

Three states, one common past: chance or malediction?  
The role of history and historiography in the formation of collective  
identities and mutual relations in Belarus, Lithuania and Poland<sup>1</sup>

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Common experiences and a common past offer a special possibility for good relations. But having a common past also can create disharmony. If one has to share traditions with others, it becomes more difficult to find specific elements to call one's 'own'. So especially in a situation of intensive search for identity a common past may be harmful to the formation of one's own identity and to mutual relations as well. In the case of Belarus, Lithuania and Poland after 1989, both generalisations hold true. While Polish-Lithuanian relations are excellent, Lithuanian-Belarusian relations are rather complicated. The reasons for this are not only political or economic, but mainly a consequence of the important role history and historiography play in the process of collective identity formation. The present article will examine the structure of this process.

*History as a means of legitimation of nation-states*

After 1989, not only Soviet satellite states, up until then bound to the Soviet Union by the Warsaw Pact and Comecon, acquired real independence, but also former Soviet republics recreated themselves as independent states. One of the main tasks of these new political units was the formation of collective identities which would confirm their existence.<sup>2</sup> This was done by means of history. All new states claimed themselves as old ones, having been victims of an alien system of repression that they had now got rid of.

It is important to stress this because it shows that not only democratic decisions such as parliamentary resolutions, free elections and so on legitimated the new independence. In order to avoid being labelled a nation 'without history', the new states turned to the past for justification and legitimation.<sup>3</sup> They searched for structures of continuity as grounds for the necessity to recreate their state. By seeking continuity in the past, this kind of justification was the general method of legitimation by 'history' after 1989. Thus, the longer continuities could be drawn back into the past, the more precious they appeared for the purposes of contemporary identity construction. Thus, facts of the remote past, in particular, acquired high importance in this process of legitimation. Especially important is the detection of medieval states,

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I present a research project on 'Collective identities and history in post-socialist discourses: Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine' under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Zdzisław Krasnodębski at Bremen University, a project which I started in February 2003.

<sup>2</sup> For the complexity of collective identity see Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and Bernhard Giesen, 'The Construction of Collective Identity', *European Journal of Sociology*, 36, 1995: 72-102. For identity politics in the three countries see Graham Smith and others ed. *Nation-building in the Soviet Borderlands. The Politics of National identities*, Cambridge 1998: esp. the chapters 'National history and national identity in Ukraine and Belarus', 23-47 and 'Nation-rebuilding and political discourses of identity politics in the Baltic states': 93-118.

<sup>3</sup> This was especially important for 'small nations' as, for instance, the Belarusians. Despite the extreme disharmony between Belarusian historians over Belarusian history it was one of the main aims of all sides to reject the accusation of being a nation without history.

kingdoms or duchies as 'predecessor states', even if this involves resorting to anachronisms.<sup>4</sup> The reason for the use especially of remote historical facts and not those of the nearer past in this process of nation-building can to a certain extent be explained in terms of how collective historical memory works. There is a fundamental difference between personal historical memory, on the one hand, and cultural historical memory, on the other.<sup>5</sup> Events in the near past, which form part of personal memory, such as the Second World War or the political changes after 1989, are part of controversial discussions. So their role for legitimation is weaker than the role of events of the medieval past, which are regarded as an integrative part of national consciousness, widely accepted as an integral part of culture and often even taught in schools. This is the reason why the present paper will concentrate primarily on an examination of facts of the remote, rather than the near, past.

### *Homogeneous nation-states, common history, different interpretations*

In the whole of Eastern Europe after 1989, the new states understood themselves as independent, self-reliant units – not only independent from the Soviet Union, but also from each other. The idea of one's own history was one of the consequences of this social consciousness. The classical form of nationalist ideology is a monistic construction: one state consists of one nation, of one ethnic unit, has one capital, one history and so on. This entails the postulate of an exclusive conception of history having the purpose of legitimating the existing nation-state by giving a rather teleological narrative of the state's ethnic unity.

But in the case of the three countries Belarus, Lithuania and Poland the situation is particular. Here, only Hitler and Stalin had created homogeneous nation-states by resettlement and relocation of the population and exterminating Jews and minorities. Before, there had always been multiethnic political units in the area. So after 1989 the realisation of an exclusive conception of history in these states was loaded with great conflict potential because of the cultural intersections and the common past of these countries. All three countries are situated on the territory of the former Republic of Both Nations. Since this was no modern national state, it is not possible to describe it as 'Polish', 'Lithuanian', 'Belarusian' or 'Ukrainian' without falling into anachronisms. But the idea of the homogeneous nation state postulated exactly this: seeking national continuities in the pre-modern period. The result was open contradiction between historians of the three countries, especially in the eastern part of the Republic of Both Nations, the so-called Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

These open contradictions are visible in the existence of various different, conflicting and incompatible narratives developing in Belarus, Lithuania and Poland, each of them using the Grand Duchy as a source of legitimation for the existing state. In all of them its capital, Vilnius, plays a fundamental and controversial role. The Grand Duchy was claimed as being Polish, since (at least after 1569) it was part of the Republic of Both Nations, often simply called Polish Republic (*Rzeczpospolita Polska*). It was also claimed as Lithuanian and viewed as the predecessor state of

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<sup>4</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski and others have recently pointed out that one should not speak of the *Republic of Both Nations* simply as 'Poland', suggesting an anachronistic continuity. See Paweł Wroński, 'O Unii Lubelskiej I Unii Europejskiej. Z profesorem Jerzym Kłoczowskim rozmawia Paweł Wroński', *Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej*, 29–30 maja 1988, 22, 273: 9.

<sup>5</sup> On the distinction between personal and cultural memory see Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert, *Geschichtsvergessenheit / Geschichtsversessenheit. Vom Umgang mit der deutschen Vergangenheit nach 1945*, Stuttgart 1999: 35-53.

modern Lithuania.<sup>6</sup> It was finally claimed as Belarusian because of the eastern Slavonic majority of inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> It is even possible to claim it as the Ukrainian state (before the union of 1569) or to call the Eastern part of the Kingdom of Poland simply Ukraine after 1569, even when this interpretation does not play a significant role in the discussion of Ukraine nowadays. However, for Ukraine the disputes with Russia on the 'rights' on the Kievan Rus' are far more important than disputes with her Western neighbours.<sup>8</sup>

These different narratives focus on the role of Vilnius. In the Polish narrative, the town called Wilno forms an integrative part of Polish culture as a centre of Polish nineteenth century Romanticism with a poet like Adam Mickiewicz at the forefront. Called Vilnius, the town played the central role in Lithuanian historical and political thought as 'capital of Lithuania', on the basis of the historical argument that the town was founded by the Lithuanian Duke Gediminas. Belarusians view the same town, now called Vil'nia, as one of the centres of the Belarusian national movement.<sup>9</sup>

### *The idea of historical 'truth' as an obstacle for mutual understanding*

Bearing in mind the great potential for conflict that emanates from this one single example of their common past, it seems to be almost impossible that the three countries could ever come to terms with each other. Indeed, there were harsh controversies concerning this especially between certain Lithuanian and Belarusian historians. A typical Lithuanian comment on Belarusian historical ideas is the statement 'One cannot choose one's history' (*Istorijos nepasirinksi*), whereas the Belarusian 'answer' is a similar, almost equal phrase: 'History is not bound to elections' (*Historyja ne padliagajuc' halasavanniam*).<sup>10</sup> Deeply rooted in the cultural memory of every nation lies the idea, or rather feeling, of one single historical 'reality' and one real existing past, which historians only have to 'find out' and to

