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**REGION**  
*and*  
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## **VILNIUS REGION AS A HISTORICAL REGION**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In relation to the area of the Vilnius Region, it was a territory inhabited by the ethnic Baltic tribes and after that it was under the influence of the Polish and the East Slavic. After the Polish and Lithuanian unions this region became as multicultural territory which was a disputable area of Polish and Lithuanian influences and also territorial affiliation in 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nowadays, the Vilnius Region is a territory divided between Lithuania and Belarus. Many changes in political affiliation during last ten centuries caused that now it is still a region inhabited by many different nations: Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Belarusian, Jewish etc. An existence of so many nations in this area caused lot of conflicts but also resulted in some forms of cooperation. During many years Lithuania and Poland were one country and lots of mutual historical facts are perceived in a totally different way by both sides. In 2004 Lithuania became a member of European Union which caused that part of historical Vilnius Region to come under UE law. It has changed a situation of national minorities in this territory.

### **2. WHAT IS A HISTORICAL REGION?**

Many concepts of regions, which were also created by geographers, result from the size of the Earth. Its surface is a large area and scientists tried to break it into smaller parts which are known as regions (Koter and Suliborski, 1994). Region is a spatial concept which refers to a separate territory; it is a relatively uniform area with many features and internal connections which distinguish it from surrounding areas (Rykiel, 2001; Baczwarow and Suli-

borski, 2002). As Koter noticed, none of the bigger or medium-sized states is homogeneous. States consist of different territorial components which have several combinations of geographical, historical, cultural, economic and organizational features. In literature which is connected with regions, it is possible to find some factors which stimulate creations of different divisions, for example: the physico-geographical, historical, ethnic, religious, other cultural factors, the settlement-communicational factor with a particular regard to a focal centre, socio-economic and administrative factor (Koter, 1995).

Historical region is a territory with inhabitants of the area who are connected by collective memory which refers to the past of the region. The historical community of this area is a basic standard of identification of historical regions. The origin of this kind of regions can be found in historical divisions of the territory, from the beginning of primary structures of tribal organizations. Nowadays historical regions are parts of bigger territories, for example part of the country which emerged during unification process (Baczwarow and Suliborski, 2002). Historical regions refer to traditional spatial systems – former political divisions. Inhabitants of the region feel some kind of separation from the rest of the area and considered the region as their motherland (Rykiel, 2001).

In some countries, regions were distinguished by early historical traditions, divisions into separate, autonomous, territorial entities with their centers of power. In early Medieval Europe, areas of modern countries possessed visible diversity. Low density of population, poor opportunity to contact other groups caused isolation of culture and social life. Some groups were shaped autonomously in closed territorial communities (Koter, 1995).

### 3. LOCATION OF VILNIUS REGION

Nowadays Vilnius Region (lit. *Vilniaus kraštas*) is a part of south-eastern Lithuania and north-western Belarus. Vilnius Region is divided into two parts by the European Union border. In the past this region was inhabited by the ethnic Baltic tribes and was a part of Lithuania but it came under East Slavic and Polish cultural influences (Kiaupa et al., 2008).

Definition of territorial extent of Vilnius Region is quite difficult. It is possible to say that Vilnius Region is a historical Central Lithuania (Fig. 1) which became a part of Poland in 1922 (Kiaupa, 2002; Kowalski, 2008). It should be noted that this area was connected with settlement of the Catholic

population which declared Polish nationality in 20<sup>th</sup> century (with a few Lithuanian enclaves: Varėna, Švenčionys, Gierviaty and also Vilnius).



Fig. 1 Vilnius Voivodeship in 1922

Source: <http://rzecz-pospolita.com/>

However, the range of influence of Vilnius was much wider (Fig. 2). When this area belonged to the Russian Empire, it was a territory of the Vilnius Province which was much bigger than Central Lithuania. During the interwar period, Vilnius District was divided into 2 voivodeships: Novahrudak and Vilnius which was much stronger and became as a capital for both administrative units. After World War II large part of the Vilnius Region became a part of Grodno District. All these territories were connected by similarity of historical events and cultural conditions. Throughout history this region comprised 4 territorial areas: Vilnius Voivodeship, Novahrudak Voivodeship, Vilnius Province and Grodno District (Kowalski, 2008).



