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State, Nation, and the National Flag in Post-Soviet Lithuania: Legitimizing Identities of the State in Institutional and Social Discourses

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Abstract

This article explores discursive construction of legitimating identity(-ies) of the state within official institutional and semipublic social discourses on the national flag in post-1990 Lithuania. By doing so, it contributes to the continuous discussion regarding the puzzling coexistence of a relatively stable democratic regime and a limited degree of social and ethnic unrest with signs of political alienation in Lithuania. It argues that an empirical approach to legitimacy studies paired with research on national symbols and discourse analysis can contribute to a better understanding of this problem. The article concludes that the most prominent legitimating identity of the state coming forth in the official discourse is that of the state as an object of love and respect. This view is both shared and challenged within the semipublic discourse—especially regarding issues of instrumental performance of the state as well as the ability to accommodate both the initiative and autonomy of its people within political affairs.

Keywords: Legitimacy; legitimation; national symbols; discourse analysis; Lithuania; political alienation

*The being of true love is for the most
Somewhat like our conception of a ghost:
All can describe its actions, shape and mien;
But none can say they have the spectre seen.*

—François de La Rochefoucauld (1799, 156)

Introduction

Like many, if not most, concepts within social sciences and humanities, legitimacy has acquired the ghost-like quality of being widely discussed and yet hard to grasp that François de La Rochefoucauld attributed to love. Within the field of academic inquiry, legitimacy has come to signify “the rightfulness of a power holder or system of rule”; in this sense, it has long been a core issue for political philosophy, even before the term *legitimacy* itself emerged (Beetham 2000, 479). However, in this article I approach the study of legitimacy of political authority not as a normative question but as an object for empirical research¹ in order to better understand the perplexities relating to national symbols, state, national community, and their interaction in post-1990 Lithuania.

There is one crucial reason to choose Lithuania as a locus for carrying out research on legitimation of political power in the post-Soviet region. As I argue further in this article,

legitimizing strategies of democratic states are shaped by different challenges and opportunities than those of authoritarian regimes. Among other Soviet successor states, only the Baltic states are defined as consolidated democracies (Schenkkan 2017) and have achieved membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Their initial attempts to establish democracy (without prior experience of this regime) coincided with the creation of their modern statehoods during the years of the interwar period in the face of the collapse of the Czarist Empire in the 20th century. However, this was not meant to last: personalist authoritarian regimes were established—first in Lithuania in 1926, then in Latvia and Estonia in 1934—followed by Nazi and Soviet occupations during World War II and the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union.

Given the historical background, perhaps it comes as no surprise that the Baltic states have claimed not only independence from the USSR but also continuity with their interwar period statehoods, as symbolized by their adoption of the interwar tricolors as national flags again. Yet, the rejection of Soviet legacies, the connection established with the interwar period, and aspirations to build images of democratic states in the Baltics faced several important difficulties, such as addressing the Holocaust during the Nazi occupation from 1941 to 1944 and repressions of the Soviet era (see Eidintas 2012; Nikžentaitis, Schreiner, and Staliūnas 2004; Pettai and Pettai 2014).

However, two other problematic issues in the contemporary democracies in the Baltics are particularly relevant for this study: interethnic cleavages and political alienation as well as disenchantment with democracy in the Baltic societies. With regard to the former, Lithuania differs from Estonia and Latvia. During the Soviet period, Lithuania experienced less large-scale migration of Russian speakers than Estonia and Latvia, where substantial numbers of Russian-speaking Soviet citizens were settled, dramatically changing the ethnic compositions of these countries (Pettai and Pettai 2014, 56–57; Steen 2006, 192). Characterized by relatively small ethnic minority groups² and its less-restrictive laws on citizenship (Barrington 1998; Kasekamp 2010, 184–188), Lithuania has so far avoided open, large-scale ethnic clashes (Kasatkina 2003; Steen 2006). However, persistent problems relating to the integration of ethnic minorities (Duvold and Berglund 2014; Budryte and Pilinkaite-Sotirovic 2009; Clark 2006; Dambrauskaitė et al. 2011; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė and Šliavaitė 2012; Janušauskienė 2016; Kasatkina 2003; Savukynas 2000) signal latent interethnic tensions.