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<sup>6</sup> Alfredas Bumblauskas, 'Kolizje historiograficzne w kwestii charakterystyki Wiekiego Księstwa Litewskiego', *Lithuania*, Warszawa 1,14, 1995: 29-46. Between Polish and Lithuanian historians there were violent quarrels over the interpretation of the Latin words 'applicare' in the 1385 treaty of Krewo. Polish historians understood this as incorporation of Lithuania, by this denying Lithuanian independence as a whole, whereas their Lithuanian colleagues stressed the independence of the Grand Duchy not only after 1385, but also after 1569. Even nowadays the opinions between Polish historians are divided, but the incorporation theory has lost its leading role in Polish historical thinking. For a short overview of the historiography of Polish-Lithuanian union see Mečislovas Jučas, *Lenkijos ir Lietuvos unija (XIV a. vid. – XIX a. pr.)*, Vilnius 2000: 11-85.

<sup>7</sup> Jakub Zejmis, 'Belarusian National Historiography and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a Belarusian state', *Zeitschrift für Ost- und Ostmitteleuropaforschung*, 48, 3, 1999: 383-96.

<sup>8</sup> A good overview of Ukrainian historiography is offered by Tomasz Stryjek, 'Historiografia a konflikt o Kresy Wschodnie w latach 1939 - 1953. Radzieckie, rosyjskie, ukraińskie i polskie prezentacje dziejów ziem wschodnich dawnej Rzeczypospolitej jako część 'wojny ideologicznej' w okresie lat trzydziestych – pięćdziesiątych XX wieku', in Krzysztof Jasienica ed. *Tygiel narodów. Stosunki społeczne i etniczne na dawnych ziemiach wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej 1939 – 1953*, Warszawa 2002: 429-564. See also Stephen Velychenko, *Shaping identity in Eastern Europe and Russia. Soviet-Russian and Polish Accounts of Ukrainian History 1914 – 1991*, New York 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Andrzej Garlicki, 'Wilno żądają wszyscy', in Robert Traba ed. *Tematy polsko-litewskie. Historia. Literatura. Edukacja*, Olsztyn 1999: 67-83.

<sup>10</sup> Albinas Kuncevičius, 'Istorijos nepasirinksi. Baltarusijos vėlyvųjų viduramžių archeologijos naujienos 1993 metų publikacijose', *Baltų archeologija* 8, 2, 1994: 23-24 and Anatol' Citoŭ, 'Lios simvala – lios naroda', in Ė. M. Skobelev ed. *Gerb i flag belorusskoj derzhavy*, Minsk 1997: 10. In his own words, the Lithuanian historian intended to reject Belarusian aspirations to the Lithuanian past, whereas his Belarusian colleague in these very words intended to defend the Belarusian character of these very facts against other positions.

‘demonstrate’.<sup>11</sup> Processes of commemoration aim at strengthening these feelings in a ritualised manner in the form of holidays, commemoration days, monuments and so on.<sup>12</sup> A nationalist, teleological interpretation of this feeling is the notion of historical ‘rights’ or historical ‘missions’ a nation must fulfil.

It is these very ideas of historical ‘truth’, historical ‘missions’ and historical ‘rights’ that make understanding so difficult. The idea of historical ‘truth’ augmented dramatically in the last years of the socialist system. Oppositional movements stressed the idea of the one and unique historical ‘truth’ making a sharp distinction between communist ‘lies’ and their own historical ‘truth’.<sup>13</sup> This led to an enforced history within society, totally obscuring the fact that no change from ‘lie’ to ‘truth had taken place’, but only a change from one system of interpretation to another. The historiography of the anti-communist opposition, too, was, however, guided by interests.<sup>14</sup>

But already a few years after the end of the communist system, the simple distinction between ‘lies’ and ‘truth’ became increasingly obsolete. Under the Soviet regime, one single, unified narrative of history in the form of a canon, serving as state ideology had dominated, even if (as, for instance, in Poland) already at the end of the ‘70s this domination came to be questioned. After 1989, a quick diversification took place. The result was a pluralism of cultures of memory and the development of different and contradictory *lieux de mémoire*, leading to a landscape of conflicting memories. For example, the forced common consensus on Soviet foundation myths (e.g. victory in Second World War) no longer existed. The Jedwabne discussion in Poland destroyed old common myths and helped to start a contrastive, pluralistic discussion on the past.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, pluralism in society gave rise to pluralism of conceptions of history and narratives. Thus, after 1989, it is not possible to speak simply of ‘the Polish narrative’, for instance. The best example is Belarus, where at least two contrastive conceptions of history developed in opposition to each other, each of them trying to

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<sup>11</sup> See Henryk Samsonowicz, *O ‘historii prawdziwej’. Mity, legendy i podania jako źródło historyczne*, Gdańsk 1997 esp. the chapter ‘Co to jest mit?’: 6-26. For a methodological approach to the problem of ‘truth’ see Chris Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit. Eine Einführung in die\_Geschichtstheorie*, Köln 1997 especially the chapter ‘Tatsache, Interpretation und Wahrheit’: 35-64.

<sup>12</sup> A good overview on the situation of various European countries is to be found in Emil Brex and Hannes Stekl, *Der Kampf um das Gedächtnis*,\_Wien 1997. See for the Polish case the articles of Stanisław Grodziski, ‘Nationalfeiertage und öffentliche Gedenktage Polens im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert’: 205-16 and Czesław Brzoza, ‘Aus der Geschichte des 3. Mai-Gedenktages in Polen’: 217-30.

<sup>13</sup> This was especially stressed in the Soviet Union opposite groups. See e.g. Robert W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution*, London 1989 and Gert Meyer ed. *Wir brauchen die Wahrheit. Geschichtsdiskussion in der Sowjetunion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Köln 1989.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to deny the necessity of detecting socialist ‘foundation lies’ as Kurapaty or others of moral importance. See e.g. David R. Marples, ‘Kuropaty. The Investigation of Stalinist Historical Controversy’, *Slavic Review*, 53, 1994: 513-23.

<sup>15</sup> See Paweł Machcewicz, ‘Przeszłość jako wyzwanie’ in Paweł Machcewicz and others ed. *Wokół Jedwabnego*, 2 vols, Warszawa 2002, 1, 14-7. On the diversification of memory cultures in Lithuania see Alfredas Bumblauskas and others ed. *Lietuvos sovietinė istoriografija. Teoriniai ir ideologiniai kontekstai*, Vilnius 2001; Rüdiger Ritter, ‘Prescribed identity. The Role of History for the Legitimation of Soviet Rule in Lithuania’, in Olaf Mertelsmann ed. *The Sovietization of the Baltic States, 1940 – 1956*, Tartu 2003: 85-11; in Belarus Rainer Lindner, *Historiker und Herrschaft. Nationsbildung und Geschichtspolitik in Weißrußland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, München 1999, chapter ‘Nationsbildung und Geschichtspolitik in spät- und postsowjetischer Zeit’, 367-478.

claim historical 'truth' for itself.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the situation after the end of the Socialist system grew even more complicated. In the new countries, various different and contradictory narratives evolved, replacing the forced agreement of an official Socialist/Soviet narrative.

