



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

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Lithuania - Repercussions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania? The public perception of the Ukrainian War

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Cultures of History Forum, published: 30.04.2014

DOI: 10.25626/0014

The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on Lithuania.

Recommended Citation

Felix Ackermann: Lithuania - Repercussions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania? The public perception of the Ukrainian War. In: Cultures of History Forum (30.04.2014), DOI: 10.25626/0014

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A former fountain at the Lithuanian Parliament Seimas was redesigned in July 2013. The fountain became a pyramid with a map on each side projecting the historical borders of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania onto today's political borders.^[1] The underlying map of the Grand Duchy is a growing black spot. Its historical lands swell to overlap modern Belarus and Ukraine before finally stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. This was easily read as the Lithuanian government's political statement, trying to point to an imagined historical continuity between the former multi-ethnic Grand Duchy and today's nation state of the Republic of Lithuania. Some critical comments about the involved notion of gigantomania were published back in July 2013, but the map was not changed.

Later, a legend was finished to explain the different periods of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.^[2] During Lithuania's EU Council presidency, it became clear, that the plan to make the Eastern Partnership the major issue on the European agenda, worked, but not the way Lithuanian policy makers intended. Belarus dropped out of the process a long time ago, and its authoritarian leader, Alexander Lukashenka, did not plan to rejoin the club. The Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich decided, after a long zigzag course between strong Russian pressure and weak EU incentives, not to sign the association treaty with the European Union. The summit to sign the European Union Association Agreement in Vilnius on 28-29 November 2014 became a paradoxical event. On one hand, it showed the complete failure of European policy regarding its Eastern neighbours. On the other hand, the historical link between Lithuania and Ukraine, as projected on the pyramid near Seimas, had been established for good and not just because all the major events took place in the newly reconstructed Palace of the Grand Dukes.

When protests on Maidan became mass demonstrations, both Belarusian and Lithuanian media started to follow the event intensively. As neighbouring countries, this extensive media attention stemmed from their proximity to Ukraine, but even more from watching Russia reshape its foreign policy. Russia's policies in what, until recently, had been called "near abroad" would also effect Belarus and Lithuania. As the protests became more intense they also became more present in semi-public spaces in Lithuania. Many people followed the situation on Maidan on espresso-TV-channel^[3]. When violence broke out on Maidan in late February 2014, people in Lithuania did not stop following. Immediately after the first Maidan protesters were shot in January 2014, the Lithuanian parliament announced an official day of national mourning. With the following Russian annexation of Crimea, the most important question in Lithuanian public discourses became how to tackle Russia and its geopolitical ambitions in the region.^[4] Radio stations, newspapers, TV channels, public discussions, even the Lithuanian presidential elections have been overshadowed by the war that started in eastern Ukraine in spring 2014.^[5]

Triggering the past. Memory as a political issue

Memory, in Lithuania's active public perception of the Ukrainian crisis, against a backdrop of dramatically deteriorating relations between the EU and Russia, is a political issue that will have an impact on both Lithuania's geopolitical position and its economy. For example, until recently, the prices for Russian natural gas paid by Ukraine and Lithuania were some of the highest among all European gas

rates dictated by Gazprom.^[6] The awareness of the contrast between the Russian methods of transnational media wars, logistical support of irredentist partisanship, and the cynical official line of foreign policy derives not just from fear of next winter's higher heating bills. It triggers the most important individual and social memories related to the post WWII and post 1991 eras. Within the individual context, many Lithuanians observe the Ukrainian events as an affair they may easily experience in the Baltics again. The current situation reminds many Lithuanians of the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940. The narrative of the peaceful Euromaidan protestors overthrown by state violence also reminded Lithuanian society of its own victims in the struggle for independence in 1990 and 1991. The fighting between unarmed civilians protesting state aggression and armed troops on Maidan in February 2014 was perceived as a parallel to the events of January 1991,^[7] when more than a dozen of Lithuanians died at the Vilnius TV tower. Television images from Kiev triggered even deeper layers of memory. Some recalled Lithuania's 1940 incorporation into the Soviet Union after only approximately twenty years of independence. Commentators highlighted the striking coincidence in time, noting the appearance of a Russian threat, posed again, after two decades of state independence. The traumatic events of the post-war years, when nationalist partisans fought against Soviet SMERSH units (Spetsyalnye Metody Razoblacheniya Shpyonov; Special Methods of Spy Detection) in a civil war were also actively recalled in social memory.

