



Opinion Article

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The Polish-Lithuanian Heritage. An Historiographic Problem

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Since the civilized society showed up on Earth's surface, people began to establish contacts and influence each other. Modern states still rely on these interconnections, which affect all political aspects of their everyday life. Here the word "political" should be particularly intended in its initial, broader meaning (from ancient Greek πολιτικός, "politikos" - related to polis life, to its affairs), hence the influences concern fields such as economics, politics in the strict sense, diplomacy, society, citizens' welfare. In the European region, a clear instance can be found in the Polish-Lithuanian cultural and political heritage (specifically in their Commonwealth), shared by four modern countries: Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine [1-5]. Obviously, these countries are affected by their whole historical interactions (especially from 20th century), being moreover geographical neighbours.

However, the Polish-Lithuanian relations first (13th century ca) and then the appearance of the PLC (1569-1795) provide a first, documented proof of active interaction between the aforementioned states, showing where firstly the interactions had place and how they developed. Objectively speaking, the PLC was one of the wealthiest and powerful political entities of its era, although the objectiveness significantly changes - as usual in historical discourse - depending on the taken perspective, thus on narratives applied to this specific history. Here the main approaches are four, one for each nation [5,6].

The most problematic appear to be the Polish and the Lithuanian ones, since in them issues of power - and whatever they implicate - are dealt with in completely different ways. The matter

in question can be, for instance, indirectly found in the terminology used in reference to specific historical events and also to names of certain geographical places. Historians as Timothy Snyder, being aware of the problem and trying to avoid any kind of accuses of historical favoritism, provided for the readers such useful gazetteer (Snyder [12]):

Unfortunately, it would be almost impossible to comprehend in such gazetteers all the existing terminology variants in different languages, so the issue still remains - at some point a choice must be made. However, the simple fact of inserting in an academic work that sort of table indicates the neutral intent of the author.

On the other hand, it is possible to encounter more direct elements of criticism, in which a particular environment is subject of it. This is the case of Poland and other neighbouring powers in Lithuanian narrative [7]. Authors often refer to little importance given to Lithuania in neighbouring countries' chronicles, see Christianization unequivocally as a pretext to conquer new lands, defines its neighbours as "aggressive and colonizers" (Kiaupa Z, Kiaupienė J, Kuncevičius A [7]). However, it is interesting to notice that on the other side, when Lithuania of that time tried and managed to conquer and assimilate principalities of the dissolving Kievan Rus - which will be for centuries part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania - such narration is rather avoided. Furthermore, the Polish perspective often seem to show little attention to other peoples' point of view and perceptions, especially when the relations between these two cultures became stronger and the Kingdom of Poland started to impose its power [8-10].

A prime example can be seen in the double definition of an historical event, namely the “Union of Krewo” or “Act of Krèva”, which stated the first official political cooperation on higher level between Poland and Lithuania. Polish narrative refers to it as a “union” (pol. unia), whereas the Lithuanian one uses the form sutartis, “contract”, then “act”, expressing neutrality and a certain form of detachment, since they considered themselves without a political and military way out during that time. This example reveals how Polish narration was and still is erroneously looking at some historical events in a “good-natured”, underestimating way, not really considering the situation of the other side. Criticism about adopting a “colonizer” attitude by the Kingdom of Poland - since the process of Polonization of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania started having then place - might be taken into account, especially towards Lithuanian and Ukrainian lands [11].

These few examples briefly show to the reader how complex the topic is; nevertheless, such an analysis should be done, revealing both the positive and negative aspects of every narration, in order to use them consequently as an interpretative key to better understand today's relations in Central Eastern Europe. In my next academic steps, I will focus more on Belarusian and Ukrainian narratives, thanks to the availability to sources from each national narrative and such as analytic works on the topic, as indicated in the reference list. The main goal will be outlining and developing an academic research which will serve as a guide-map to Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian societies of the past and of today [12,13].

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