In this article, I am particularly interested in the three largest ethnic groups in Lithuania: Lithuanians, Poles, and Russians. After the collapse of the USSR, Lithuania's Russians have been less vocal about their political and social status than its Poles (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2011; Savukynas 2000); their image has been that of the more “integrated” ethnic minority of the two (Beresnevičiūtė and Nausėdienė 1999) and the apprehensions about possible danger in the national media relate more directly to Russia than to Lithuania's Russians (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2012). However, the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2013 and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 have placed the Russian ethnic group in the foreground. According to Monika Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, representations of Lithuania's Russians in web dailies during the period from January 1 to June 30, 2014, were influenced by the “geopolitical context (the actions of Russia in Crimea and the Eastern Ukraine), that is why it is written [in the web dailies] about possible threats to Lithuania from the Russian Federation and the harnessing of ‘soft power’ in order to mobilize the Russian ethnic minority in the country [Lithuania]” (2015, 43; my translation). However, she points out that the political loyalty of Lithuania's Poles is also called into question in the media analyzed: for example, in web items related to the suspicions that Valdemar Tomaševski—the leader of the “Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania” party and member of the European Parliament since 2009—“potentially might have connections with the authorities of the Russian Federation” (42–43). Thus, their images as allegedly dangerous, politically and culturally, in the mass media concerns both ethnic groups.

The Polish ethnic minority is not only larger than that of other ethnic groups in post-1990 Lithuania, but also stands out as a “border minority, which has come about from changes due to state borders over several centuries and from the assimilation and migration processes” (Janušauskienė 2016, 578–79) among those that were formed almost exclusively through migration, like that of Russian-speaking migrants during Soviet era (Duvold and Jurkynas 2013, 148). In contrast to other ethnic groups, the Polish minority is not spread throughout the country but rather concentrated in the southeastern part of Lithuania around the capital city of Vilnius, where “in some administrative districts it makes up a majority or a plurality of the population” (Janušauskienė 2016, 579). Finally, the Polish minority was inevitably entangled in the complicated relationship between Lithuania and Poland through the centuries, from their coexistence within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (Staliūnas 2005), to the annexation of Vilnius by Poland in 1920 (Dambrauskaitė et al. 2011, 101; Duvold and Jurkynas 2013, 149; Pettai and Pettai 2014, 45), to the secessionist position expressed by a fraction of Poles during the period of independence from the Soviet Union (Clark 2006, 169; Dambrauskaitė et al. 2011, 128; Duvold and Jurkynas 2013, 149).

The issue of political alienation (exemplified, among other things, by chronically low trust in democratic political institutions and political isolation; see Agarin 2012; Duvold and Jurkynas 2013; Duvold and Berglund 2014; Donskis 2011; Ramonaitė 2007; Rose 2007) indicates that the Lithuanian state encounters difficulties with regard not only to its ethnic minorities but also to its titular ethnic group—Lithuanians. There is no consensus regarding the causes for state/nation alienation in Lithuania; explanations vary from fast and drastic sociocultural change (Donskis 2011, 107), to economic problems and corruption (Duvold and Jurkynas 2013, 138–140, 146–148), to divergent ideas about the nature of democracy (Ramonaitė 2005). In some sense, it cannot be otherwise, for such a complex problem cannot have just a few underlying factors. It is a mosaic, consisting of many different pieces.

Therefore, I argue that an empirical approach to legitimacy studies paired with research on nationalism and discourse analysis can contribute to a better understanding of the puzzling coexistence of democracy and comparatively small ethnic minorities with persistent political alienation and continuing latent interethnic tensions. More precisely, I explore legitimating identities of the state and the national community as well as how their relationships among each other are discursively constructed in the official and semipublic discourses surrounding Lithuania’s national flag.³ Is the role that the state carves out within its discourse also present in social discourse? What implications does this have for the state and national relationship within the Lithuanian nation-state?