Fig. 2. Vilnius Region against the contemporary state borders

A – narrowest version, B – widest version

Source: authors' own elaboration based on: M. Kowalski (2008)

Historical Lithuania was divided into (Fig. 3):

- Aukštaitija (Literally Highlands) – area in northeastern Lithuania which also comprised some territories of southwestern Latvia and north-western Belarus, with the biggest city Panevėžys,
- Samogitia (Žemaitija, Literally Lowlands) – territory in western Lithuania, with capital city in Telšiai, but the largest city was Šiauliai,
- Suvalkija (Sūduva or Suvalkija) – the smallest ethnographic region in the southwest of Lithuania, with capital city in Marijampolė, but the largest city was Kaunas,
- Mažoji Lietuva (Lithuania Minor) – region at the Baltic sea coast which included territories in Kaliningrad Oblast, with the largest city Klaipėda.



Fig. 3. Historical regions in the current territory of Lithuania  
 Source: authors' own elaboration based on <http://www.wiw.pl/>

– Dzūkija (Dzūkija or Dainava) – historical region in the southeast of Lithuania and also included territories of Belarus with capital city in Alytus, but the largest city was Vilnius (Kiaupa et al., 2008).

#### 4. SHORT HISTORY OF THE VILNIUS REGION

Historians supposed that first settlers appeared in the Vilnius Region as early as in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. It was caused by very beneficial natural factors – location in river's valleys, forest areas, etc. (Kłos, 1923; Remer, 1990). First primitive wooden settlements existed in this area in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. In the Middle Ages, with the beginning of Lithuania's statehood, the Vilnius Region became a part of some kind of tribal association (Ochmański, 1982). This region was inhabited by the ethnic, pagan, Baltic tribes which were connected with pagan cult of nature and celestial bodies (Kiaupa et al., 2008). At the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when Teutonic Order was established, Lithuania started an expansion in the south and east, which

means that Vilnius Region became as a part of the Lithuanian state during the unification of the Lithuanian tribes. Slavic agronomical culture of the Vilnius Region was on much higher level than Lithuanian hunting culture and Slavic population had an unquestionable superiority (Kłos, 1923). Since the 14<sup>th</sup> century this region was under permanent East Slavic and Polish cultural influences. Polish merchants and craftsmen were arriving to Vilnius and others cities (Krajewski, 2007).

In 1385 in Kreva, Poland and Lithuania established a union, which resulted from the threat of Teutonic Knights. Władysław Jagiełło, Grand Duke of Lithuania, took the Polish crown, married Polish Queen – Jadwiga, and became a King of Poland. Incorporated union which connected both countries allowed Lithuania to keep national separateness but Lithuanian authorities had to accept Polish monarchs as their rulers (Sobczyński, 2005). Jagiełło contributed to the Baptism of Lithuania which took place in 1387. One of the consequences of the Polish-Lithuanian union was the beginning of massive migration of Poles especially to the Vilnius Region, which was the most developed area in Lithuania at that time. In 1413, the union was confirmed in Horodło and Vilnius Voivodeship was created. It was a time when Polish and Lithuanian cultures started to infiltrate each other without any obstacles (Ochmański, 1982). The 15<sup>th</sup> century was the time, when Vilnius was established as real Lithuanian capital city of the extensive territory of Lithuania. The Jagaila dynasty, which was attached with the Vilnius Region as a motherland, promoted Vilnius in rivalry with Cracow – the capital city of Poland at that time (Kłos, 1923).

The 16<sup>th</sup> century was a time of fast growth of Vilnius and development of the whole region. King Sigismund I the Old supported trade and industry. In Vilnius and also in the whole region, there were many hospitals, schools, churches and industrial institutions created (Sawicz, 2003, Remer 1990). The second part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was called the “Golden Age” for this region because kings Sigismund Augustus and Stefan Batory with their entourages stayed in Vilnius many times. It caused that Vilnius city became one of the largest cities in Europe at that time (it had more than 100,000 people). Development of the city was accompanied by a very conducive location – trails leading to Klaipeda, Kiev, Moscow and Cracow crossed in this area. In addition to this, many families like: Sapiecha, Pac, Chodkiewicz and Radziwiłł competed in this area, which led to building many beautiful palaces and temples (Kiaupa et al., 2007).



Fig. 4. Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after real union in Lublin in 1569

However, in 1569 Poland and Lithuania initiated a real union in Lublin and established the Coat of Arms of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with the capital city in Warsaw – it means that Vilnius Region started losing its importance in a country (Kłos, 1923).

The 17<sup>th</sup> century was for Vilnius Region, as well as for the whole territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a time of misfortunes and disasters. In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, during Swedish invasion many people lost their lives and almost all settlements were burnt. Only in Vilnius 20,000 people were killed and fire, which lasted for 8 days, destroyed almost all buildings. After these events famine and pestilence started in the Vilnius Region, which changed the city into cemetery (Remer, 1990).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the North War also took place in this region. It caused a lot of devastation. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century government gave a lot of special laws to Jews, which resulted in massive migration movements. Vilnius was even

called “Jerusalem of the North” at that time (Chlebowski et al., 1882). In 1775 after the 3<sup>rd</sup> partition of Poland, the Vilnius Region became part of Russia, which initiated Russification of Poles and Lithuanians (Sawicz, 2003).

