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## POLISH-LITHUANIAN RHETORIC IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

**Abstract.** This study examines how Polish-Lithuanian political myths, stereotypes, and historical phobias are reproduced and transformed in contemporary media discourse. Although many of these narratives originate in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nation-building processes, they continue to shape rhetorical strategies, identity boundaries, and perceptions of the “Other” in both states. The research employs an inductive methodological framework informed by Abdelal et al. (2009), Allan (2016), and Hopf (2005), treating media discourse as an intersubjective site where collective identities are constructed and contested. Inductive content analysis identifies recurring lexical choices and evaluative patterns, while inductive discourse analysis reconstructs broader narrative logics and ideological oppositions without imposing predefined categories. The empirical material comprises Polish and Lithuanian media texts published between December 2010 and March 2014, a period marked by intensified debate following protests against Lithuania’s amended Education Act. Approximately 600 media items from major Polish broadcasters and Lithuanian- and Polish-language newspapers form the dataset. The findings demonstrate that historical myths, stereotypes, and anxieties – such as fears of occupation, accusations of chauvinism, and competing narratives of victimhood – persist in twenty-first-century rhetoric, resurfacing particularly in moments of political tension. These discursive patterns illuminate the enduring role of media in reproducing asymmetrical national identities within Polish-Lithuanian relations.

*Keywords:* Polish-Lithuanian relations, media discourse, national identity, stereotypes, political myths, discourse analysis.

Polish-Lithuanian relations are periodically governed by myths, stereotypes, and phobias that manifest themselves in the media and in statements made by public figures. Each myth, stereotype, or phobia has its own origins and history. Frozen during the Soviet occupation and the period of the Polish People’s Republic, they resurfaced in the new reality of the 1990s. At that time, both Poland and Lithuania lacked a new form of identification and a reliable analysis of the neighbouring states and nations. The leaders of the two states returned to earlier policies: Poland to the Jagiellonian and

Giedroyc concepts, and Lithuania to those pursued in the interwar period. It appears that, in establishing new relations, both states failed to take into account that, after forty-five years within the Soviet sphere, they were no longer the countries they had been before the Second World War. The attempt to seek a new sphere of normality in relations between the states was halted by a barrier of phobias, myths, and stereotypes. Moreover, the clash between the nationalism of the small Lithuanian nation and that of the large Polish nation created an asymmetry that hindered the normalisation of bilateral relations.

Drawing on the existing catalogue of adjectives (Buchowski, 2006, pp. 229, 281) used by Poles and Lithuanians to describe one another, I examine whether nineteenth-century political myths, stereotypes, phobias, and complexes are visible in the media rhetoric of both states in the twenty-first century. Or perhaps these relations are, in everyday life, free from fears, and only occasionally, for the purposes of an election campaign, do politicians reach for topics that are tried-and-tested and always capable of sparking heated debate? In any case, the issue of myths and stereotypes in the rhetoric between states and nations does exist, and constitutes an interesting subject of research not only in political science, but also in sociology, linguistics, and psychology.

## **Research Method**

The choice of methods applied in this study stems from the assumption that media discourse and its rhetoric constitute an essential component of collective identity formation. Myths, stereotypes, and various forms of collective anxiety or phobia are integral parts of how communities perceive the “Other”. Consequently, the analysis of media narratives – both their explicit content and their implicit rhetorical structures – provides insight into how nations construct and reproduce identity boundaries in public communication.

The methodological framework follows the approaches outlined in Abdelal et al. (2009), Bentley B. Allan (2016), and Ted Hopf (2005). Abdelal and his colleagues identify several principal methods used in identity research, including surveys, content analysis, discourse analysis, and ethnography, while also adding experiments and cognitive mapping as emerging, complementary tools (Abdelal et al., 2009, p. 9). Allan (2016) distinguishes three empirical sources of identity data – objective, subjective, and inter-subjective – assigning demographic analysis to objective sources, survey research to subjective sources, and content, ethnographic, and discourse

analysis to intersubjective sources (Bentley, 2016, p. 8). He further classifies open surveys, ethnography, and discourse analysis as inductive methods and argues that inductive discourse analysis is particularly well suited for studying state or collective identity because it allows texts to “tell everything they have to say” without imposing predefined interpretive categories (Bentley, 2016, p. 11).