Legitimation, Discourse and National Symbols

According to Rodney Barker (2001, 22), legitimacy can be researched as an activity of ascribing legitimacy—legitimation—carried out by political actors in their attempts to be perceived or acknowledged as “possessing legitimacy” (see also Barker 2007). Barker (2001, 19) convincingly argues that legitimacy is a descriptive attribute of political actors and “exists only when people believe it exists”: it has no permanently fixed content. In his opinion, “an enquiry into the ways a regime legitimates itself and the counter legitimations which are to be found amongst its opponents can reveal political actions which both constitute and cause a particular outcome in the conduct and character of government” (23). Thus, differentiating between “legitimacy” and the activities of “legitimation” allows shifting attention from normative theorizing toward observing the content that the concept of legitimacy acquires in a particular context as well as the process of how this content is being produced.

I also follow Barker (2007, 22) in his claim that one of the principal ways for a political authority—be it an individual or the institution—to legitimate itself lies in the actions of “cultivation or conservation of a coherence of identity.” As he puts it, “the identity at one and the same time legitimates the person, and is confirmed by the person’s manner of expressing it”

(Barker 2001, 35). Though assuming and maintaining a legitimizing role are indispensable for any type of government, the form of the latter sets certain criteria regarding choices of identity (-ies).

During the lifetime of La Rochefoucauld in 17th-century France, the prevalent normative justification of political authority was the metaphysical principle of the divine right to rule, which found its expression through concrete individuals—kings and queens. Contrary to that, the idea of popular sovereignty offered a secular alternative legitimacy of political power by changing the source of sovereignty from the monarch to the people. This means that the sovereignty of the polity rises from the will of its people rather than from a lord or government (Jackson 1999, 444). Popular sovereignty does not necessarily translate into democracy, and even the harshest dictatorships may claim to represent the will of the people (Yack 2001, 519). Yet, in its democratic form, “where the people are the rulers, anyone who ‘usurps’ that function must be as close to being a passable substitute for the people as possible” (Barker 2007, 26). Therefore, a state aiming to claim and cultivate a “democratic” identity has a particularly challenging task of accommodating both authoritative and subordinate aspects of political power relations.

The question then is: how can legitimating identities be constructed and their content interpreted? I answer it by tapping into the fields of discourse and nationalism studies. The former suggests language is one of the principal means of identity production by arguing that social identities “are *discursively*, by means of language and other semiotic systems, *produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed*” (de Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999, 153; emphasis original). Steffen Schneider, Frank Nullmeier, and Achim Hurrelmann (2007, 132) also claim that discourses “greatly influence the worldviews and collective identifications, attitudes, and value orientations of individual citizens and elite actors.” However, merely stating that legitimating identities are discursively constructed is not sufficient for an empirical analysis. One also needs to identify which discourses can actually be considered to constitute legitimating identities of the states, as well as which actors within the state are producing them and in what contexts. These are all crucial issues to be solved.

I hold that the subfield of nationalism studies investigating symbolic and ritualistic aspects (Elgenius 2011; Eriksen and Jenkins 2007; Kolstø 2014) offers some very important suggestions. According to Simon Harrison (1995, 255), “competition for power, wealth, prestige, legitimacy or other political resources seems always to be accompanied by conflict over important symbols, by struggles to control or manipulate such symbols in some vital way.” National symbols are a special kind of political symbols that allow the state to legitimize “itself vis-à-vis the concept of the nation that undergirds it” (Geisler 2005, xix–xx). Building on these ideas, I expect discourses related to national symbols to reflect the representations of nationhood and statehood attached to them.

My focus is on national flags because I see them as key national symbols—“summing up, expressing, representing for the participants in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated way, what the system means to them” (Ortner 1973, 1339). Michael E. Geisler (2005, xxii) points out that national flags stand out among other national symbols:

In contradiction to the anthem and the holiday, the flag also represents the authority invested in it by, or on behalf of, the nation as a collective whole to the people as individuals or subgroups. There is, in other words, an element of power relations built into the symbolism of the flag (and the emblem), which is either absent or much weaker in the case of most other national symbols.

Thus, the exploration of discourses surrounding a national flag allows examining the ideational construction of state and national identities in the concrete context of a given nation-state.

