

WHAT COMES AFTER THE NATION? POSSIBLE SCENARIOS OF POSTNATIONALISM IN CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE (THE CASE OF LITHUANIA)

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The article analyses possible transformations of nationalism in contemporary Lithuania. The author argues that two forces influence the national identity. On the one hand, local identities have been strengthening. Currently, an attempt to revive / create a Samogitian identity based on certain political goals is rather visible in Lithuania. On the other hand, an opposite process can also be observed: it is a wish to revive a region corresponding to the boundaries of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The article concludes that due to globalization processes national identity receives pressure both from the “above” and “below”, i.e. alternative identity models are being offered in relation to either local identities or regional identities covering several states.

Keywords: the construction of a region, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, local identities, national identity, nationalism.

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Introduction

Researchers of nationalism agree that a modern nation and nationalism are not ahistorical products but are the result of modernization. Some argued that transformational processes led to nationalism (Smith 1986, 1995); according to others, nations were imagined (Anderson 1983) and invented (Hobsbawm 1990) at the end of the 18th century. In most scholars' opinion, nationalism was a response to occurring changes: either to the transition of the agrarian society to the industrial one (Gellner 1996) or to the democratization of absolute monarchies in which the powers were compelled to look for new sources of legitimating, one of which became a nation. The question emerged in the 21st century: to what degree can nationalism still be an important factor and what transformations are possible in the age of globalization?

Nationalism that emerged in the 19th century had a double-sided character, at least in Eastern Europe. On the one hand, it was liberation from former empires (Russia and Austria-Hungary). However, nationalism also worked in an opposite direction: it extinguished local identities and traditions. The projects of literary language delegitimized dialects; they were expelled from the public life and became an object of scholarly research. The creation of typical national costume, character, kitchen, etc. also eliminated rich local traditions. Nationalists wanted to purify what the times had “spoiled”.

Therefore, they looked back at the Middle Ages which became, for many nations, a mythical “Golden Age” during which their nations were “pure” and “clean”.

Today this kind of nationalism experiences erosion. The research has demonstrated that the “purity” of a nation is an abstraction that had never been realized in history (it should be mentioned here that Adolf Hitler’s plans were based on this imperative which “justified” mass extermination of Jews). Secondly, the enlarged European Union emphasizes communication between nations and views the manifestations of nationalism suspiciously. Thus, what are possible transformations of nationalism? Of course, the question is very broad and requires comprehensive research. This article has a far more modest goal. It focuses on Lithuania and processes that take place in the country. In a future research, the questions raised should be placed in a wider geographical context.

Theoretical choices

Spatial and chronological boundaries are important for the understanding of identity. In what space do we live, to which space do we assign or want to assign ourselves? Which historical period seems the most fruitful to us? These are the questions that delve into the research on historical self-consciousness (or consciousness). In this case, we do not have in mind objective criteria but the feelings of a majority of society. Historical studies demonstrate that an “objective history” does not exist; we make certain historical periods more meaningful because of our contemporary situation. The present makes historians evaluate historical events differently, enthrone certain “Golden Ages” and consecrate different personalities of the past.

The attitude of society towards its past is never passive: it remembers selected events, associates certain meanings with them and forgets others. Remembered events in the course of time acquire new meanings and nuances. The interpretations of the battle of Bouvines (on July 27, 1214) during which the King of France Philip August defeated Oton IV and his allies can serve as an excellent example here. This victory became legendary; however, after the 13th century it was forgotten. It was revived in the 17th century because it prompted reminiscences about the French monarchy. During the time of the July monarchy, historians (François Guizot and Augustin Thierry) saw in this battle the union of the king and people. In 1871–1914, this victory was interpreted as the first victory of the French over the Germans (Le Goff 1998: 190–191). The above interpretations can be called a historical memory.

If we think more radically, the discipline of history itself is a version of historical memory: it cannot escape ideology, i.e. certain aspect of evaluation (however, according to one of the most prominent researchers of historical memory Pierre Nora, the discipline of history and historical memory are two different things (Nora 1984: XV–XLII)). Without delving into more profound theoretical problems of historical memory (Candau 1996) we can argue that no objective time framework exists; it is drawn by a society itself regarding its own history.

We adhere to the similar attitude with regard to geographical spaces. Regions are not determined by “objective” criteria. The differentiation of regions also depends on the workings of imagination: on the persuasiveness of geographical arguments and definitions.