In 1812, Napoleon's army marched through the Vilnius Region. Napoleon even created Temporary Commission of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania but this was only short term liberation of the region. In December 1812, Russian army entered the city again (Chlebowski et al., 1882; Wisner 1999; Sawicz, 2003). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many patriotic movements, which were connected with both communities – Polish and Lithuanian, were born in Vilnius Region. In 1863, the January Uprising started in the Vilnius Region. Both Polish and Lithuanian sides took part in the fighting but the uprising was brutally crushed by the Tsar's governor Mikhail Muraviov, who in consequence initiated repressions for inhabitants of the whole region (Łossowski, 2001).

After the beginning of World War I, the Lithuanian activists passed a declaration of loyalty to Russia in Vilnius. During the World War I, Vilnius Region was under the occupation — first German and then Russian. In 1919 Polish army liberated Vilnius Region but not for long. During Polish-Bolshevik war Vilnius Region was again under Russian occupation (Sawicz 2003). K. Górski describes this period: “persecution of Poles in Lithuania in 1918-21 was a short-term violence, but in later years it became as systematic, deliberate and tenacious action, which was subordinated to legislation and administrative practice” (Kurcz, 2005).

Polish army liberated almost the whole region except Vilnius which belonged to Lithuania. Poles could not accept that they lost the Vilnius Region which was an important part of Polish policy (Kowalski, 2008). Marshal Piłsudski wanted to negotiate with the Lithuanians about creating a federal state. However, the Lithuanian side did not want to negotiate with the Poles. Piłsudski did not want to act against the League of Nations so he had the rebellion in Vilnius initiated by General Lucjan Żeligowski. In October 1920 Żeligowski started the rebellion and created a new country – Central Lithuania with capital city in Vilnius. Two years later Polish government adopted an act which incorporated the Vilnius Region to Poland (Eberhardt, 1998; Sawicz, 2003). The Lithuanian side never agreed with this fact and considered this area as occupied by the Poles (Kurcz, 2005).

During the interwar period Lithuanians who lived in the Vilnius Region blamed Polish authorities for closing schools with Lithuanian language and persecuting the Lithuanian language in the liturgy in churches (Stręk, 2006).



During the World War II Vilnius Region was under the occupation sequentially: Russian, German. It was also a time when Polish Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) operated in this region, which led to liberation of that region but with cooperation with Russians. As a result, Vilnius Region became a part of USSR until 1991, when Lithuania proclaimed independence (Łossowski, 2001).



Fig. 5. Vilnius in the Polish administrative structure in 1930

After World War II, Poland and Soviet Union signed a special repatriation agreement which caused the Poles who inhabited Vilnius Region to be

displaced into Poland in 1945–1946 (Sawicz, 2006). It means that ethnic composition of this region was completely changed.

In the 1950s Russians wanted to weaken importance of the Church in the Vilnius Region. From the 1970s the Lithuanian national movement started developing. This began aspirations of independence for the Lithuanian State. The 1980s were a period, when the manifestation of Lithuanian dissatisfaction with Russian politics escalated. In 1988 the Lithuanian national symbols were restored (Jackiewicz, 2005). It should be noted that the Poles who inhabited the Vilnius Region wanted only autonomy, which caused conflict with the Lithuanians. The Poles supported USSR and even in 1990 they declared Polish Autonomy in Sołeczники, which aspired to function as part of USSR. Lithuanian authorities still cannot forgive Polish minority this fact. After declaration of Lithuanian independence the Vilnius Region became divided by the border between Belarus and Lithuania (Kurcz, 2005). In 2004 Lithuania became a member of the European Union and NATO.

## **5. VILNIUS REGION – NOWADAYS**

Vilnius Region is an area where many cultures have always coexisted: Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Jewish, Karaite etc. Multicultural history made this region an unusual mixture of different religions and cultural heritage. Local community uses more than one language in communication, which causes many conflicts, even in daily life. One of the biggest problems in this region is the neighborhood of Poles and Lithuanians. In the past it was one country and people did not recognize their nationality for many years because the nationalistic movements did not exist (Leśniewska, 2009).

The history of mutual relations between the Polish, Belarusian and Lithuanian nations is still full of interethnic relations in the Vilnius Region. Local Poles arouse suspicion and Lithuanian authorities discriminate Polish national minority in comparison with other minorities. A similar policy of Belarusian authorities, perhaps not so apparent from historical point of view, but is still conducted (Żołędowski, 2003).