### *Different types of understanding the nation*

The challenge was thus the same for all three countries. In order to come to terms with each other, their individual 'truth' had to be modified in a certain way. But the ability to do so was not equal in all these countries. As the following analysis will show, the ability depends on the ruling idea of nation and of the structure of national narratives in each of the given countries. There are great differences in both points between the three countries: firstly, there is a different type of understanding of 'nation' between Poland, Lithuania and Belarus and, secondly, there is a characteristic structure of intersection of Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian foundation myths.

The idea of nation forms the centre of the historical narratives of all three countries. But what is meant by nation in these countries is far from being the same. Additionally, there is a pluralism of concepts of nation in each one of these countries. In Polish thinking two main streams exist: there is the ethnical, 'modern' concept and the historical, 'federalistic' one, both symbolised by Roman Dmowski's idea of Piast's Poland and, on the other side, Józef Piłsudski's idea of a Jagiellonian Poland.<sup>17</sup> Poland's Western shift after 1945 led to a concentration on an ethnic-based understanding of nation, but the idea of a Polish historical, cultural nation still exists to this day.

The Lithuanian idea of nation seems to be purely ethnical at the first glance.<sup>18</sup> But there is an historical element in the Lithuanian concept of nation also, which is visible in the claim for Vilnius at the beginning of nineteenth century. The Lithuanian claim rested in fact on historical reasons, being justified by the character of Vilnius as the capital of medieval 'Lithuania'. But even this claim for Vilnius is based on what one could call a historical ethnic idea of the Lithuanian nation: there is the Lithuanian conception of an ethnic Lithuanian medieval state with a then Lithuanian-inhabited capital of Vilnius, which lost its Lithuanian character only because of processes of polonisation and belorussification.<sup>19</sup> So, finally, the claim for Vilnius is based on an ethnic idea of nation, too. In fact, there is no real historical idea of nation in Lithuanian thinking today: The modern Lithuanian national movement did (and does) not claim the whole territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania as the future Lithuanian state, but only its small Western part, the so-called '*Lithuania propria*'.

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<sup>16</sup> Anna Brzozowska, 'Symbols, Myths, and Metaphors. The Discursive Battle over the 'True' Belarusian Narrative', *Slovo*, 15, 1, 2003: 49-58; Henadz Sahanovich, 'The War against Belarusian history', *Education in Russia, the Independent States and Eastern Europe*, 20, 1, 2002: 18-27.

<sup>17</sup> See the essay of Andrzej Walicki, *Trzy patriotyzmy. Trzy tradycje polskiego patriotyzmu i ich znaczenie współczesne*, Warszawa 1991.

<sup>18</sup> For Lithuanian idea of nation see Abba S. Stražas, 'From Auszra to the Great War: The Emergence of the Lithuanian nation', *Lituanus* 42, 4, 1996: 34-73. Old, but useful is Manfred Hellmann, 'Die litauische Nationalbewegung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert', *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung*, 2, 1953: 66-106. See also V. Stanley Vardys and Judith Sedaitis, *Lithuania. The Rebel Nation*, Boulder 1997 chapter 'At the European crossroads: Lithuania's Historical roots', 1-27.

<sup>19</sup> Across the centuries the Lithuanian language almost disappeared because there was no written tradition, but the consciousness of being 'Lithuanian' remained, even if it was expressed in Polish. See Zigmantas Zinkevičius, *The History of the Lithuanian Language*, Vilnius 1998: 263.

The Belarusian understanding of nation contains important ethnic elements, too.<sup>20</sup> The idea of an old Belarusian nation with its own language helped consolidate the idea of an independent Belarusian (and Belarusian-speaking) intelligentsia between both Poland and Russia. The ‘Lithuanian statutes’ of sixteenth century written in a language considered as predecessor of Belarusian are held as evidence of this. The idea behind it is that three eastern Slav tribes (Krivichy, Dregovichy, Radimichy) represent the starting point of Belarusian ethnogenesis. But there are also many arguments regarding the existence of a non-ethnic concept of nation based on the idea of a Belarusian territory.<sup>21</sup> This is especially to be seen in the field of culture, which promotes the notion of a ‘whole-Belarusian process’ dating back to the Middle Ages, which includes ethnic non-Belarusian people.<sup>22</sup> This idea allows the integration of noblemen in Belarusian history, ordinarily simply known as ‘Polish’ or ‘Lithuanian’ such as Radziwiłł or Ogiński.<sup>23</sup> Underlying this seems to be the concept of a Belarusian territory, seen as constant ever since the Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup> Significant for this ‘territorial’ thinking is the outstanding position of the borderlines of the Belarusian state in the coat of arms from 1995.

Summing up briefly, it is worth noting that in all three countries there is an ethnic idea of nation in connection with others, among which the historical idea of nation seems to be of special importance. Since the general development after 1989 not only in the three countries, but in the whole of Eastern Europe, went in the direction of ethnically-based nation states, it seems obvious that Poland and then Lithuania with their mainly ethnically-based conception of nation had better possibilities for their nation-building than Belarus with its different conception based also on territorial arguments. The specific problem of the Belarusian case is already visible at this point: the intention to draw their ‘own’ narrative by exploring non-ethnic Belarusian elements leads to an ‘exclusion by inclusion’. Claiming all events on the territory of today’s Belarus as ‘its own’ is hardly tolerable for neighbours having mostly ethnic-based ideas of nation.<sup>25</sup>

### *Intersection of foundation myths decides the structure of the narrative*

The second difference between the three countries’ historical position lies in the structure of possible national narratives. An analysis of national narratives of history demonstrates their construction as a sort of chain of foundation myths,<sup>26</sup> which in

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<sup>20</sup> See for the following Lindner, *Historiker*, chapter ‘Nationales Selbstverständnis und ‘weißrussische Mission’’: 459-67.

<sup>21</sup> As Timothy Snyder puts it, Belarusians formed the biggest ethnic unit, but nevertheless formed no nation. See Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569 – 1999*, New Haven, 2003: 281

<sup>22</sup> This idea is stressed not only in political discourse, but also in the field of culture. In the introduction to his history of Belarusian music, V. Skorabagataŭ speaks of an ‘all-Belarusian process’, thus showing a non-ethnic-based idea of Belarusianness. See Viktor Skorabagataŭ, *Zaigrali spadchynnyia kuranty. Cykl narysaŭ z historyi profesijnai muzychnai kultury Belarusi*, Minsk, 1998: 13.

<sup>23</sup> For a Belarusian interpretation of the Radziwiłł family see Irina Maslenicyna and Nikolaj Bogodziazh, *Radzivilly – Nesvizhskie koroli (istoricheskie miniatiury)*, Minsk 1997.

<sup>24</sup> In the work of Georgii Vasil’evich Shtychaŭ, *Starazhytnyja dzjarzhavy na terytoryi Belarusi*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Minsk, 2002, the title already suggests the existence of Belarus in ancient times.

<sup>25</sup> One can see here at work elements of a premodern understanding of nation, as Timothy Snyder puts it: Snyder, *Reconstruction*: 281.