In line with Hopf’s assertion that discourse reflects collective identity, shaped by both domestic debates and the wider political environment (Hopf, 2005, p. 226), this study applies inductive content analysis and inductive discourse analysis to the media rhetoric used in Poland and Lithuania. Content analysis serves to identify recurring lexical choices, terms, and evaluative patterns, whereas discourse analysis seeks to reconstruct the broader narrative logics, oppositions, and identity positions articulated in the media. Both methods were employed inductively, following Allan’s recommendations (2016, p. 12), ensuring that categories were generated from the material itself rather than imposed *a priori*. This approach allows the identification of the myths, stereotypes, and rhetorical patterns through which the Polish and Lithuanian media construct each other as “Others” in public discourse.

The empirical material covers the period December 2010 to March 2014, beginning with the protest in Warsaw against the amendment to Lithuania’s Law on Education, an event widely reported in the Polish media. The frequency of publications on “Poles in Lithuania” increased markedly thereafter. A search of the TVN24 archive yields 163 items, more than 100 of which appeared after December 2010, while the TVP archive contains 210 items, approximately 180 published after the protests. Although 100–180 items over four years may appear modest in absolute terms, the increase is significant when compared with earlier periods, during which only a single article per year was sometimes published.

The Lithuanian research material comprises approximately 500 articles published in Lithuanian-language press and in the Polish-language press of the Polish minority in Lithuania. These texts constitute the basis for the qualitative reconstruction of the rhetorical strategies, identity narratives, and discursive mechanisms present in media communication.

## **A Brief Historical Introduction**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the political struggle between the “old Lithuanians” and the “new Lithuanians” over the shape of the future Lithuanian state became the leading topic in all newspapers pub-

lished in Lithuania, and was widely discussed in Poland. Michał Jagiełło, in two volumes (Jagiełło, 2010, 2011), compiled and presented these ongoing debates in an exhaustive manner. On the basis of these materials, we see that the Polish-Lithuanian and Lithuanian-Lithuanian discussions involved contemporary intellectuals such as Henryk Sienkiewicz, Eliza Orzeszkowa, Michał Römer, and many others. The Poles and the “old Lithuanians” wished for the rebirth of Lithuania together with Poland, whereas the “young Lithuanians” sought to create a nationally homogeneous Lithuanian state with Vilnius as its capital. When, at the end of the First World War, Lithuania proclaimed the Act of the Re-establishment of the State of Lithuania, and in early 1919 elected Antanas Smetona (Jakubavičienė, 2016) as president, while in Poland power was taken over by Józef Piłsudski, the debate concerning the shape of both states shifted to the political arena. Disagreement over future coexistence, fear of the Polish “occupier”, and a lack of understanding of the new Lithuanian national political elite contributed to the emergence of antagonisms. Educated inhabitants of towns and the surrounding nobility (“old Lithuanians”) were mostly supporters of the idea of a modern nation rather than the ethnic nationalism proposed by the then young Lithuanian elite and national Lithuania. Therefore, the Polish army was welcomed as “their own”, and Vilnius together with the Vilnius region was incorporated into Poland. Lithuanians were unable to forgive Poles for the loss of their capital. Diplomatic relations were severed. In Lithuania, with its provisional capital in Kaunas, over the course of twenty years there grew the image of the Pole as an occupier, a traitor, a criminal. Vilnius, meanwhile, became shrouded in mythical tales of the city of Gediminas oppressed by Poles, of the forced denationalisation of the Lithuanians living there, of the great capital of Grand Duke Vytautas and its fall under the Polish eagle. Mythologisation was interrupted by the Second World War, and the occupation of these territories by the Soviet Union placed an “iron curtain” between Poland and Lithuania (Milerytė-Japertienė, 2014), which became “perforated” in the 1980s and finally broken after the collapse of the USSR.

More than two decades ago, Poland and Lithuania resumed diplomatic relations, and in 1994 signed the Treaty on Friendly Relations and Good-Neighbourly Cooperation (Monitor Polski, 1994). Close cooperation between intellectual and political elites in the early 1980s and 1990s gave hope for good and fruitful collaboration in the future. Pursuing the Giedroyc doctrine, Poland renounced claims to former lands and, wishing to distance itself from the USSR/Russian border, strongly supported not only