In this article, I probe the degree of correspondence or dissonance between the institutional and social discursive representations of the national flag, statehood, and nationhood. I explore “the recontextualization and transformation of specific political concepts and identity narratives”

(de Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999, 152): how the representation of the same concepts, objects, or narratives keeps its original form or alters within different contexts. Similarities and differences in how the nation, state, and national flag are “imagined” within official and social discourses offer a window for understanding tensions between the Lithuanian state and its nation.

Research on flags has been relatively scarce in the field of nationalism studies. As noted by Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Richard Jenkins (2007, xxiii), except for the flag of the United States of America, “flags are only mentioned in passing in most social science studies of nationalism.” The post-Soviet space is particularly relevant for research on national flags, as such studies are still relatively scarce (Eriksen and Jenkins 2007, xxiii–xiv). I seek to add new empirical material to existing work on the region (see Akstinavičiūtė and Petraitytė 2007; Elgenius 2011; Jarutis 2011; Mesonis 2012; Rimša 2008). The aforementioned studies on the use of national flags in Lithuania usually focus on either political or social symbolic legitimations, whereas I integrate both perspectives.

Empirical Material: Sampling and Analysis

In order to analyze institutional discourse on the national flag, I chose to examine two types of empirical material: the text of the Law on the Lithuanian State Flag⁴ and the utterances of the members of the Seimas (the parliament of Lithuania; MP).

The Law on the National Flag was selected for the analysis as one of the primary legal documents regulating the status and use of the national flag.⁵ While the law sets legally binding provisions regarding the national flag, it does not provide the rationale behind them. The statements made by the MPs during the plenary sessions of the Seimas in the discussion of the law and its amendments supplement this shortcoming, when they argue in favor or against certain decisions concerning the national flag. The transcripts, in Lithuanian,⁶ of all the plenary sessions are available through the Seimas website.⁷ The keywords used in the search among the transcripts in the database were *vėliavos įstatymas* (the law on the flag) in all grammatical forms. The timeframe used was from March 11, 1990 (the day of declaration of independence), to March 5, 2015 (the day the discussion of the final focus group took place). The transcripts that deal directly with the Law on the National Flag were then identified from the search results. This resulted in a sample of 42 plenary sessions.

The sample of the social discourse was gathered from three focus group discussions conducted during my fieldwork in Lithuania in March 2015. The scope of the article does not leave room for a thorough discussion regarding the reasons for choosing this particular method of data collection⁸ and sampling criteria. However, it is necessary to state the following two main inducements. First, it offers an opportunity “to observe the processes through which important concepts like ‘nation’ are being ‘co-constructed’ during an ongoing discussion” (Wodak et al. 2009, 3). Second, though statements made in the focus groups may not reflect what the same individuals might say privately (Gamson 1992, 19–20), focus group discussion participants are not under the same restrictions as MPs, who speak in a completely public, official mode. Thus, focus group discussions allow us to explore semipublic discourses (de Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999, 152). Focus group discussions can open a window to those strands of discursive representations of nationhood and statehood that the participants consider “appropriate,” “necessary,” or “possible” to express within wider circles than their closest family members and friends.

Targeted participants for the focus groups were adult citizens of Lithuania who started their schooling in 1990 or later (making them between 18 and 32 years of age at the time of the focus group discussions). I aimed to have both female and male focus group discussion participants to ensure gender balance. Discourse studies fall within interpretivist and quantitative methodological frameworks. Therefore, I did not consider all possible demographic variables such as education, professional occupation, marital status, etc.⁹ in connection with the sampling, although I was mindful of them when they were mentioned by participants in their utterances.

Citizenship, schooling, and self-ascribed ethnic belonging were crucial criteria. I chose Seimas as one of the main state institutions in Lithuania, so I wanted to find individuals within the population who, besides being citizens and thus subject to the laws and regulations issued by the Seimas, were also of legal age and entitled to vote. The power dynamics of interdependence between the Seimas and its electorate make them among the most intriguing actors in the political field.

The amount of schooling and self-ascribed ethnic belonging to one of the three largest ethnic groups in Lithuania are important for several reasons. These sampling criteria offer an opportunity to look into the discourses on national symbols by individuals informed by the education system of a newly reestablished state. Moreover, the existence of both Polish and Russian state schools in Lithuania besides those based on the Lithuanian language opens the possibility of probing into possible similarities and differences among the discourses of discussants with different educational backgrounds. Furthermore, my interest in the younger generations of citizens in Lithuania is fueled by research that demonstrates that the experiences of adolescents and young adults may well have lasting effects on their political outlooks in later life (Mishler and Rose 2007; Neundorf 2010; Tilley 2002).