<sup>26</sup> A ‘foundation myth’ in the sense used here means a fact or event of the past playing a decisive role in the formation of a certain narrative, thus being a crucial stone in the building of collective identity. In this way a ‘narrative’ can be understood as a composition of the basic foundation myths. See

their sum explain the character of the now existing nation. It seems obvious that there are two basic kinds of foundation myths. Myths of the first kind serve as legitimation only for one single nation, those of the second kind can be used by various nations.

In the national narratives of the three countries, there are foundation myths of both groups. One example for the first kind is the kingdom of the Polish Piast dynasty - a Polish central foundation myth, but without significance for her eastern neighbours, so there are no disputes at all about this subject.<sup>27</sup> One example of the second kind is the Republic of Both Nations, especially its eastern part, the Grand Duchy, forming an important foundation myth for Lithuanians and Belarusians as well, additionally being an important element of Polish and Ukrainian narratives of history. These one could call 'intersected myths' because of their multifunctional character, important for identity constructions of two or more nations.<sup>28</sup>

Such 'intersected' myths make possible a classification of narratives into two: those with a high percentage of 'undisputed' foundation myths (i.e. having a function for one single nation only), and those with a higher number of 'intersected' myths. This classification is important, because the structure of the narrative essentially determines the problems encountered by one nation in forming her identity by constructing a concise and consistent story of its own historical development. The *a priori* existence of many intersected foundation myths in a given narrative complicates the process of self-definition and forces one to justify one's use of historical events to the neighbours.

So the quota of intersected foundation myths in the narrative of one nation determines the possibilities of writing a 'purely individual' history, a history of one's own, without getting into conflict with one's neighbours. The more 'intersected' foundation myths occur, the more problems occur as a consequence of constructing an 'exclusive' narrative. If a nation can dispose of many individual, undisputed foundation myths, the construction of a narrative and thus of national collective identity is much easier. Moreover, there is a connection between concise narrative and identity: the more individual foundation myths exist, the stronger one's own identity construction.

### *The 'intersection area': Geography and the structures of narratives*

In most cases, foundation myths are linked up with concrete issues, that is, with historical figures, historical events or historical landscapes. It is interesting that very often foundation myths are bound to a certain territory. Looking at where the three countries get their foundation myths from nowadays, there is a distinction between 'individual' areas and 'intersected' ones (e.g. for the Polish case the difference between the towns of Kraków and Wilno). There is a certain 'intersection area', which

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Samsonowicz, O 'historii prawdziwej', chapters 'Mity 'Początku'' and 'Polskie mity Początku': 27-40 and 59-70.

<sup>27</sup> See Marek Cetwiński, 'Kazimierz Odnowiciel: Mit wiecznego powrotu w dziejopisarstwie polskim', *Biuletyn Instytut Filozoficzny – Historyczny WSP w Częstochowie*, 17, 6, 1999: 3-7; Jerzy Topolski, 'Historiographische Mythen. Eine methodologische Einführung' in Adelheid von Saldern ed. *Mythen in Geschichte und Geschichtsschreibung aus polnischer und deutscher Sicht*, Münster 1996: 27-35.

<sup>28</sup> There are also examples of historical events which are interpreted in a different manner by neighbours, but which do not play a central role in their historical consciousness. One example is the Chmielnicki-uprising of 1648 – a Ukrainian foundation myth, but interpreted on the Polish side only as riot without further importance for the formation of Polish identity. See Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, Seattle 1995: chapter 'The Polish Historical Viewpoint', esp. 17 and 'The Ukrainian Historical Viewpoint', esp. 19.

one could locate approximately between Vilnius and Minsk, to which the foundation myths of all three countries are bound.

To understand Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian problems of history and of mutual relations in the right way, it is important to consider the character of the region between Vilnius and Minsk. It is one of the typical East European border regions, where various national narratives and interests stand in sharp contrast between each other and can hardly be solved because of the very complicated ethnic structure at the micro-level. The number of these border regions in Eastern Europe is mainly due to the ethnic mix in many parts of Eastern Europe. But the specific nature of the region between Vilnius and Minsk has to do with the fact that there are neither 'natural borders' in this region nor a historical name.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike other border regions like Galicia, Bukowina or Transylvania, the region between Vilnius and Minsk never formed an independent political unit, but nevertheless has got a specific quality. It is the region where, since medieval times, East Slav and Baltic tribes lived together. In the Middle Ages, the area of Baltic settlement reached at least as far as Minsk, so it is not enough to speak only of the Vilnius region as an intersection area.<sup>30</sup> The Polish element, which was present in the region since late Middle Ages, led to the notion of North-Western *kresy* - the only kind of denomination existing for this territory. But there are two problems with this name: firstly, it is a Polish notion only and evokes the idea of Polish domination in this area: *kresy* means borderlands, so people living in this area are mentally mapped to be at the eastern borders of a centre being Poland. For obvious reasons, this conception is not acceptable neither for Lithuanians, nor for Belarusians nor Ukrainians. Secondly, the notion of *kresy* does not distinguish between areas with ethnic Lithuanian, Belarusian or Ukrainian population, thus postulating a uniformity, which in fact did not exist.<sup>31</sup>

The present-day states of Belarus, Lithuania and Poland share this area, but it is important to point out in what sense. Following its Western shift, present-day Poland contains hardly any part of what one could call the 'intersection area'. But also in former times, there was a Polish state with a considerably extensive area called 'Polish': the Polish Kingdom that endured up to 1795 as the Western part of the Republic of Both Nations. This meant that the heritage of the past one can rely on to form a 'Polish' historical narrative contains a considerable number of 'undisputed' foundation myths, historical events as well as towns or regions such as Kraków, the regions Wielkopolska and Małopolska and others. So especially in Poland it is possible to build a historical narrative without using the intersected Eastern myths and based on an huge number of foundation myths undoubtedly 'Polish' dating back to the Middle Ages such as the Piast dynasty or King Kazimierz Wielki. This 'ethnic' Polish history can serve as social glue, moderating identity losses concerning the Eastern

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<sup>29</sup> See Ralph Schattkowsky, 'Das Land zwischen Ost und West. Regionalität und Herrschaft im östlichen Mitteleuropa', in Mieczysław Wojciechowski and Ralph Schattkowsky (ed.), *Historische Grenzlandschaften Ostmitteleuropas im 16. und 20. Jh. Gesellschaft – Wirtschaft – Politik*, Toruń 1996: 7-24; Stefan Troebst, 'What's in a Historical Region? A Teutonic Perspective', *European Review of History*, 10, 2003: 173-88.

<sup>30</sup> See Zignas Zinkevičius, 'Pietryčių Lietuva nuo seniausių laikų iki mūsų dienų' and Valerijus Čekmonas and Laima Grumadienė, 'Kalbų paplitimas rytų Lietuvoje', both in K. Garšva and Laima Grumadienė (ed.), *Lietuvos rytai. Straipsnių rinkinys*, Vilnius 1993: 42-100 and 132-6.

<sup>31</sup> On the term *kresy* see Hanna Dylągowa, 'Kresy – pojęcie historyczne i emocjonalne', *Więź*, 9, 1999: 95-101 and Stefan Kieniewicz, 'Kresy. Przemiany terminologiczne w perspektywie dziejowej', *Przegląd Wschodni*, 1, 1, 1991: 3-13.



region.<sup>32</sup> What causes problems in the Polish narrative is the idea of former Polish Eastern cultural domination.