Larry Wolff demonstrated convincingly how the region of Eastern Europe was invented in the 18th century (Wolff 1994). After the study of Iver Neumann (Neuman 1998) it became obvious that regions which often seem defined by objective criteria of historical destiny or culture are essentially imagined in our heads; first of all, they belong to our mental world. Only later politicians exploiting regions “invented” and “constructed” by intellectuals draw political vectors and make practical decisions that influence the future of regions.

From the “Paradise lost” to the “Promised land”

If we looked at the history of Lithuania from the “official” point of view, we would have the following historical model: after the liberation from the Soviet Union that had brought a lot of evil to the country, the new Lithuanian state was established; during the last fourteen years much was achieved since we became a part of the European Union. It has been argued that the Soviet past should be evaluated negatively, and the present and the future, positively. However, Lithuanian citizens themselves do not hold such views.

Sociological research demonstrated that around 70% of Lithuanian people supported the membership of the country in the EU. Even one year in this organization did not crush euro-optimism of Lithuanians. The Eurobarometer conducted in May - June, 2005, revealed the following results: having been asked about their attitude towards the European Union, 9% of Lithuanian respondents said that it was very positive, 40% that it was positive, 39% neutral, 6% negative, and 1% very negative. In other EU countries the attitude to it was a little more pessimistic: 8% of respondents evaluated the EU very positively, 38% positively, 32% neutrally, 14% negatively, and 4% very negatively (Eurobarometer, 2005, http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb63/eb63.4_en_first.pdf).

These data show that we look up to the West. But what do we see there? As the sociological research demonstrates, Lithuanians associate the EU with the material well-being. For the citizens of Lithuania, the EU means a better life (66% of them think so) (Eurobarometer, 2002, http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion). Here we can remember the EU money often mentioned in the public discourse. However, we should not forget that time will come when Lithuania has to pay more than it receives. In attempting to make Lithuanians sympathize with the project of the EU, the Lithuanian government emphasizes its material aspect¹. Europe is imagined as a giver of material goods (the aspect of cultural heritage and value orientations are often forgotten). Europe (particularly England, Ireland and Spain) have become, for many Lithuanians, a new home and an escape from poverty. Thus, Europe can be considered a “promised land” for Lithuanians. First of all, it is because of the economic emigration (Lithuanians move physically to their “promised lands”).

¹ The association of the West with material things reveal the opposition formulated during the Soviet times between the “spiritual” “us” (the Soviet Union) and the “materialistic” West. Thus, although nobody doubts our western orientations, the code used to interpret our movement towards the West was inherited from the Soviet times. However, the problem of codes in contemporary society is a separate issue.

Secondly, the image of a rich and full Europe attracts us. It resembles a promise that we will live like that sometime in the future (it is the sphere of imagination that gives us hope for a better future).

Sociological surveys demonstrate that Lithuanians do not believe in a quick material improvement. The aspect of the future is very important here: people indicate that they expect a better future for their children (in 2003, 63.2 % stated that the life of the Lithuanian youth would improve after joining the EU²). Thus, a better life awaits us in the future. It is our travel to a better time. This phenomenon of a “promised land” may have determined why Lithuanians still did not lose their faith in the EU; everything cannot change in a year or two.

Another aspect that shows the imagination of Europe as a “promised land” for Lithuanians should also be mentioned. Sociological research demonstrates that a large part of the citizens of Lithuania is unhappy about the workings of democracy in their country; however, they are satisfied with democratic processes in the EU. As the Eurobarometer survey demonstrates, even 72% of Lithuanians are unhappy about the workings of democracy in the country. Only 24% are satisfied with democracy in Lithuania. The European average is 53% of respondents are satisfied with democracy and 44% are unsatisfied with it. However, 48% of Lithuanians are happy with democracy in the EU. Only 21% of Lithuanian respondents are unsatisfied with it. The European average is 49% and 35% correspondingly (http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb63/eb63.4_en_first.pdf). While Lithuanians treat the reality of their own country negatively, they think that matters are better in Europe, the “promised land”.