Lithuania's aspirations for independence from the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, the closer Lithuania came to regaining independence, the more loudly the issue of Vilnius and the Vilnius region returned, along with fears of once again losing the capital to Poland. With the resumption of relations, the old myths and phobias shaped in the interwar period also resurfaced, including those concerning Polonised Lithuanians. Professor Zigmąs Zinkevičius wrote as follows in the early 1990s: "A huge role in the destruction of the Lithuanian language in the Vilnius region was played by the long period during which this region was separated from Lithuania in the interwar period. At that time, the Polish administration conducted an open policy of persecuting the Lithuanian language. Particularly severe were the years of the war and the first period after its end, when White Polish partisans killed people who spoke Lithuanian. (Koprowski, 2009)" This met with a negative reaction from the Lithuanian intellectual, émigré, writer and poet Tomas Venclova<sup>1</sup>, who wrote in an open letter to Lithuanians and Poles in Lithuania, among other things: "I am truly horrified by the voices of Lithuanians who demand the closing of Polish schools, the liquidation of folk-art ensembles, who oppose the legitimate demands for cultural autonomy in areas where the Polish population predominates, who forbid the carrying of the white-and-red flag alongside the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian ones during major demonstrations in Vilnius, who publicly compare Piłsudski to Hitler – something not only mortally offensive to Poles, but also incredibly foolish. (Koprowski, 2009)" Venclova's reaction shows how greatly the attitudes of Lithuanians in emigration differ from those who were raised on the myths of the interwar period. Naturally, one cannot generalise. Myths about Polonised Lithuanians appeared quite frequently in the statements of Lithuanian activists up until the mid-1990s, and were clearly heard in Poland. Later they fell silent, probably because Poland was once again needed by Lithuania – this time to achieve membership in NATO and the European Union. Poland assisted. The goal was achieved, and Lithuanian complexes, phobias, myths, and stereotypes did not disappear, but returned with great resonance both in Poland and Lithuania, helping to revive Polish stereotypes about Lithuanians. This occurred after the first protest in Poland concerning the rights of the Polish minority in Lithuania in 2010 – specifically against the new Education Act in Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija, 2011). Let trace the most important rhetoric on the Polish and Lithuanian sides and look for myths, stereotypes, phobias, and complexes within it.

## Case Studies and Discursive Analysis

On 11 December 2010, a picket in defence of the rights of the Polish minority in Lithuania was held in front of the Lithuanian Embassy in Poland. Media reports<sup>2</sup> showed the slogans and banners displayed by the protesters. Two slogans of particular relevance to this analysis appeared: “Lithuanian chauvinism” and “elder brother”. The protesters accused the Lithuanian authorities of national chauvinism, which they regard as a negative characteristic of Lithuanians. The same attribute is also found in the table compiled by K. Buchowski (Buchowski, 2006, p. 1). The second slogan, addressed to the Polish authorities, suggested that they were acting as an overly indulgent “elder brother”. Demands for respect for the rights of the Polish minority in Lithuania expressed by admonishing Lithuanians as “younger brothers” amount to a political burning of bridges between the two states. This is because the expression is degrading to Lithuanians: the “elder brother” may admonish or punish the “younger” at any time, whereas the “younger” cannot take any decisions without the consent of the “elder”, rendering him dependent on Poland. Although in 2015 the Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, when extending congratulations to Poland on the occasion of Independence Day, referred to Poles as brothers himself, his statement was devoid of any undertones of superiority or inferiority of either nation (Michalak, 2015). It was simply a designation of a fraternal nation and was made three years after the most significant verbal clashes between Poland and Lithuania since the early twentieth century.

The issue of defending the rights of the Polish minority is the central theme of every debate between Polish and Lithuanian politicians and publicists. Piotr Zychowicz, then a commentator for *Rzeczpospolita*, in his article “Komorowski na Litwie: między sentymentami a Realpolitik (Zychowicz, 2015)” (“Komorowski in Lithuania: Between Sentiment and Realpolitik”), presents several stereotypes and discusses how, in the Polish view, Lithuanians perceive Poland, and how some Poles perceive Lithuania. An example of the Polish perception of Lithuania is President Bronisław Komorowski’s sentiment towards Lithuania rooted in the era of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the regret over the end of “Jagiellonian cooperation”. The author addresses Lithuanians, encouraging them not to fear, for Poland has no imperial ambitions towards Lithuania and has no intention of Polonising or annexing its neighbour. These first two expressions indeed frequently appear in statements by Polish politicians or representatives of the Polish minority in Lithuania as nostalgia for the fruitful cooperation between the two states. They seem to forget, however,

that contemporary Lithuanians constitute an ethnic nation, not a political one, as was the case several centuries ago. Many Lithuanians react to such sentiments as to yet another attempt at occupation and destruction of the Lithuanian nation. Therefore, when the leader of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (AWPL), Waldemar Tomaszewski (W. Tomaševskis), stated that it was Lithuanians who should integrate into the Vilnius region because Poles had always lived there (Tomaszewski, 2011), the Lithuanian publicist V. Bartasevičius (2011) reacted appropriately. In a column published on *lrytas.lt*, he wrote that Tomaszewski was a fool who, with such words, harmed not only the Polish minority but also Lithuanians, as he awoke dormant xenophobia, anti-Polish sentiment, and fear of the re-seizure of Vilnius. “Such words for Lithuanians are like a needle pricking an exposed nerve (Bartasevičius, 2011)”, he writes. The columnist thus provides another negative attribute of Lithuanians – xenophobia.