Nowadays Lithuania contains Vilnius and the Vilnius region: an important part of the mentioned 'intersection area'. So the problem of intersected foundation myths is much more important and it is not possible for Lithuanian historians to create an undisputed 'Lithuanian character' of this region. But Lithuania like Poland consists additionally of a region with undisputed 'Lithuanian' character: the region of Samogitia, which had constituted during several times in history a nucleus of Lithuanian national self-assertion. This fact has recently led to a strong regionalistic Samogitian self-awareness and a conception of history predicated on the assumption of being the 'real' Lithuania.<sup>33</sup>

Belarus is in the most unfavourable position, being wholly situated in the mentioned 'intersection area'. There is no Belarusian region fulfilling a similar role as the Kingdom of Poland or Samogitia.<sup>34</sup> Between Lithuania and Belarus, there is a second point, making the situation of Belarus even more unfavourable. Given the similarity of the Belarusian language to both Polish and Russian, Belarusian culture did not have an equally undisputed criterion for self-definition and segregation as had the Lithuanians with their non-Slavic and therefore very different language.<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note that the acceleration of Lithuanian national movement started with the public use of the Lithuanian language. To this day the Lithuanian language has had a high mythical value in Lithuanian culture.<sup>36</sup> One can detect here a reason for, on the one hand, the fast success of the Lithuanian national movement and, on the other, the weakness of the Belarusian case. The Belarusian language was treated either as a Polish or as a Russian dialect and thus could not fulfil a similar function. So the postulate of a Belarusian distinct identity was not believed *a priori* by its neighbours, but had to be demonstrated again and again.

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<sup>32</sup> Wojciech Wrzesiński ed. *Polskie mity polityczne XIX i XX wieku*, 2 vols, Wrocław, 1994 - 1996 gives an overview over crucial Polish myths. The myth of Polish East (Daniel Beauvois, 'Mit Kresów Wschodnich' czyli jak mu położyć kres', in Wrzesiński, *Polskie mity*, vol. 1, 93-106) is here only one myth among others.

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Adomas Butrimas and others, *Žemaitijos istorija*, Vilnius 1997, esp. the chapter by Egidijus Aleksandravičius 'Žemaičių kultūrinis sąjūdis Lietuvos atgimimo istorijoje': 270-94.

<sup>34</sup> However, an important direction in Belarusian historiography uses the medieval duchy of Polack as undisputed foundation myth. See Lindner, *Historiker*: 81-4.

<sup>35</sup> The problem is not the youth of the Belarusian language, because there is a vivid literal tradition not only during the reformation, but also in the Middle Ages, when the so-called 'Old-Belarusian' was the official written language of the Grand Duchy. In this function, the Belarusian language is one of the few non-intersected foundation myths of present-day Belarus. But this myth is relatively weak because of the similar character of Belarusian in comparison to Polish and Russian. See Snyder, *Reconstruction*, 41. Many Polish and Russian speakers still do not accept the character of Belarusian as an individual language, considering it a mere dialect and calling it and its mixed forms 'the simple language' (jazyk 'po prostu'). See Čekmonas, 'Kalbų paplitimas': 133. In present-day Belarus there exists a complicated structure of language mixture of Belarusian and Russian. See Nacional'naja Akademija Nauk Belarusi. Instytut jazykoznanija imeni Jakuba Kolasa ed. *Tipologija dvujazyčija i mnogojazyčija v Belarusi*, Minsk 1999: 112-242.

<sup>36</sup> For the Lithuanian idea of nation see Vytautas Berenis, 'Modernėjančių mentalitetų gimimas', in Berenis and others ed. *Lietuvių mentalitetai: tautinė istorija ir kultūros problemos*, Vilnius 2002: 190-220. The importance of language for the Lithuanian national idea being characteristic for all Baltic countries is stressed by Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States. Years of Dependence, 1940 - 1980*, London 1983: 167.

## Strategy

There are two main strategies of coping with the past and writing history. From a maximalistic, exclusive position, writing history not only serves as a means of self-definition, but also acquires a strictly exclusive character by creating a history of 'one's own' and ignoring the needs and interpretations of one's neighbours. The opposite view offers an inclusive version of historiography, which understands the idea of historiography as a common task, as the consequence of a common past. Accepting inclusive elements in one's own narrative makes for better mutual understanding, but also presupposes the giving up of several elements of the exclusive conception. In particular the mentioned idea of historical 'truth', common and widespread in non-scientific circles of society, had to be seriously modified for these purposes. In the process of designing their identity and their mutual relations, the main task of the three states after 1989 was to find solutions in this field.

### *Poland – Lithuania: 'getting rid' of history?*

In his study, Timothy Snyder shows that after 1989 an important step of Polish Eastern policy was the rupture with the old traditional Polish understanding of these areas. The Polish idea of a cultural nation postulated a Polish cultural mission into the East, which viewed in a certain sense present-day Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine as part of Poland. The rupture implemented by foreign minister Skubiszewski and prepared by Jerzy Giedroyc and Jerzy Mierosławski in the Polish emigration journal *Kultura* consisted of two main elements. The first was the decision to treat the Eastern neighbours as states with equal rights and not to see them through the lens of one's own narrative. The second element was to place the state interests of the present-day Polish republic higher above any contentious historical debates.<sup>37</sup>

This strategy succeeded in many respects. By 'leaving history to the historians' and preventing its exploitation in actual politics, not only a normalisation of mutual relations with neighbours was possible, but also a harmonisation of historical narratives. In the case of Lithuania and Ukraine, this strategy worked well: Poland and Ukraine succeeded in coming to terms on a most contentious part of their mutual history, when both countries founded a bilateral commission with the aim of elucidating the mutual massacres of the 1940s and the post-war resettlement of Ukrainians by communist Poland, the so-called *akcja Wisła*.<sup>38</sup>

Poland and Lithuania divided between themselves the historical heritage of the Republic of Both Nations and Grand Duchy: Poland came to regard itself as a successor of the Western, while Lithuania views itself as successor of the Eastern part.<sup>39</sup> When the majority of Polish historians spoke no longer of an annexation or incorporation of 'Lithuania' into 'Poland' in 1385, they accepted by this the Lithuanian construction of succession, the Lithuanian historical 'rights' on the Grand

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<sup>37</sup> Snyder, *Reconstruction*: 218-20. See also Romuald Wernik, *O realną politykę wschodnią. Kilka uwag o polskiej polityce wschodniej i mniejszościowej*, Wrocław 1999.

<sup>38</sup> After the government formally apologized for this, a common historical commission was set up with the aim of investigating the *akcja Wisła*. See Grzegorz Motyka, 'Problematyka stosunków polsko-ukraińskich w latach 1939 – 1948 w polskiej historiografii po roku 1989', in Piotr Kosiewski and Grzegorz Motyka ed. *Historycy Polscy i ukraińscy wobec problemów XX wieku*, Kraków 2000: 166-78; Włodzimierz Bonusiak ed. *Polska i Ukraina w podręcznikach szkolnych i akademickich. Materiały z konferencji naukowej nt. podręczników szkolnych i akademickich w Polsce i na Ukrainie, odbytej 18-19 września 2000 r. w Wyższej Szkole Pedagogicznej w Rzeszowie*, Rzeszów 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Snyder, *Reconstruction*, 251.

Duchy. In addition, both partners created a common version of the Vilnius/Wilno history, downplaying any remaining controversies.