The above attitudes correspond to the “official” history that I have mentioned above. However, if we looked at the configurations of historical memory, we would see some deviations from this “official” history. We have not only a “promised land,” but also the “paradise lost”. Although it might sound strange but it is the Soviet time. Sociological surveys show that even 53.5% of the Lithuanian people think that life was better during the Soviet time (29.5% disagree with this opinion).³

One more interesting thing should be mentioned: nostalgia for the Soviet time has been gradually increasing. In 1991, only 6% of Lithuanians thought of the Soviet time as the best period in the history of Lithuania; in 1993, this number increased to 8%. Meanwhile during the period of 1991–1994, the number of people who viewed the Soviet time negatively decreased from 81 to 64% (Štutinienė 1997: 78). In 2004, 10 years after, this number decreased to 29.7%. We can see the intensification of nostalgia for the Soviet time. Many politicians and political activists do not want to acknowledge that in case the Soviet time is the “lost Paradise”, then nostalgia for it becomes stronger in time. It is natural that with the increasing positive evaluation of the Soviet time, the negative attitude towards the present of independent Lithuania is strengthening. For instance, in 1991, 20% of Lithuanians viewed it as the most difficult period

² The 2004 “Vilmorus” survey.

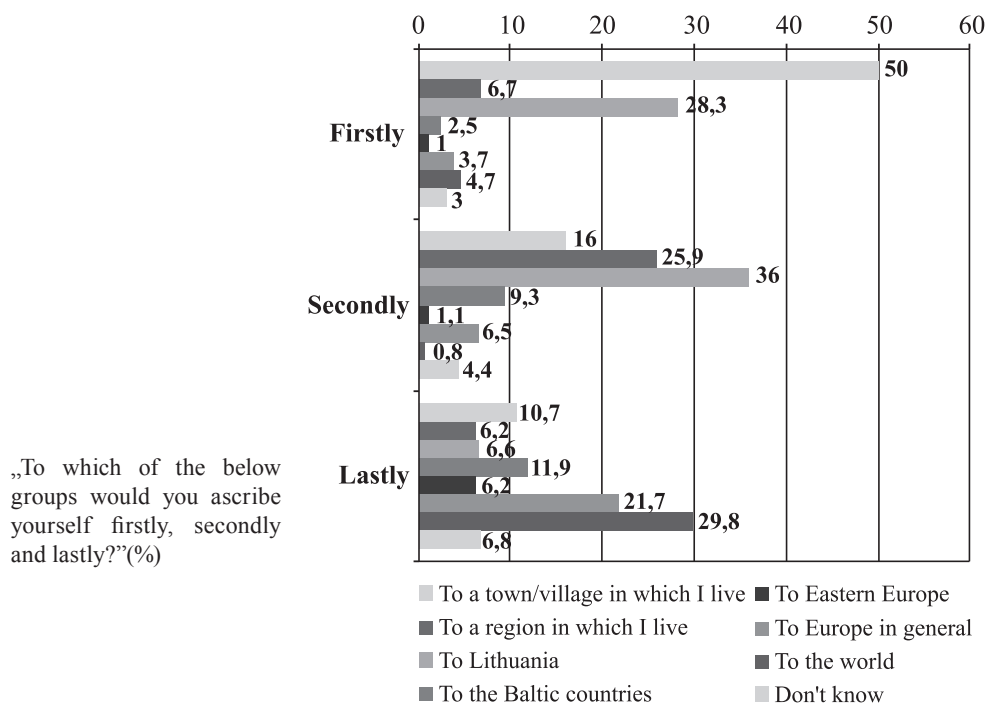
³ The survey was conducted by the Market and Opinion Research Company “Vilmorus” in 2004.

for the country, in 1994, this number was 22%. Among citizens of non-Lithuanian ethnicity, the negative attitude towards independent Lithuania went from 29% in 1991 to 36% in 1994 (Štutinienė 1997:78). In 2004, 34.2% of the Lithuanian people considered the period from the reconstruction of Independence in 1990 to the present as the most unsuccessful time in the history of Lithuania. Thus, looking at the current situation, we can see that one third of the Lithuanian population think that the worst historical period is either the Soviet time or the years of independent Lithuania. 40-59-year olds with primary or secondary education living in the countryside or county centers whose monthly income for one family member amounts to 200 Litas are most often disappointed with the independence of Lithuania.