The topics and prompts for discussion were centered on the perceptions of the status and meaning of the national flag as well as its official and private use. However, the discussants were not provided any information about the particular details of the Law on the National Flag beforehand. This was done in order to observe what opinions and knowledge about the legal regulations regarding the national flag the discussants already have. The focus group discussions took place at the time when the state was considering reintroducing compulsory military service in Lithuania, which was eventually done, justified to a great extent by the crisis in Ukraine (Ministry of National Defense 2015) and the implication of a potential military threat stemming from Russia (Weymouth 2014).

Discourse studies not only account for the importance of language in the formation of collective identities but provide concrete guidelines for analyzing a given spoken and written discourse in order to reveal how this action of creation actually happens. This article is informed by the discourse-historical approach within critical discourse analysis (see de Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak 1999; Krzyżanowski 2010). First elaborated as a method for examining images of anti-Semitic stereotypes in Austria in the mid-1980s (Wodak 2001, 70; Reisigl and Wodak 2009, 94), discourse-historical analysis was further fleshed out by exploring different but characteristically political and historical topics (Krzyżanowski 2010, 71, 74–75).

Empirical data were analyzed by applying several elements of the discourse-historical analysis model. First, the content of the chosen discourse was summarized by identifying its main topics (de Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak 1999, 157–58; Krzyżanowski 2013, 116). The key themes belonging to the overall discourse on the national flag were marked out in the institutional discourse while similar topics were provided for the focus group discussions.

Though the topics discussed by the MPs or established in the Law on the National Flag are the same as those of the focus group discussions, the timeframe of these discussions may have differed. However, one of the most important features of discourse, according to Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 36–37), is that “discourses and discourse topics ‘spread’ to different fields and discourses. They cross between fields, overlap, refer to each other or are in some other way socio-functionally linked with each other.” Thus, political discourse forms one of the elements of the discursive context within which more recent focus group discussions are taking place and thusly relates to semipublic discourse despite being on different temporal register.¹⁰

The analysis explores linguistic devices through which social actors are being referred to (reference/nomination strategies) and labeled (predication strategies) as well as how these references and predications are being justified (argumentation strategies) in empirical material (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 45). As mentioned above, the interpretivist framework of my article does not aim to generalize the whole population of Lithuania or measure the prevalence of a certain discourse within the entire society from the sample. Instead, the goal of the article is to

reconstruct diverse discursive strands present in the sample and provide detailed analysis of their content. Within the confines of the article, the examples from the data are intended only to serve as an illustration of the principal findings.

The Private and Official Use of the National Flag

Three main topics summarize the themes and subtopics touched upon in the Law on the National Flag, parliamentary debates, and focus group discussions (1) the definitions of the national flag, (2) the private and official use of the national flag, and (3) the status and use of foreign national flags. Each of these topics could easily be turned into a separate analysis. For the purpose of this article, I decided to cover the theme of the private and official use of the national flag for two reasons. First, it has excited rather spirited discussions not only among the MPs, but also among the participants in the focus groups. Second, this topic is tightly connected to the issue of the interaction between the state and its national community.

Here, two images of the tricolor emerge in both the official and semipublic discourses: first, the tricolor as merely a formal decorative item with little instrumental or symbolic value, and second, the tricolor as capable of serving both pragmatic and/or ideational purposes in itself, or having the potential to do so under certain circumstances and conditions.

The Tricolor and Its (Lack of) Instrumental Value

One image of the tricolor found frequently, but with minor support, in parliamentary debates ever since the 1990s is that it performs only a formal, purely “symbolic” role, of little instrumental value in harnessing legitimacy for the state in the eyes of the nation. In this view, the state creates its legitimacy through its pragmatic function: the provision of utilitarian goods and solving “real” problems of society. Symbolic policies and practices—such as flying a national flag or national celebrations—should not be among the central priorities of the state and should not require “unreasonable” expenditure. For example, during the session on June 19, 1991, MP Rūta Gajauskaitė stated:

I want to suggest, and it seems to me that most deputies would agree, that the question regarding further continuation of our work should be resolved together with those questions that we ought to consider. That is with those laws which are mandatory... without which one could not start, let us say, the land reform. And not such [laws] as the [law of the] flag.