The reason for these common activities of Poland and Lithuania can be detected in their common state interests: both states strongly pursued membership in the European Union. This meant the necessity to solve neighbour and minority problems as a precondition of entrance. Especially for the Lithuanian *raison d'état* the notion was crucial that orientation to the West and membership of Western institutions (strongly desired because of a fear of Russian aspirations) was possible only with the help and in communication with the pre-war enemy Poland. As a result, an idea of a 'strategic partnership' of the two countries evolved.<sup>40</sup>

But there was also a price to be paid for the Polish-Lithuanian agreement. Creating a common, harmonised version of history automatically means 1) a break with one's own traditions and 2) accepting the historical constructions of the other partner. Poland did the former by giving up her historical 'rights' on Vilnius. This meant a sharp rupture with traditions rooted in Polish cultural thought.<sup>41</sup> Secondly, this also meant Polish acceptance of Vilnius as the capital of Lithuania and an acceptance of the Lithuanian construction of history – especially of the two main problems of Lithuanian history construction.

Firstly, there was a contradiction between the Lithuanian view of the annexation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union in 1940 as an aggression (which is what it actually was) and the fact that Stalin himself had given Vilnius to this country. From a logical point of view, condemning the aggression would also mean condemning the 'return' of Vilnius. The reason for the rejection of this contradiction lies in the second contradiction of Lithuanian history that Poland had to accept: before 1940, Vilnius was anything but an ethnic Lithuanian city. Even the most optimistic statistics could count no more than 2% Lithuanians, whereas the Poles came to 30% (the most numerous ethnic group in the city were the Jews with 40%). What made Vilnius the ethnically Lithuanian city that it is today was Soviet resettlement politics. If one were to use the ethnic criterion, Lithuanians should have given Vilnius back to Poland after the Second World War. But instead of insisting on arguments like this, on the Polish side efforts were made to accept the Lithuanian positions, for the first time in history perceiving Lithuania as an equal political partner.<sup>42</sup>

Lithuania on the other hand, accepted Polish problems. This shows the 'new' Lithuanian reaction to the 'old' Polish ideas of cultural mission, which remained vivid, because they are so deeply rooted in cultural memory, which cannot be blotted out overnight by political decisions. If Polish official politics accepted the

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<sup>40</sup> See for the Lithuanian search for security Peter van Ham, 'The Baltic States and Europe: The Quest for security', in Birthe Hansen and Bertel Heurlin, *The Baltic states in world politics*, Richmond 1998: 24-45; for Polish fulfilment of conditions for EU-entrance see Wanda Dugiel, 'Warunki członkostwa w Unii Europejskiej i ich spełnianie przez Polskę', in Elżbieta Kawecka-Wyrzykowska (ed.), *Stosunki Polski z Unią Europejską*, Warszawa 2002: 95-116; for 'strategical partnership' and Lithuanian-Polish relations see Jerzy Marek Nowakowski, 'Trudne partnerstwo strategiczne' and Povilas Gylys, 'Najnowsza historia rozwoju stosunków polsko-litewskich', both in Stanisław Miklaszewski ed. *Polska polityka wschodnia*, Kraków 2000: 31-40 and 57-62; Raimundas Lopata, 'Lietuvos ir Lenkijos valstybinių santykių raida nuo 1990 m.', *Šiaurės Atėnai*, 17. X. 1998, 37, 431.

<sup>41</sup> In 1999, the vice-president of the Polish parliament Jan Król expressed the opinion that one should not overestimate Polish-Lithuanian minority questions, thus showing the intention to set more stock by Polish-Lithuanian relations as a whole than by 'old' minority 'rights'. See Jan Król, 'Współpraca polska-litewska', in Miklaszewski, *Polska polityka*, 25-6.

<sup>42</sup> Two examples: Janusz Dunin-Horkawicz, 'Jak szanować Litwę? Nurty wileńskiego myślenia', *Zeszyty Historyczne*, 128, 1999: 82-8; Bogdan Szlachta, 'Zrozumieć rację Litwinów', *Więź*, 8 1992: 22-31.

Lithuanianness of Vilnius and its culture, the idea of cultural heritage has endured to this day.<sup>43</sup> Thus present-day Polish schoolchildren still learn by heart the famous beginning of Mickiewicz's poem *Pan Tadeusz* 'Lithuania, my fatherland'. For Polish cultural thinking the idea of a Polish cultural heritage and of a Polishness of Vilnius and of Mickiewicz is crucial. It is so strongly embedded in the minds of the Polish population, that its rejection on the basis of rational, state-interest-led reasons is simply impossible.

With this harmonised version of history, it is possible nowadays for Lithuanians to accept the Polish position. Since it was no more absolutely necessary to postulate the Lithuanianness of Vilnius Romantic poets, it was much easier to accept Polish ideas of Polish cultural heritage on Lithuanian territory. The switch can be seen in the following two examples. At the beginning of the Lithuanian national movement with the journal *Aušra* in 1882, Jonas Basanavičius claimed for the purposes of national self-definition the whole past of the region as Lithuanian, speaking of Mickiewicz, Kondratowicz, Moniuszko and all Vilnius Romantics as Lithuanians.<sup>44</sup> Nowadays, not only the common Polish-Lithuanian background of Mickiewicz is stressed,<sup>45</sup> but also his 'European' character.<sup>46</sup> This shows once more how intensively the leading idea of Europe structures historical Lithuanian thinking.<sup>47</sup>

It was this orientation towards actual state interests that led Lithuanian political leaders to an acceptance of Polish positions at a further crucial point. Since the emergence of an independent Lithuania after 1989 the strong postulate of an official excuse by Poland for the occupation of Vilnius by General Żeligowski in 1920 limited the possibilities of a Polish-Lithuanian agreement. Thus, the Lithuanians wanted Poles not only to accept the Lithuanian historical narrative, but also demanded an excuse from a state which was not responsible for the action.<sup>48</sup> In 1993, Landsbergis for the first time spoke of the possibility of an agreement with Poland without a Polish excuse for Żeligowski. This and the final ratification of the Polish-Lithuanian treaty one year later marked an important turning point. In placing state interests above historical 'right', Lithuania accepted the Polish position and thus desisted from demanding that Poland should accept the Lithuanian historical narrative as a whole.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For the idea of Polish culture in the East see Grzegorz Kotlarski and Marek Figura (ed.), *Oblicza wschodu w kulturze polskiej*, Poznań 1999.

<sup>44</sup> Jerzy Ochmański, *Litewski ruch narodowo-kulturalny w XIX wieku (do 1890 r.)*, Białystok 1965: 179-90.

<sup>45</sup> In his article on the film by Polish director Andrzej Wajda 'Pan Tadeusz', based on the poem by Adam Mickiewicz, Marius Ivaškevič called Mickiewicz a 'bridge' between Poland and Lithuania. See Marius Ivaškevič, 'Kodėl aš ne lenkas? Mintys, šovusios į galvą žiūrint "Poną Tada"', *Kultūros barai*, 4, 2000: 40.

<sup>46</sup> See Egidijus Aleksandravičius (ed.), *Mickevičiaus Lietuva. Adomo Mickevičiaus 200-osioms gimimo metinėms*, Kaunas 1999 and Aušra Jurgutienė (ed.), *Lietuvos kultūra: romantizmo variantai: mokslinės konferencijos, skirtos Adomo Mickevičiaus 200-osioms gimimo metinėms ir įvykusios 1998 gruodžio dieną, medžiaga*, Vilnius 2001.