The Soviet period as the most unsuccessful in the history of Lithuania was regarded by respondents over 60 and the youngest ones (16–19-year olds) with university education living in county centers and those whose monthly income for one family member exceeded 1000 Litas. We can conclude from these data that those who still remember the occupation of Lithuania and those who know the Soviet time only from the school books and family stories evaluate it most negatively. Furthermore, those who earn enough and do not feel as outsiders of the society also consider the Soviet time negatively. The independence of Lithuania gave them possibilities they could not have during the Soviet regime. Thus, despite the fact that there is a clear division between the attitudes of the Lithuanians towards the Soviet time and independent Lithuania, a large part of the Lithuanian society regard the Soviet period as the “Paradise lost”. Therefore, we have here almost a Biblical story: Lithuanians expelled the “Paradise lost” – the Soviet Union – now wander towards their “promised land” – the European Union. The Lithuanian identity is, in this case, an identity of travelers in the desert. They are expelled; they will not be able to come back but they have an objective – the “promised land”. However, they must travel not by a comfortable European train but barefoot in the tiring desert. It is very good that Lithuanians have this goal – Europe. It would be much worse if this objective did not exist (we can also emphasize that, according to recent sociological surveys, Lithuanians become more optimistic; their optimism might be related to the improving economic situation but we cannot reject the psychological aspect of being in the European Union). But those travelers are hurt as they had been expelled from Paradise and they sincerely hate the desert through which they travel. Thus, to speak metaphorically, an average Lithuanian feels homeless, i.e. he / she has not yet found his / her promised land.

The revival of local identities

When the society is torn between nostalgia for the past and future hopes, we can ask: what identities become stronger? Here surveys on the values of the population conducted in 1990 and 1999 are most telling. In both surveys the question was posed: “To which of the enumerated groups would you assign yourself first of all?” 66% of the respondents ascribed themselves to Lithuania in 1990 and only 37.2% in 1999. 25.4% in 1990 and 51.4% in 1999 ascribed themselves to their town or township. The survey repeated in 2004 demonstrates the following distribution:



Identification with Lithuania was stronger in 1989–1991. We can notice that later local identities become more important: the identification with a town or a village in which respondents live acquires more significance than their identification with Lithuania. Thus, the above data show that the old traditional Lithuanian identity is losing its significance and power. The old forms of nationality stop being interesting, and new ones have not been invented yet. This enables us to argue that some kind of void exists: there is no “present moment”. In this void, the possibility of new identities arises. The erosion of the Lithuanian identity has been best exploited by people attempting to establish a Samogitian identity. Samogitia as a named region has been known from the 13th century. For the first time in history Samogitia was mentioned in the Volhynia chronicle, in the description of the 1219 peace treaty of Halych-Volhynia. During the 13th–15th centuries the Lithuanian rulers relinquished Samogitia to the Livonian Order for a few times. During 1411–1795, Samogitia was a county. It was a territorial-administrative unit consisting of the lands and later “volost”. Historical sources emphasized the differences between Lithuanians and Samogitians; they mentioned their different character, language and customs. Currently, we speak of several ethnographic regions in Lithuania but Samogitians, differently from Highlanders (aukštaičiai, dzūkai, suvalkiečiai), have the strongest regional identity. We can also see that currently this regional identity is being exploited most ardently. There exist the Samogitian Parliament, Samogitian Academy and the Association of Samogitian Culture. In 2007, a group entitled “Samogitians have always existed and will always exist” was created. This group attempted to register all Samogitians living in the world.

Moreover, it planned to issue IDs to all who considered themselves Samogitian. Later there was a report that the Samogitian party, which is to defend the honor of Samogitians, would be established. According to the founding document of this party, “Samogitians” national dignity is degraded and the image of Samogitians as uneducated people is formed in Lithuania”.

Let us pay attention to the fact that in the 19th century Lithuanian nationalism, like that of other nations, made its headways arguing that Lithuanianness was degraded and had to be defended. Therefore, we can notice ambitions strong enough to create a regional identity based on political demands. Policies of the European Union support the identification of people with ethno-cultural communities. In this regard, the politicized Samogitian movement has some possibilities to use certain EU institutions for its own objectives. This Samogitian movement can have wider implications. It can be an incentive for other regions to organize culturally and politically and pursue their own goals. It means a serious challenge to the central government. Historically, this process essentially means the restoring of a pre-national state and the return to local identities and traditions. At the same time it is the erosion of the Lithuanian identity as it was conceived by the 19th and 20th century nationalists. Besides local identities we can also notice another process: it is the construction of a broader region comprised of several states.

Search for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL)

In the public life of Lithuania, the idea about a region corresponding to the boundaries of the GDL or Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth receives an increasing attention. It is not a new idea: in Poland, Ukraine and even Belarus this idea has been discussed for quite a while. But why did Lithuanians become more interested in this idea? Of course, it is related to an active foreign policy of Lithuania in the former Soviet republics, Ukraine and Belarus, supported by the US.⁴ Does not this growing interest have deeper roots? Is not it related to the changing Lithuanian identity? It is a transformational state of identity when old forms of identity are unconvincing and new values are still not found.