In April 2011, Jarosław Kaczyński, in an article entitled “Bałtyckie Waterloo Tuska” (Kaczyński, 2011) (“Tusk’s Baltic Waterloo”), accused the then Polish Prime Minister of pursuing a policy towards “smaller partners” that fuelled extreme nationalist sentiments in Lithuania. For the first time in the four months of debate, a prominent Polish politician explicitly referred to Lithuanian nationalism. By also accusing the Prime Minister of a lack of cooperation with smaller countries, he indirectly reinforced one of the stereotypes of Polish imperialism, which is indeed how some Lithuanians perceive Poland and its attempts at cooperation with Lithuania. A response to Kaczyński’s article came in May, published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Kuźniar, 2011) by the adviser to President Bronisław Komorowski, Professor Roman Kuźniar. Kuźniar emphasised that the previous policy of cooperation with Lithuania had involved “turning a blind eye” to Lithuanian policies towards the Polish minority. He expressed hope that Lithuania would overcome its inferiority complex towards Poland and the Poles in Lithuania, as they did not pose a threat to Lithuania. This referenced a concept discussed by numerous authors: the Lithuanian complex vis-à-vis Poland – its origins and nature. K. Buchowski writes extensively about it, explaining, based on various studies, that this complex derives from negative emotions directed towards the Polish-speaking nobility (Buchowski, 2006, pp. 74, 139, 176, 188, 220, 255, 279, 339, 355). On the other hand, it may have resulted from Polish unkindness and a “superiority complex” towards the newly forming Lithuanian state at the beginning of the twentieth century (Buchowski, 2006, p. 115). What is interesting is that indeed some Lithuanian publicists and politicians continue to exhibit complexes towards Poland, which manifest as fear of Polish diacritics as a destructive element

for the Lithuanian state. Besides the Polish language, another part of these complexes is a different historical narrative, in which the Polish version is presented as a “neo-occupation” of Lithuania. For example, an article by T. Baranauskas published in *Veidas* entitled “Okupacja Wileńszczyzny – przemoc, prawo i propaganda” (Baranauskas, 2011) (“The Occupation of the Vilnius Region – Violence, Law, and Propaganda”), presents the prevalent Lithuanian interpretation of the seizure of Vilnius and the Vilnius region. The author recalls that Poles – politicians, historians and others – maintain that Poland never occupied the Vilnius region and that its incorporation into the Second Polish Republic was lawful. He also reminds readers that during negotiations over the 1994 treaty, Lithuania failed to include the “condemnation of the occupation of the Vilnius region”. According to him, the Conference of Ambassadors, which approved the borders of Lithuania and Poland in the 1920s, had no legislative authority to do so. He also cites, from the *zpl.lt* website, a widely held Polish opinion portraying General Lucjan Żeligowski’s operation as a liberation action and the Vilnius region’s rightful return to Poland. Józef Piłsudski is depicted as an imperialistically dangerous usurper who sought to recreate the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and plotted cunning plans to annex all of Lithuania. Ultimately, this historical narrative is framed as “neo-occupation”, with Poland portrayed as an occupier and aggressor. In the context of Polish education in Lithuania, the then spokesperson of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Renata Lazdin (R. Lazdin), assured that “Lithuania will consider Polish comments regarding the Education Act, but will not allow interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state” (Lazdin, 2011). Between the lines of this statement, one can discern a fear of Polish imperialism and of renewed occupation, hence the strong emphasis on Lithuanian sovereignty.

Another article (Stoma, 2011) is rather innovative and bold. Its author considers Lithuanian Poles to be a consequence of the twenty-year incorporation of the Vilnius region into Poland. He stresses that in contemporary Europe, everyone may be whoever they wish, but that residing in a given state nonetheless requires adhering to its laws. Although the interpretation suggests that the author accuses Lithuanian Poles of disloyalty, he concludes by stating that Lithuanians and Lithuanian Poles must draw closer in order to reduce Poland’s political influence – which, he argues, could be achieved by introducing Polish as a subject in Lithuanian schools. The text illustrates how deeply ingrained the notion of imperialism and the fear of Polish expansionism is within Lithuanian society.