How Ukraine crisis fits into official Lithuanian state narrative

The membership in both EU and NATO has an important symbolical impact on the perception of the situation in the region. At the beginning of the Lithuanian EU presidency in 2013, the Lithuanian president and former EU commissar Dalia Grybauskaitė hoisted two Lithuanian flags in front of the classicist estate in Vilnius. Today, a Lithuanian, European and NATO flag fly in front of the palace.^[8] The nearby green bridge is a Soviet construction with four sculptures representing Soviet youth, Soviet workers, Soviet peasants and Soviet soldiers. The bridge and its statues are a recurring source of public debate over whether to preserve some Soviet heritage in public spaces. In the spring of 2014 it was bannered with the herb of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the NATO flag as if to show the iron statues "the context of their current presence"^[9] in Vilnius. There are many other occasions when frightening memories of historical experiences became co-memorized in the Lithuanian public. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine are perceived as a realistic danger for the Baltics as well.^[10] Newspapers advised readers on how to prepare for a possible war. Politicians discussed the threat of Russian tanks near the bordering Kaliningrad region. Experiences under Stalinist rule are retold among people in their discussions about the current political situation.^[11]

The ongoing military conflict in eastern Ukrainian promotes the narrative of the independence of Lithuania in 1990 and 1991 gained as a result of Lithuanian society's resistance to Russian oppression. Both, the peaceful protest of the civil society at the Euro-Maidan, which began in December 2013, and the violence that broke out in February 2014 fit into this official Lithuanian state narrative. The ongoing conflict reflects the national renaissance movement, atgimimas, which found power in peaceful mass meetings and the long-term occupation of public spaces. It also evokes the heroic narrative of Lithuania's partisan resistance in the second half of the 1940s.

In regard to the connection between private memory (Gedächtnis) and more institutionalized forms of memory (Erinnerung), I would argue that the Ukrainian events are so present in Lithuania because of two significant current generation shifts: 1) The generation that still remembers the immediate post-war years, when the Forest Brothers (Lithuanian partisans) opposed the Stalinisation of Lithuania, are

passing away. Their testimonies were added to the public memory reservoir during the last twenty years by such institutions as the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Regimes in Lithuania and the Museum of Genocide Victims in the former KGB building in Vilnius.^[12] The Ukrainian events legitimise and update this narrative in Lithuania. 2) Today, the events of 1991 have to be told to a new generation born after the fall of the Soviet Union.^[13] For them, the late Soviet experience and WWII are rather abstract events with less meaning and presence than for those who grew up during the Cold War.

Conclusion

Many Lithuanians were united with Ukraine in a transnational media space due to a highly active public perception of the ongoing war. Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing struggle in eastern Ukraine are seen differently in Lithuania than in neighbouring Belarus. Despite Lithuania's NATO and EU membership, the crisis in the Ukraine renews co-memorized narratives of Russian occupation.

The last decade has been one of intensive studies of memory in the region. Many dimensions of memory politics have been discussed and brought together with empirical studies on the local, communal, generational and institutional level. From my point of view, it is problematic to talk about memory wars.^[14] What we can see is memory instrumentalized as part of the ongoing media war in Ukraine.^[15] Both parties abuse history as a propaganda stunt. Memory is at the core of political choices to be made, as in regard to 8 or 9 May –as you wish. Memory is reshaped by ongoing events, which in turn, change the public perception of those events.

In essence, memory war is not a struggle for the past. As it was emphatically pointed out, memory is constantly reconstructed in the present context and theoretically memory is always a social projection of future visions onto the imagined canvas we call the past.

Today in Ukraine it is evident that future is not a virtual issue or something abstract. It is about decisions of global importance, active social engineering, and the ongoing negotiation of self-images constructed by societies at large and on a smaller scale as well. Thus, memory is not the core of the Lithuanian-Belarusian perspective of the current undeclared Ukraine war but does express the political visions of different sides of the conflict whose narratives are difficult to merge. We need to more actively address the dimension of the future in our analysis of memory– both in the Baltics and in Eastern Europe. We have to make sure, that we don't analyse memory for the sake of a better understanding of the past. Rather, we analyse memory to understand today's world, to give our own judgement of present times, and to develop a clearer vision for the future of the societies we are part of.

Footnotes

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