During the “orange revolution” in the Ukraine, the visit of the Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus and Polish President Aleksandr Kwasniewski to Kiev provoked discussions about the reconstruction of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Commenting on the appearance of the Lithuanian and Polish presidents in Kiev, a Russian political scientist Aleksej Nevzorov warned that the recreation of the Commonwealth is most likely to happen. According to him, Poland with its 38.3 million inhabitants,

⁴ During the broadcast of the Lithuanian radio “Forumas,” to the request to comment on the talks about a region corresponding to the boundaries of the GDL that is supposedly supported by the US administration, the US ambassador in Lithuania Stephan Mull responded: “While Lithuania attempts to support democratic forces in Belarus, Ukraine and in the countries of the region of the Black sea, I often remember achievements and strengths of Lithuania as a multi-national state during the last millennium. The US supports and encourages whole-heartedly such policy of Lithuania. However, I disagree that the goal of such policy is to “soften” the influence of Russia. I think it is in the interest of all of us to support the growth of democracy in as many countries as possible including Russia. Nobody should be expelled or surrounded by hostile forces”. See: <http://www.lrt.lt/news.php?strid=586866&id=733592>.

Lithuania with the 3.5 million and the Ukraine with the 48 million uniting their forces may climb to the “highest league”. In his words, “*What will happen if, according to the well-known scenario of “velvet revolutions”, Belarus (with its 10 million people) and some peripheral parts of Russia (such as the districts of Briansk and Kaliningrad; the latter has 947 000 inhabitants including 420 000 living in the city of Kaliningrad) fall under the jurisdiction of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? In this case, a totally new player appears on the map of Europe and the whole world. A gigantic country located on the crossroads of Europe and Russia with around 100 million inhabitants. This is much more than some European Union “locomotives”: Germany – 82.1 million and France, 59.3 million*” (http://www.apn.ru/?chapter_name=advert&data_id=274&do=view_single). Of course, politicians hurried to deny such political constructions. However, Russian commentators remained scared. The same Nevzorov wrote: “*The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that existed for 226 years (from 1569 to 1795) was always the worst enemy of Russia*” (http://www.apn.ru/?chapter_name=advert&data_id=274&do=view_single).

Let us leave this ideological war and the utopian idea of such state. However, the idea of such region is not utopian. I think that the revival of this region would supply the flailing Lithuanian identity with a new meaning. It is important that the revival of the region of the GDL could resolve the problems of the Lithuanian identity raised in this paper. Lithuanians could find themselves and their identity not in the limitless and difficult to reach Europe but in a smaller, culturally and historically more comfortable region. Secondly, the historical period of the GDL could become the “Golden Age” for Lithuanians and could replace the current “Soviet Paradise lost”. Doubtless, now this vision seems utopian. However, let us take a closer look: a part of the society (it does not matter that it is an elite) is caught up with these ideas. Historians demonstrate that the heritage of the GDL is multi-lingual. Works written in other languages in the Grand Duchy have become a part of the Lithuanian cultural heritage. This wish to escape from a cultural framework defined by the national language can be noticed not only in the sphere of historiography. In his books and articles, Gintaras Beresnevičius talked of the Grand Duchy as the possible space for a new Lithuania⁵. Popularity of his works shows that people love his ideas. Thus, Lithuanians long for identities and spaces different from those inscribed by the 19th century builders of the Lithuanian nation. Therefore, it is rather natural that we look for clues in the heritage of the GDL. Such nostalgia is not an accident. It is related to the enlargement of the European Union. It is obvious that Europe is too big and too differentiated to become equally welcoming and comfortable for everyone (let us not take into account the years of “cold war” when the EU was considered as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union). However, we cannot limit ourselves to a national state itself. The world becomes more global, and horizons of our lives also broaden. Therefore, old multicultural states comprised of several nations become more

⁵ Beresnevičius discussed the above ideas most widely in the following books: Beresnevičius, G. 2002. *Ant laiko ašmenų* [On the Blades of Time]. Vilnius: Aidai; Beresnevičius, G. 2003. *Imperijos darymas. Lietuviškos ideologijos metmenys* [Construction of an Empire. An Outline of the Lithuanian Ideology]. Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla.