Two further articles attempt to confront Lithuanian fears toward Poland and challenge the myth of Poland as an occupier and aggressor.

On *lrytas.lt*, a column entitled “Zniszczone stosunki z Warszawą naszemu państwu odbiją się boleśniej niż Polsce” (Laurinkus, 2011) (“Damaged relations with Warsaw will hurt our state more than Poland”) was published. The author blames the President of the Republic of Lithuania, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2010–2012, Audronius Ažubalis (A. Ažubalis), and the chairman of the Polish-Lithuanian Parliamentary Cooperation Group for the deterioration of relations. He argues that the President should not have rushed into signing the Education Act, even if deadlines required it. According to him, the Act was also criticised by Lithuanian intellectual circles, though for reasons other than those invoked by the minorities. He questions why no one debates the Russian minority, even though Russian culture dominates Lithuania’s public space. He stresses that Polish culture exists on the margins – with the exception of the work of Czesław Miłosz (C. Miłosz), who was favourable towards Lithuania. A similar but more forceful column followed: “Kto przeklina Polaka, Żyda i Amerykanina, ten prawdziwy szlachcic?” (“Who curses a Pole, a Jew, and an American – is he a true nobleman?”) by R. Valatka (2011). “The EU is rotten – only gays and other nonsense come from there. NATO – unnecessary. America – evil. Our quarrel with Poland is worse than in the twentieth century – over Vilnius. Although Vilnius has long been ours (Lithuanian), and we are not part of Russia, our blood boils because we cannot forgive the Poles for twenty years of occupying the capital” – he asks his Lithuanian brothers, ironically yet seriously: “What has happened to them?” He continues by asking why some people feel nostalgia for “the Russian”, and why no one remembers that this occupier killed, murdered, and deported hundreds from Lithuania. “Today we watch Russian TV with joy, yet against the Polish ‘cz’ and ‘w’ we draw our rusty swords. We do not vote because the authorities steal, but when Poles co-govern Vilnius, we complain – and why do we not vote then? If we remain silent before elections, let us have the courage to remain silent afterwards, instead of blaming every misfortune on a Pole, a Jew, or an American – but never on a Lithuanian.” Although neither text directly states that Poles are perceived as aggressors by most Lithuanians, the contrast between “nostalgia for the Russian” and hostility toward Polish letters provides a telling example. Concluding the discussion of complexes escalating into phobias, one cannot do so other than with the words of V. Plečkaitis, who emphasised in his column in Lithuania’s most popular daily newspaper that Lithuania has never had such stable borders, such a strong position of the Lithuanian language in the state, nor as many Lithuanians in Vilnius and Klaipėda as during the past twenty-some years of independence (Plečkaitis, 2011). This is a concrete example of Lithuanian

phobia stemming, as the author claims, from the invented “mythical force” allegedly responsible for the lack of patriotism among Lithuanians.

J. Haszczyński, writing in *Rzeczpospolita* (Haszczyński, 2011b) about the matter of Polish education, argued that peaceful pickets, protests, letter writing, petition campaigns, and appeals by Polish politicians achieved nothing. The Lithuanian authorities listened neither to their own citizens nor to Poland, and instead became entrenched in the belief that they were acting in the best interest of young Poles by increasing their chances on the labour market and bringing the law in line with European norms. The verb “to become entrenched” may be a more diplomatic synonym for intransigence, obstinacy, and stubbornness – characteristics listed in the table as negative attributes perceived by Poles in Lithuanians. In a subsequent text, he argued that “Poland poses no political or cultural threat to Lithuania” (Haszczyński, 2011a). He is yet another commentator responding to Lithuanian fears of a Polish occupier.

Radosław Sikorski, then Poland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, gave two interviews in which he stressed that “after 20 years of relations in which Poland offered its friendship, the time has come for a reciprocal gesture” (PAP, 2011a), and that “I do not think it is my role to enter into a polemic with the Lithuanian Prime Minister. Our demands regarding the treatment of the Polish minority have been known for years. Throughout Europe, one may write their surname as they wish – but not in Lithuania. We ask and patiently wait for a Lithuanian gesture of friendship on this matter” (PAP, 2011b). Once again, Lithuanians emerge as unyielding, obstinate, and cunning: while Poland “offered its friendship” in Lithuania’s Western aspirations – successfully – Lithuania merely promised to resolve issues and fulfil Polish expectations.