<sup>47</sup> In the years before joining the EU, the problem of the European Character of Lithuanian culture was broadly discussed. Historians pointed out the individuality of Lithuanian culture in a European context dating to the Middle Ages. See Darius Staliūnas ed. *Europos idėja Lietuvoje: istorija ir dabartis*, Vilnius 2002; Alfredas Bumblauskas and Rimvydas Petrauskas (ed.), *Lietuvos europėjimo kelias: istorinės studijos*, Vilnius 2002; I. Vinogradnaitė, 'The Construction of National and European Identity in Lithuania', in P. Drulák ed. *National and European identities in EU enlargement. Views from Central and Eastern Europe*, Praha 2001: 95 – 112.

<sup>48</sup> Poland could not accept this postulate as this would lead to further revanchist postulates from other countries. Snyder, *Reconstruction*, 254.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 272 f.

The Polish-Lithuanian conflict now became part of an old, finished history (therefore historicised) and was described as such in the Lithuanian media.<sup>50</sup>

In this way, Poland and Lithuania managed not only to organise the past by dividing historical heritage, but also to cope with the ideas of historical ‘truths’ existing in both societies. This was perhaps the most important achievement of the whole process. Poland and Lithuania managed to combine the harmonised narratives of history with the historical ‘feelings’ dominating their respective societies. This was of crucial importance for the survival of the narrative. If history or a historiographic description only claims to be a rational construction ‘from above’ and differs too much from these feelings, it runs the risk of losing social acceptance or even of being labelled as ‘false’. For purposes of identity construction, it becomes worthless because it cannot play the role of ‘social glue’.

For Polish society, the problem was harder than it was for the Lithuanians. To this day it has been a delicate task to accept and to marginalise *kresy*-Romanticism in Polish society.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to this, Lithuanians are in quite a good position, because their historical narrative won over. No longer forced to stress the problems of this narrative, they can use its integrative potential. Here lies an important reason for the intensity of mobilisation and restructuration of the Lithuanian society. At the official level, Lithuania nowadays presents itself as a Europe-orientated, modern nation-state with fair-play politics on minority questions.<sup>52</sup> In this way, the orientation towards Europe and the European Union helped modify and render more malleable the historical ‘truth’ in both countries and offered an *Ersatz* and an additional orientation, which complemented and thus diminished ‘old’ ideas of historical ‘truth’.

*Polish-Lithuanian harmony causes troubles with Belarus: The Licvin-theory of Ermalovič and the reaction of Gudavičius*

The ‘losers’ in this Polish-Lithuanian agreement are the Belarusians. For them, the common past with their neighbours turned out to be a malediction rather than a chance. A similar partition of historical heritage to that between Poland and Lithuania is not possible, because there was never either a historical ‘Lithuanian’ or a ‘Belarusian’ unit, dividing the Grand Duchy in two parts<sup>53</sup> which could have been used as Lithuanian and Belarusian by predecessor states. This means that the development of two exclusive, but harmonised narratives was not possible either.

So harmonising the narratives between Poland and Lithuania automatically means excluding Belarus – a problem all Belarusian national narratives have to cope with.

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<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Bronys Savukynas, ‘Su kaimynais kaimyniškai, arba pokalbiai apie senuosius stereotipus’, *Kultūros barai*, 8, 9, 1997: 2. Saulius Drazdauskas speaks even of the ‘end of history’ of both countries. Saulius Drazdauskas, ‘Lenkų sindromo pabaiga? Kelios pastabos su istoriniu kontekstu’, *Naujasis Židinys – Aidai*, 10, 2001: 521-24, (521).

<sup>51</sup> In his analysis of the Polish political system, Zdzisław Krasnodębski describes the unwillingness of Polish liberals to deal with the past at all: Zdzisław Krasnodębski, *Demokracja peryferii*, Gdańsk 2003: 229-39. The strategy of getting rid of history may be a consequence of this attitude towards the past.

<sup>52</sup> Saulius Kubrys, *National Minorities in Lithuania. An Outline*, trans. by Milda Dyke, Vilnius 2002. For an official point of view see Tautinių mažumų ir išeivijos departamentas prie Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės (ed.), *Tautinių mažumų švietimas Lietuvoje: teoriniai ir praktiniai aspektai. Konferencijos medžiaga 2000 m. gruodžio mėn. 19 – 20. d.*, Vilnius 2001.

<sup>53</sup> A somewhat similar situation exists between Poles and Ukrainians. The Grand Duchy contained before 1569 important parts of regions with Ukrainian settlers. These regions went after the Lublin Union to Korona Polska. So there is a historical border separating present-day Belarus and Ukraine, but not Ukraine and Poland. But this is of no further importance for today, because Korona Polska and the Grand Duchy do not play a central role as they do in Ukrainian foundation myths.

Bearing in mind the fact that present-day Belarus and Lithuania both contain parts of the mentioned intersection area, but not of present-day Poland, it becomes obvious that there appeared disputes especially between Belarus and Lithuania over history and not so much between Belarus and Poland. In Belarus there exists at least one strong narrative, which describes Belarus as a successor to the Grand Duchy. This posed a particular problem to Lithuanians, who rejected this part of the Belarusian conception as a whole.

These problems occurred very early when a new historiography was coming into being, seeking for alternative terms beyond the Soviet paradigm. In 1989, Mikola Ermalovich published his ideas on Belarusian origin,<sup>54</sup> which later on he worked out in detail. According to him, the historical right on the designation 'Lithuania' does not belong to Lithuanians, but to Belarusians. His argumentation works as follows:

In the same way that there existed under the Baltic term of "Prusiiia" a strong German state, there hid under the Baltic term of "Litva" a strong East-Slav state. In the same way that the Eastern Germans were called "Prusaki", who should not be confused with Prussians ["Prusy"], so Belarusians of the Nemen area [*paniamonskia belarusy*] were called 'litviny', who should not be confused with "litoŭcy". The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a poly-ethnic state, but judging by the history of its foundation on the territory of Belarus, which was its nucleus, and by the domination of Belarusian culture and language it was first of all a Belarusian state.<sup>55</sup>

Without further research it is not possible to discuss these statements, but that is not the task of the present article. Ermalovich's statements form an important part of the Belarusian way of coping with the past. Even if Ermalovich holds an extreme position, which is not shared by all Belarusian colleagues,<sup>56</sup> his ideas were highly important for a certain direction in the discourse on Belarusian self-awareness. Historians tried to postulate an ethnic-based regional conscience of the Polish-speaking intelligentsia of the nineteenth century, calling them *licviny*, and occupying the regional conscience of Polish speaking noblemen of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for this purposes. Great figures such as Adam Mickiewicz are placed in the proximity of Belarusian culture, implicitly acquiring a certain degree of Belarusianness.<sup>57</sup>

But the ideas of Ermalovich represent not so much an opposition to Polish, but rather to the Lithuanian narrative, indirectly denying Lithuanians the right to their very name. Several political circles even propagated the idea of renaming the Republic Belarus as 'Litvania'.<sup>58</sup> This triggered, as a consequence, sharp reactions on the part of Lithuanian historians. When in 1993 a reader of Belarusian history directed to a

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<sup>54</sup> Mikola Ermalovich, *Pa shliadach adnago mifa*, Minsk 1989.