relevant for us today. Here we do not speak of the revival of the GDL. We have in mind the revival of a certain region. It can make our current activities meaningful and provide them with some direction. As in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century heroic deeds of the dukes of the pagan Lithuania served as a guide for creators of the Lithuanian nation, currently, the multi-cultural and multi-national GDL of the 16th and 17th centuries could become such guide for us. By the way, it is not only us who long for the constructions of old states destroyed by the epoch of nationalism. Last year an initiative related to the recreation of the Prussian region arose in the German Bundestag that our media did not notice. The Deputy Jorgen Klimke who, in his faction, specialized in the sphere of tourism, asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs Joschke Fischer: “What is the attitude of the Federal Government towards the creation of a Lithuanian-Russian-Polish euro-region that would geographically correspond to the historical region of East Prussia?” Although this question was essentially based on the matters of tourism, its subtext seemed obvious. Therefore, it was not surprising that the Foreign Ministry of Russia reacted to this initiative rather angrily. Of course, individuals of this initiative knew that it was difficult to get a universal support. Ervin Marchewski told to the portal “Russland Aktuell” (<http://www.aktuell.ru/>) that this “small inquiry” was an attempt to prompt the government to participate in the matters of the region more actively. “Somehow I am not a revanchist”, – he emphasized mentioning the necessity to observe the post-war treaties. By the way, 71 deputy of the Bundestag signed this inquiry. This initiative demonstrated not as much the revanchist mood of certain German strata but nostalgia for the old state constructs that had disappeared from the political and cultural map long ago. Thus, we are not alone suffering from nostalgia for the past. It is likely that the enlarging and uniting Europe will be interested in the revival of new regions based on the old historical traditions. It could be attractive to many people since these former historical regions populated by different nations and cultures remind of the contemporary world transformed by the migration processes. Furthermore, with the opening of borders it is not attractive to live according to the old models of nationalism. The old historical constructs supply new forms with the sense of history. It is possible that we live at a time when new regions are being invented and constructed. Similar processes took place in the 19th century when nations – “imagined communities” – were constructed. As a rule, they were historically based on the Middle Ages. Currently, new regions are becoming such “imagined communities” based on the New Age. Of course, it may still be a utopian project. However, at first all projects seem utopian. For instance, who could have thought of the Lithuanian state at the beginning or in the middle of the 19th century? Individuals interested in Lithuanian antiquities were derided by the contemporary “elite”. “Lovers of Lithuania” (litvomanai) seemed strange marginal personas for many people at the time. However, it was these marginal individuals that created the modern Lithuanian nation and the Lithuanian state.

Conclusions

- 1) Sociological data demonstrate that twofold tendencies emerge in the Lithuanian society: on the one hand, nostalgia for the past, idealization of the Soviet life; and, on the other hand, hopes for the future associated not with the East but with the West and European Union.
- 2) Sociological data also show that the national identity and identification with Lithuania are weakening.
- 3) These conditions strengthen local identities and identifications. An attempt to create/recreate a Samogitian identity related to some political goals is noticeable in Lithuania.
- 4) We can observe a different process: an attempt to revive a region corresponding to the boundaries of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.
- 5) Therefore, we can conclude that due to globalization, a national identity is pressured not only from the “above” but also from the “below;” i.e. some alternative models of identity are being offered in relation to local identities or identities corresponding to the territories of several states.
- 6) It is difficult to say at this moment whether these forces will gain a momentum or remain marginal. The article presented only hypotheses that need to be tested in a broader geographical context of Eastern Europe.

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KAS SEKA PO TAUTOS? GALIMI POSTNACIONALIZMO SCENARIJAI VIDURIO RYTŲ EUROPOJE (LIETUVOS ATVEJIS)

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Santrauka

Apmąstomos galimos nacionalizmo transformacijos šiuolaikinėje Lietuvoje. Teigiama, kad Lietuvos tautinei tapatybei didžiausią įtaką turi du veiksniai. Viena vertus, vis stiprėjant vietinėms tapatybėms, pastebimos pastangos atkurti arba sukurti žemaičių tapatybę, kuri turėtų tvirtą politinį pagrindą. Kita vertus, pastebimas ir priešingas procesas: siekiama atkurti tą regioną, kuris atitiktų Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės ribas. Galiausiai straipsnio autorius prieina prie išvados, kad dėl tam tikrų globalizacijos procesų įtakos tautinė tapatybė patiria „spaudimą“ tiek iš „viršaus“, tiek ir iš „apačios“, t. y. alternatyvūs jos tapatybės modeliai neišvengiamai susiejami arba su vietinėmis, arba su regioninėmis tapatybėmis, dėl to nunyksta joms būdingi saviti bruožai.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: regiono konstravimas, Lietuvos Didžioji Kunigaikštystė, vietinės tapatybės, tautinė tapatybė, nacionalizmas.

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