Meanwhile, President of the Republic of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė, referring to compliance with the same treaty provisions cited by Minister Sikorski, accused the Polish minority of disloyalty towards the Lithuanian state and of attempting to sow discord between Poland and Lithuania. She added that “the article on the loyalty of national minorities is a fundamental article of the Polish-Lithuanian treaty” (Kazimierczuk, 2011). Poles and the Polish minority are frequently accused of disloyalty – just as earlier they were accused of treachery, a negative attribute of Poles in Lithuanian eyes. The alleged attempt to sow discord may equally be referred to as intrigue, also listed among negative traits.

Dr A. Šindeikis asks: “Where will the conflict between Poles and Lithuanians lead us?” (Šindeikis, 2011) At the outset, he lists the problems that remain unresolved, while also noting that no one has articulated the dangers

that the settlement of these issues might entail. The author expresses shame on behalf of those Lithuanians who still fail to understand that the Vilnius Region (Wileńszczyzna) is the true homeland of Lithuania's Poles and that they have no other. He admits with sadness that there are also those among his compatriots who would attempt to explain to Lithuanian Poles that they are not Poles at all. "Such Lithuanians are beyond help" (Šindeikis, 2011). "If, in the twenty-first century, people fail to understand that an individual has the right to affiliate with whatever national identity they choose, and not with the one desired by Lithuanians, then can Lithuania with such citizens be considered a civilised country?" the author asks.

He does not understand the Seimas' decision to impose the Lithuanian language by force and to intimidate young people with a new, more difficult matura exam for which pupils will not have time to prepare. Foolish political decisions, he argues, will lead to a loss of trust among Poles in the legal and administrative system of their state, and such confrontation – where one side feels unhappy and unworthy – may result in "such an R. Sikorski" one day placing the issue of autonomy on the table of Polish-Lithuanian negotiations, Šindeikis concludes. Although the author rightly observes that the fear of Polishness (*fobia polskości*) constitutes rather unwise state policy, he ultimately employs a form of "scare tactic" towards Lithuanians by invoking the possibility of Poland demanding autonomy for the Vilnius Region. The author also refrains from attributing explicitly positive or negative characteristics to either side of the conflict.

Another debate, highly relevant to Lithuanian and Polish self-perceptions, was sparked by the brochure "Ponary – miejsce ludzkiej rzeźni" (Niwiński, 2011) [Ponary – A Site of Human Slaughter], published by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland (MSZ, 2011). Lithuania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a letter to its Polish counterpart asking whether the formulations contained in the brochure – "the Lithuanian occupation of Vilnius" and "the German-Lithuanian occupation" – represented the official position of Poland (BNS ir lrytas.lt inf., 2011). R. Sikorski responded on Twitter: "It is good that the brochure of the Institute of National Remembrance is being read in Lithuania. May it inspire respect for minorities today" (Sikorski, 2011). The brochure did not inspire; on the contrary, such formulations irritate Lithuanians. On the other hand, if Poles were to rely on historical policy in the same way Lithuanians do, they could also point to a historical period in which the Lithuanian appears as occupier and traitor. This debate illustrates that mutual accusations of occupying the Vilnius Region constitute a vicious circle in bilateral relations.

We see this in an interview with historian Algimantas Kasparavičius (Algimantas Kasparavičius) published in the newspaper *Veidas*. The journalist asked whether historians from Poland and Lithuania had still failed to establish a unified historical narrative concerning the inter-war period and the Second World War. The historian replied that this was not yet possible because there are too many historians in Poland with radical views who maintain that in 1939 Lithuania occupied Vilnius. The second question concerned the actions of the ministry, which apparently supports such ambiguous publications. The historian replied that Lithuania had “pushed itself” towards Poland in the 1990s during its accession to NATO and the EU, but “we discovered that Poland does not need Lithuania; however, if Lithuania is pushing so hard, then why should Poland not begin to demand surnames, bilingual signs, and now a historical narrative?” (Kasparavičius, 2011) This time it is the Lithuanian side that levels accusations of radicalism against Polish views, and this may even be interpreted as an accusation of nationalism – something that earlier was not found among descriptions of the Poles.