The situation of Poles in the Belarusian part of the Vilnius Region is completely different. It is an area which still exists outside of European Union. Belarus is a country, which does not function as a constitutional state of law. Situation of Poles in the Vilnius Region in Belarus is used for many political games. Both, Lithuanian and Belarusian sides of the Vilnius Region

are inhabited by more than 500 thousands Poles (Tab. 1). In the Lithuanian part of this region it is possible to notice some kind of national movements. Despite many disputes, Polish organizations and institutions can exert an impact on Polish community. In Lithuania a Polish political party exists (AWPL – Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania). It usually wins approximately 3% of the votes (Kowalski, 2008).

Table 1. The ethnic composition of present administrative districts of the Vilnius Region in 1999 and 2001

| Nation     | Vilnius District (2001) |      | Grodno District (1999) |      | Together  |      |
|------------|-------------------------|------|------------------------|------|-----------|------|
|            | thousands               | %    | thousands              | %    | thousands | %    |
| Belarusian | 30,5                    | 3,6  | 738,2                  | 62,3 | 768,7     | 37,8 |
| Lithuanian | 466,3                   | 54,9 | 3,0                    | 0,3  | 469,3     | 23,1 |
| Polish     | 216                     | 25,4 | 294,1                  | 24,8 | 510,1     | 25,1 |
| Russian    | 98,8                    | 11,6 | 119,2                  | 10,1 | 218       | 10,7 |
| Others     | 38,5                    | 4,5  | 30,1                   | 2,5  | 68,6      | 3,4  |
| Total      | 850,1                   | 100  | 1184,6                 | 100  | 2034,7    | 100  |

Source: M. Kowalski (2008).

Nowadays, many historical facts are interpreted completely different by the Poles and the Lithuanians. For the Polish, a union with Lithuania was a great period of history, but for the Lithuanians it more like an occupation. Many Poles regarded Lithuania as their motherland, despite the fact that they felt Polish. The greatest Polish poet A. Mickiewicz began one of his books with the words: “Oh Lithuania, thou art my motherland (...)”. In the Vilnius Region Józef Piłsudski, one of the biggest Polish patriots and the chief commander of Polish army was born. These are only a few examples of this kind of behavior. In Lithuania people still remember and cannot accept the rebellion of General Żeligowski, whose operation caused an annexation of Vilnius Region into Poland during the interwar period.

W. Meysztowicz says, that “We were all Lithuanians: in the palaces, in the manors, and cottages, no one bothered to be a Pole. Belonging to one of two nations which were in the Commonwealth, was widely accepted. It was not prohibited for a Lithuanian to be a Pole, or for a Pole to be a Lithuanian. Languages were mixed, but did not divide people” (Brodowski 2000).

Many great Poles were connected with the Vilnius Region, including poets Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Józef Ignacy Krasicki, Czesław

Miłosz, Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, composer Stanisław Moniuszko, politicians Józef Piłsudski and Joachim Lelewel, painter Ferdynand Ruszyc or photographer Jan Bułhak. All of them defined themselves as Poles but they felt the connection with Vilnius and considered Vilnius Region as their homeland (Kudirko, 2007).

Nowadays Poles are considered as a national minority in Lithuania and after 2004 Lithuania became a member of the European Union. This fact caused that Lithuania had to sign a lot of international laws which protect national minorities. This should improve the situation of national minorities in the western part of the Vilnius Region. Nowadays, the biggest problems of Polish minority in the Vilnius Region include: spelling of Polish names, which must be spelled in Lithuanian language without Polish letters, recovery of lands (which is almost impossible because of Lithuanian bureaucracy), Polish names of streets and places and education in Polish schools.

## 6. CONCLUSION

1. Wider range of Vilnius Region means that this region is an ethnic and religious borderland divided by the Lithuanian and Belarusian border (which is also an external border of the European Union).

2. Location on the borderland of Lithuania and Belarus and proximity of Poland and Russia causes infiltration of many cultures.

3. Cultural separateness is caused by existence of Belarusian and Lithuanian ethnic borderland and also Catholic and Orthodox religious borderland.

4. In history Vilnius Region played a special role for Poland and Lithuania (for Lithuania, Vilnius was always a historical capital city but for Poland it was a special area where Polish University existed).

5. Position of Polish national minority is still strong and is best described by the phrase: "We have never left anywhere, Poland has left us" (Winnicki, 2005).

6. Vilnius Region has a rich history, which shows a lot of conflicts between nations inhabiting this area (the most spectacular example is the Żeligowski rebellion).

7. Inhabitants of this region have a strong awareness of belonging.

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