<sup>55</sup> Mikola Ermalovich, *Starazhytnaia Belarus'*. *Polacki i novagorodski peryady*, Minsk 1990: 351.

<sup>56</sup> See a moderate position in Henadz' Sahanovich, *Narys historyi Belarusi*, Minsk 2001:59-94. Zejmis, 'Belarusian National Historiography', 392-94 describes the 'more measured approach' of the majority of Belarusian historians.

<sup>57</sup> On the Polish life of Minsk in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century see Tadeusz Zienkiewicz, *Polskie życie literackie w Mińsku w XIX i na początku XX wieku do roku 1921*, Olsztyn 1997. For a Belarusian interpretation of Mickiewicz see Lew Miračycki, 'Adam Mickiewicz im Bewusstsein der Beloruthenen', in Zdzisław Krasnodębski and Stefan Garsztecki (ed.), *Sendung und Dichtung. Adam Mickiewicz in Europa*, Hamburg 2002: 293-300.

<sup>58</sup> See the website of this group: <<http://www.come.to.litvania.html>> [Accessed 9 February 2004].

broader public was published, Lithuanians reacted and rejected the main ideas.<sup>59</sup> The debate reached its peak with an article by the Lithuanian historian Edvardas Gudavičius, who not only rejected this idea as a whole, but also questioned the scientific character of his colleagues' contributions.<sup>60</sup> Alfredas Bumblauskas from Vilnius University spoke of the 'infantile diseases of a nascent Belarusian nationalism'.<sup>61</sup>

This is an excellent demonstration of the great importance of foundation myths in the formation of collective identities. The Belarusian attempt to usurp a common foundation myth, exclusively for one's own purposes, violated the needs of the Lithuanian construction of collective identity. For Lithuanians it is simply impossible to accept the thesis of a leading and founding role played by the Belarusians instead of the Lithuanians at the beginning of the Grand Duchy, because it stands in sharp contrast to a Lithuanian historical narrative, which imparts legitimation to modern Lithuania and as such forms an integral part of the *raison d'être* of the present-day Lithuanian state. This is moreover a narrative that has now been accepted by Polish historians and thereby once more confirmed in Lithuanian consciousness. Nevertheless, Lithuanian historians were, on the whole, open to sharing the heritage of the Grand Duchy with Belarusians, but proposed a totally different version of Belarusian ethnogenesis.<sup>62</sup> This remained so after the 'agreement' on history with Polish historians.

### *Choosing another past?*

In 1995 Belarusian President Aliaksandr Lukashenka introduced a new state flag and coat of arms. The Pahonia motive was rejected and replaced by a composition with visible similarities to the former Soviet coat of arms including such elements as the Red Star and wheat ears. This was not only a change of symbols, but the introduction of a second historical narrative on Belarusian history, conceptualising Belarus rather as part of the East-Slavonic family than a Western-orientated country. This meant a reorientation towards Soviet Belarusian traditions, as Lukashenka himself stressed.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, it marked a radical change in the formation of official identity: if with the Pahonia motive Belarusian identity was intended to use the whole past of the intersection area for its own purposes, now a sharp rupture was being made by

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<sup>59</sup> I. Saverchanka and Zm. San'ko, *100 pyttaniaŭ i adkazaŭ z historyi Belarusi*, Minsk 1993. In 1994 a translation of several passages was printed in *Naujasis Židinys*, followed by a comment by Kastytis Stalioraitis, 'DLK paveldas ir Baltarusiai', *Naujasis Židinys*, 9,10, 1994: 52-9.

<sup>60</sup> Edvardas Gudavičius, 'Following the tracks of a myth', *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, 1, 1996: 38-58.

<sup>61</sup> Alfredas Bumblauskas, 'The heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: perspectives of historical consciousness', in Grigorijus Potashenko ed. *The peoples of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania*, Vilnius, 2002: 28.

<sup>62</sup> In Lithuania, the ideas of Edvardas Gudavičius on Belarusian ethnogenesis are widely accepted. He speaks of a proto-Belarusian ethnic group called Gudai, from which originated both the Belarusians and the Ukrainians: Edvardas Gudavičius, 'The Ruthenians', in Potašenko, *The peoples*, 45-56 (earlier published in Lithuanian in Vytautas Ališauskas et al. ed. *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštijos Kultūra. Tyrinėjimai ir vaizdai*, Vilnius 2001: 197-206.

<sup>63</sup> Vystuplenie Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus' A. G. Lukashenko na vstreche s pobediteliami i prizerami konkursa na luchshii poiasnitel'nyi tekst k Gosudarstvennomu gerbu Respubliki Belarus' i Gosudarstvennomu flagu Respubliki Belarus' 25 sentiabria 1996, in Skobelev, *Gerb i flag*, 5. See also Astrid Sahm, 'Political Culture and National Symbols: Their Impact on the Belarusian Nation-building Process', *Nationalities Papers* 27 1999: 649-61 and Rüdiger Ritter, 'Ein Wappen, zwei Staaten. Der Reiter in Litauen und Belarus', *Osteuropa*, 54, 7, 2004: 37-51.

stressing Soviet foundation myths and putting a stop to using the whole intersected past as a primary source of identity.

But this proved unfeasible. The court historians around Lukashenka tried to ban Pahonia as a 'fascistic' symbol, but failed in excluding it totally from their narrative.<sup>64</sup> They failed also in dominating Belarusian society with their narrative and symbols: The main propagator of the idea of Pahonia as a state symbol had been the Belarusian People's Front 'Adradzhennje', the most important political factor in the early '90s. This organisation lost considerable political influence after 1995, but nevertheless it was possible to organise a conference in 2002 by members of the People's Front 'Adradzhennje' on 'Ideals of the Belarusian National Republic and the Rebirth of Belarus'.<sup>65</sup> In 2003, in Belarusian bookshops a huge coloured volume on Belarusian history was sold which had been printed in Slovakia and presenting an opposite version of Belarusian history, stressing the officially condemned foundation myths.<sup>66</sup> This demonstrates once more that it is not sufficient simply to ban intersected historical facts, because the narrative thus constructed seems artificial, violates historical memory and cannot prevail over other existing concepts. The dispute is currently going on with an open result but it is already clear that a stable construction of identity and peaceful relations cannot be achieved without dealing with the intersected past.

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<sup>64</sup> After the new state symbols were installed in June 1995, in December 1995 an official competition was started in order to find a text with the best explanation for them. In general, the Pahonia motive was not totally excluded from the new historical narrative, but lost its function as an important foundation myth and was now called an alien, Lithuanian symbol. For some texts of the competition see Skobelev, *Gerb i flag*, passim, for the condemnation of Pahonja as fascistic symbol see the articles of Aleksandr Stukanov, 'Emblema mira i truda': 88 and Dmitrij Chromchenko, 'Simvoly nadezhdy i dobra': 79.

<sup>65</sup> Navukova-histarychnaja kanferencyia 'Idealy BNR i Adradzhen'nje Belarusi', Mensk, 17 sakavika 1002 g., conference reader unpublished, in my archives (RR).

<sup>66</sup> Uladzimir Arlov and Zmitser Gerasimovich, *Kraina Belarus'. Iliustravanaia historyia*, Martin [Slovakia], 2003.