Continuing the presentation of Lithuanian phobias regarding Poland, another text bore the title: “The ultimatum exists. What else is missing?” (Ozolas, 2011) The author begins by asking what else must occur for Lithuania to understand what Poland has said. R. Ozolas claims that Poland has not officially said a word about W. Tomaszewski (Waldemar Tomaszewski), because he is a “sanctioned Polish leader of a fifth column in Lithuania” (Ozolas, 2011). He also notes that Sikorski visited Lithuania three times, never officially, and only to meet the Polish minority – an act which, according to the “borderlands” (kresowa) policy, signifies not so much denying but certainly ignoring Lithuanian authority in Vilnius. Meanwhile, according to the author, D. Tusk visited Lithuania uninvited. He did not meet A. Kubilius (Andrius Kubilius) in the capital, but instead “called him out” onto “pure Lithuanian territory”. Moreover, at the Gate of Dawn (Ostra Brama) in Vilnius, he said, without circumlocution, that relations between Poland and Lithuania would mirror those between Lithuania and its minority, and, “to make it clear who is in charge” (Ozolas, 2011), he ordered the protesters to return to school. The author also mentioned the visit of L. Kaczyński (Lech Kaczyński), the renunciation of the order of L. Wałęsa (Lech Wałęsa), and the statement of President B. Komorowski (Bronisław Komorowski): “the goat will come to the cart”. According to the author, all this indicates that, just as in 1938, Poland has issued an ultimatum to Lithuania. Lithuanian politicians, he argues, should not remain silent, for the threat is close, and NATO and the EU will not help – firstly, because Poland presides over the Council of the European Union, and secondly,

because the NATO forces that would be expected to help consist of Polish soldiers. Polish policy, he continues, has always been oriented towards the occupation of Lithuania and “the spilling of Baltic blood onto Slavic soil” (Ozolas, 2011).

This tone pervades many articles in the Lithuanian press. A lack of understanding of the history and relations between the two states in the early twentieth century, as well as the supplementation of narratives with invented elements, has produced the phobia of Polish occupation. Fortunately, there is a growing number of people who assess history and contemporary bilateral relations more soberly, even though new antagonisms are now emerging. One example is the statement by V. Landsbergis (Vytautas Landsbergis): “It is nice to have a punching bag” (Landsbergis, 2011), in which he claims that Poland has formulated the principle: “Do not pass without striking Lithuania” (2011). He refers to President B. Komorowski’s remark about the “goat” and states that he paid Lithuania a compliment, because Lithuania is not a goat and will not go to the cart – particularly if the cart is stupid or full of rubbish. The words “stupid” and “full of rubbish” directed at Poland illustrate how Lithuanians perceive the contemporary political turmoil and struggles in Poland. Such perceptions of Poland, combined with demands for the protection of the Polish minority’s rights, certainly do not facilitate the resolution of issues, nor the establishment of constructive and partnership-based relations between Poland and Lithuania – relations which scholars and cultural figures strive so hard to build.

In an interview with Tomas Venclova for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the poet stated that both Lithuania and Poland had contributed to the foolishness in bilateral relations (Venclova, 2012). The poet also emphasised that both states must pursue a more balanced historical policy towards each other, and he described Polish and Lithuanian nationalism as “twin-like” (2012). Polish politicians likewise ceased their sharp campaign against Lithuania and attempted to cool emotions. An example is the statement of Tomasz Nałęcz, then adviser to President Komorowski, who stressed that both states should strive for good relations, and therefore Poland should stop “shouting” at Lithuania – even when there are grounds to do so – because this may be perceived as the imperial behaviour of a larger partner (lyrtas.lt, 2012).

An analysis of media coverage indicates that from December 2010 until approximately June/July 2012, Polish and Lithuanian politicians remained engaged in constant verbal skirmishes. These prolonged exchanges yielded no tangible results, save one: the issue of the Polish minority in Lithuania became entangled in a Polish media-political conflict, and during the 2012 parliamentary election campaign the Polish minority emerged as a signifi-

cant element in disputes between the candidates. Fatigued by the persistent tension and political sparring, Polish and Lithuanian intellectuals – figures from the spheres of culture, the arts, journalism, and poetry – continued to appeal for the normalisation of Polish-Lithuanian relations and the abandonment of prejudices and phobias. Politicians in both states responded to this appeal and moderated their statements, which correspondingly resulted in fewer texts in which myths, stereotypes, or phobias could be discerned.

Lithuanian politicians, absorbed in the electoral campaign, redirected these phobias towards the Polish minority in Lithuania. A similar tendency appeared in some Polish-language media outlets in Lithuania, though this does not constitute the subject of the present study. It should merely be noted here that Akcja Wyborcza Polaków na Litwie (AWPL) became a coalition partner in the new government of Algirdas Butkevičius following the autumn 2012 elections (Maksymowicz, 2012). Meanwhile, relations between Vilnius and Warsaw remained relatively calm, and public discussions were balanced. Neither commentators nor politicians invoked history, prejudices, or mutual phobias. In Poland, it was believed that now, with a Polish party included in the governing coalition, the demands of the Polish minority would finally be addressed. Furthermore, Poland was preparing to assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 1 July 2013.