This type of argumentation continued to resurface, and not only in the first years of statehood. For instance, during the session of June 11, 2009, when discussing the amendment of the Law on the National Flag regarding the titles of the holidays for which flying the tricolor is mandatory, MP Rokas Žilinskas remarked sarcastically “that this is a very meaningful amendment which will essentially change our life here in Lithuania, in our state” and went on to demand an explanation of why the time of the Seimas should be wasted on such matters. This exemplifies the recurring challenge to the significance of symbolic practices from more utilitarian perspectives.

Similar reasoning echoes in the statements of those focus group participants who saw the tricolor more as a formal marker of a country: although it should be formally respected, it need not invoke deep feelings or require financial investments. For instance, when discussing the weekly ceremony of replacing the national flags in front of the Presidential Palace in Vilnius, one participant in the Russian group exclaimed, “And few tourists come [to view the ceremony of the changing of the national flags]?! From our money? There, we waste money for such things. We are supporting all that ceremony.” However, some discussants, although agreeing about the formal nature of the tricolor, thought that it and the state’s symbolic practices as such could serve certain pragmatic purposes. For example, according to one participant in the Russian group, the goal of such symbolic policies as the obligatory flying of the national flag by private individuals

on certain national holidays ought not to be viewed in such categorical or essentialist terms as aimed at inducing or expressing the “love” of the state. In her opinion, such practices serve as a means of maintaining order (the state as “educator” of the relatively unruly nature of humans in the absence of control or penalties) and ease interethnic coexistence by at least formal acknowledgement of state authority and ethnic groups other than one’s own:

R_01: And why strict [fines for not flying the tricolor on certain national holidays]? Every state represents its sign. If they [state institutions/politicians] don’t do anything, what will this turn into? People need strictness, it is necessary to have something to fear, to have something to force them....R_02: But you can’t love your country by compulsion.

[R_06 shows signs of agreement with R_02]

R_01: Well, no one is saying that it has to be loved.

R_02: Then you will not respect it.

R_01: Look, if you’re not slow-witted, and you’re at least a little educated, you will respect, nevertheless, both the country where you live and its people; and you will speak in a somewhat tolerant manner near them....

Here, the tricolor seems to be perceived as a form of politeness that should be maintained even if that requires state interference—just as phrases like “thank you” or “please” are perceived to smooth social interaction even if uttered automatically or insincerely.

The Tricolor and Its Ideational Power

With regard to the potential and limits of the tricolor in the ideational field, we can distinguish two attitudes. For some MPs and group discussion participants, the tricolor has a certain “intrinsic” appeal, the ability to imbue even routine practices with “sense” and “educational meaning,” or to elicit strong emotional responses in individuals, like tears. However, a more prevalent attitude was that the ideational power of the tricolor depends on the specific circumstances and conditions surrounding its use.

Two modes in which the tricolor either enhances or diminishes its emotional or ideational appeal can be discerned in the empirical material: first, its “formal” versus “sincere” use, and second, its “respectful” versus “disrespectful” use.

Formal Versus Sincere Use of the Tricolor

Within the debate about the formal versus sincere attitude toward the tricolor and its use, the flag harnesses its full potential of helping to create and sustain symbolic ties among individuals, the nation, and the state—when used sincerely and not merely formally by individuals. For example, MP Justinas Karosas argued on April 9, 2002:

In truth, I think that the easiest way to be a patriot is by flying the flag, it is much more difficult to be a patriot in one’s soul. . . . I think that forced or advisory-forced [*sic*] flying the flag encourages this version, when patriotism is understood as external, emphasized by certain attributes and not as an inner conviction of a person. I think that we have had quite a bit of such “patriotism,” and it is time to slowly bid farewell to it. I believe that today the citizens of Lithuania deserve to be acknowledged as citizens of Lithuania by their inner convictions and not by flying or not flying the flag.

