confidence building require examples and there are many bilateral (from transport and energy links to development of cultural and economic ties) as well as multilateral issues (the future of the EU and the transatlantic coalition, the struggling Eastern Neighbourhood, etc.). Both countries should also support their think-tanks, NGOs and public diplomacy activities. Looking back on the relations at the civil society level, it is very symptomatic how rare those relations are and how little contacts we have. We need more trust and less suspicion.

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<sup>9</sup> Available at: <<http://www.ldb.lt/TDB/Vilnius/DarboRinka/Situacijos%20apvalga/LastSituacija.aspx>>.

<sup>10</sup> Available at:

<<http://db1.stat.gov.lt/statbank/selectvarval/saveselections.asp?MainTable=M2030204&PLanguage=0&TableStyle=&Buttons=&PXSID=3106&IQY=&TC=&ST=ST&rvar0=&rvar1=&rvar2=&rvar3=&rvar4=&rvar5=&rvar6=&rvar7=&rvar8=&rvar9=&rvar10=&rvar11=&rvar12=&rvar13=&rvar14=>>>.

<sup>11</sup> Comment made by the Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski on the occasion of demonstrations of Polish Minority in Vilnius said that this is a dispute of Citizens of Lithuania with Lithuanian state, <<http://pl.delfi.lt/aktualia/polska/komorowski-to-jest-spor-obywateli-litwy-z-panstwem-litewskim.d?id=56816103>>.



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