The media registered only two events that provoked waves of criticism on both sides and revealed the persistence of prejudices and societal stereotypes. The first incident occurred after a match in Vilnius, when Polish football supporters marched through the city streets shouting “Wilno nasze!” (Vilnius is ours!). The second event took place in Poznań, where, during a match against a team from Vilnius, supporters displayed a large banner bearing the slogan “Litewski chamie, klęknij przed polskim panem” (Lithuanian boor, kneel before your Polish master). The Polish press, the Polish Football Association, politicians, commentators, and intellectuals condemned the behaviour of the Lech Poznań supporters as despicable (Butrimas, 2013). Polish online discourse erupted in fury and indignation. *Gazeta Wyborcza* published a photograph featuring apologies from Poles, which any reader could sign (lrytas.lt, 2013).

In the Lithuanian press, however, Algis Medalinskas, writing for *lrytas.lt*, reflected on how dangerous the chant ‘Wilno nasze!’ had been and whether the supporters had merely vocalised what Polish politicians and diplomats were thinking (Medalinskas, 2013). The author’s reflections were not solely personal. Such a chant by Polish supporters provokes and reinforces among Lithuanians the conviction that Poles are an expansionist power capable of seizing Vilnius at any moment. This does not facilitate

inter-state cooperation and certainly hinders dialogue between the minority and Lithuanians, including the Lithuanian authorities. Conversely, the banner displayed in Poznań illustrates the profoundly negative manner in which some Poles perceive Lithuanians, as well as how deeply rooted prejudices are and, indeed, how significant the “master” complex may be among certain segments of the Polish population. Fortunately, the actions of the supporters did not spark renewed tensions between Warsaw and Vilnius.

## **Conclusions**

The conducted content and discourse analysis allows us to conclude that Polish-Lithuanian media rhetoric in the years 2010–2014 reveals both the persistence of historical identity narratives and their susceptibility to ad hoc political instrumentalisation. The reconstructed categories – myths, stereotypes, phobias and complexes – function not merely as isolated labels but as coherent discursive structures that organise the way the neighbour is perceived and delineate the boundaries of permissible public debate. The inductive analysis demonstrated that both sides reconstruct their identities through symbolic oppositions in which “Us” and “Them” are continually negotiated, yet rarely redefined.

On the Polish side, central categories include Lithuanian nationalism, a sense of inferiority, as well as references to Lithuania’s imperial anxieties or to a nostalgic vision of contemporary relations framed in the spirit of “Jagiellonism”. Within the discourse, these categories operate as interpretative frameworks that give meaning to disputes over minority rights and allow the actions of the Lithuanian authorities to be presented as consequences of long-standing patterns of thought. On the Lithuanian side, narratives about Polish imperialism, the threat of neo-occupation, the disloyalty of the Polish minority and the symbolic danger to sovereignty remain entrenched. In Lithuanian discourse, such references act as protective mechanisms, reinforcing the image of a state defending its integrity against a stronger historical partner.

The reconstructed rhetorical examples – from expressions such as “elder brother”, through references to occupation, to warnings about expansionism – indicate that contemporary media not only reproduce nineteenth-century and interwar patterns of perceiving the Other, but often generate new variants adapted to current political tensions. At the same time, the analysis clearly shows that these narratives are neither stable nor uniform: alongside confrontational tones, there also appear voices that challenge dominant op-

positions, undermine entrenched myths and attempt to construct alternative ways of thinking about Polish-Lithuanian relations.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that media discourse functions as a field of identity-based contestation, in which old and new narratives coexist, clash and mutually reinforce one another. However, more than a decade has passed since the conflict that forms the subject of this analysis; during this period, both Poland and Lithuania have changed significantly, as has the Polish minority in Lithuania itself. Although individual stereotypes continue to surface in Lithuanian public discourse, particularly in relation to the Polish minority in Lithuania, the debate has never again reached the level of intensity observed in the years 2010–2012. The reduced intensity of these disputes suggests that some earlier narratives have weakened or lost their mobilising function, and that contemporary Polish-Lithuanian relations rest on much more pragmatic and balanced foundations – especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, which has further strengthened political cooperation, security alignment and societal solidarity between the two states.

#### N O T E S

<sup>1</sup> He emigrated from Lithuania in the 1970s, facing the threat of repression by the USSR.

<sup>2</sup> Among other outlets, in the daily *Rzeczpospolita* and on the TV station TVN24 on 11–12 December 2010.

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