Similarly, some focus group participants argued that national self-understanding and patriotism are an “inner attitude.” For instance, the participant in the Lithuanian group L_06 stated that Lithuania’s Russians and Poles would be able to identify with the tricolor “if they were true Lithuanians who believed in what they are doing, in truth, if they really consider themselves as Lithuanians.” Other participants held that one can experience love and respect for the homeland without necessarily actively using the tricolor or celebrating national holidays. What matters is

that the attitude to the tricolor and symbolic practices are stemming from feelings of love and respect. As discussant R_02 put it: “But it is possible to show respect [for Lithuania] without flying [the flag].”

Similarities and differences between the Seimas debates and the focus group discussions also emerge with regard to what can generate feelings of love and respect. In the Lithuanian group discussions, love and respect for Lithuania and the tricolor were largely seen in relation to national sacrifices for the sake of independent statehood. That helps explain why the mandatory flying of the national flag did not seem problematic at all to this group. Symbolic policies and practices of the state were generally evaluated as successful in terms of numbers of participants and the engagement of their feelings. The only criticism concerned the continuation of Lithuania as a “weeping nation”; joy and jubilant celebrations of attained statehood ought to replace the “bad weeping” stemming from self-pity, as L_02 states:

I work with youth organizations, and we promote the celebration of 11 March¹¹ and 16 February,¹² so in principle, when I go, for example to the 13 January¹³ commemorations, I understand that it is not a joyful event. We all understand the tragedy of our history and the tragedy of that day. But, in principle, when they sing, and every year [it is] the same, and those sad concerts, and everybody brushes away their tears—I can’t take it, because, well, perhaps it is necessary to say, “Thank you for our freedom,” and that we go forward, and we celebrate those things, and we celebrate 16 February and 11 March, and it is enough to weep every day.

Among participants of the Polish and Russian focus group discussions, no such prevalent consensus emerged even though the national sacrifices for the sake of the state were also important. However, we can distinguish two dominant perspectives regarding the factors that influence the sentiments of love and respect for one’s country and the success of national symbols and state symbolic policies: first, how the state performs instrumentally, and second, how it allows individuals to choose for themselves how to express these feelings.

The perception of state symbolic policies and practices as only partially successful or unsuccessful depends largely on these two factors. With regard to the first determinant, discussants interpret focusing on solving instrumental problems and providing utilitarian goods as ways for the state to show its “love” and “care” for its national community, who will then reciprocate this affection, as P_01 suggests:

There are different opinions. It would be a long discussion. We could begin with finances; how the state takes care of youth, the elderly and so on, and why it wants to attract [people] to its celebrations. It was really well said [*indicates P_04*] that if they [politicians] could solve [socio-economic issues] ... if we [lived] like Americans....

The second factor relates to how the state is seen as impeding the development of love and respect by forcing people to display the tricolor whether they want to or not, ignoring their free will. Here the state is viewed as a coercive “teacher” that imposes homework on its “pupils,” as R_02 states:

And when it comes from the heart... because now I go to school and if I am... how I am forced to do homework—let’s say for literature lesson—you are given a list of what has to be read, meaning, this is needed and this, and this, and this, and this. ... And then, later, after some years, you begin to understand yourself that you do want to read it, you need it yourself. Then you go and you read. . . . And those state celebrations which are supposed to give birth to some kind of patriotism in you and so on, this has somehow to be in the heart. But that which is in the heart—you cannot force it, nor can you advertise it.

In the parliamentary debates, there was no mention of the “instrumental” route to the hearts of the people among MPs, who perceived tricolor as more than just a formal symbol. The way for the state either to ignite or foster love and respect was seen as going through “education.”

Two positions among MPs regarding what it means for the state to be an “educator” can be discerned. Some MPs see the Lithuanian state as a coercive “educator” that aims to enforce at least external compliance from its subjects, either because of what these MPs consider an erroneous belief that this will generate sincere emotional response in the population, or simply for the sake of external obedience itself—which is even less acceptable to them. An example of such reasoning is the statement of MP Eligijus Masiulis, who claimed during the session on January 17, 2002:

I repeat once again, it is a question of values. And I have understood from those who pretend to be effusively big lovers of the homeland that they have not yet realized in ten or twelve years of independence that the form, the pose is not important, what is important is the content. We will not be able to force the citizen to love the homeland. One can only teach them to love the homeland.

The second interpretation is that the Lithuanian state already is (according to some MPs) or ought to be (according to others) a noncoercive, civically engaged “educator” who should remind and teach the nation about its civic duties and responsibilities, through its symbolic policies and practices:

Flying the flag is like a moral duty and some, let us say, law or decree simply reminds us of it . . . Someone might say: “To hell with this state, I will not hoist the flag.” Such cases can also occur. I do not think that even then we ought to punish, but a certain educational element, a reminder of the moral duty of a citizen ought to remain. (Vytautas Landsbergis, April 9, 2002)

Regardless of the type of “educator” that the Lithuanian state supposedly is or ought to be, this depiction of the state presupposes the nation as its pupil who is learning about civic duties and rights, the meaning of the state and its symbols. Whereas focus group discussants did not discursively elaborate further on the image of a nation as a “pupil,” the discourse of the MPs used two distinct and somewhat contradictory representations.

The depiction of the nation as a pupil is based on appealing either to youth or, conversely, to old age. Lithuania is still a “young” country lacking civic traditions, its citizens not fully aware of their duties: “Many people are still adjusting to being citizens of Lithuania,” said MP Rasa Juknevičienė on January 17, 2002; “even though ten years have already passed. I feel this myself from my own neighborhood, my own street. . . . Are you really convinced that this provision in your project—the removal of the duty—is not wrong and very harmful for our young state?” Meanwhile, in the ageist and gendered image of the “old lady,” where citizens still cling to their “old ways” or have limited capacities for fully comprehending and implementing all requirements regarding the national flag (compared to politicians and experts), MP Romualdas Rudzys warned on June 26, 1991, that:

Some innocent old village woman might become a victim [of fines regarding improper flying of the tricolor] because she is not at the right time or in the right place forgot to remove that flag or it fell down, or children pulled it down.

Respectful Versus Disrespectful Behavior with the Tricolor

The mode that permeated the Law on the National Flag and all its amendments, as well as Seimas deliberations and focus group discussions, was that of respectful versus disrespectful behavior with the tricolor. The perception of the tricolor as an object of particular respect that should not

be “desecrated” was established with the inception of the Law on the National Flag in 1991. The principle of respect for the national flag is strongly emphasized in Article 15 of the Law on the National Flag in 1991:

The citizens of the Republic of Lithuania, as well as other persons who are staying in Lithuania, must respect the Lithuanian State Flag. The outrage upon the Lithuanian State Flag shall be punishable in accordance with the procedure established by laws of the Republic of Lithuania.

This principle has been moved forward to Article 9 in the most recent version of the law, from 2013:

1. Persons who have violated the procedure for hoisting the national flag of Lithuania, a flag of a foreign state, the flag of the European Union or a flag of an international public organization shall be held liable in accordance with the procedure established by law.
2. Persons who have desecrated the national flag of Lithuania, a flag of a foreign state, the flag of the European Union or a flag of an international public organization shall be punished in accordance with the procedure established by law.

The administrative liabilities for private individuals who fail to fly the tricolor on certain holidays were challenged unsuccessfully by some MPs, who in 2002 proposed abolishing this requirement altogether. Examples of their arguments have been presented above in the statements of Karosas and Masiulis. However, when discussing the Law on the National Flag and its amendments, MPs never criticized the legal liability provisions regarding the desecration of the national flag.

Some participants in the Polish and Russian groups (but not in the Lithuanian group) had the impression that the principle of respect embedded in the Law on the National Flag is often violated in Lithuania.¹⁴ According to one participant in the Polish group, even state institutions disrespect the flag by not observing the rules for the maintenance of flags, which are sometimes flown “in tatters” (presumably outside state institutions and not only private buildings). Several discussants in all groups were critical of the administrative liabilities regarding the display of the tricolor or criminal liabilities regarding “disrespect” shown to the tricolor. Yet, none of the participants proposed totally abolishing the legal consequences for acts of desecration, which were mostly understood as maliciously soiling, burning, or tearing/ripping up the flag.

The only caution regarding this overwhelming agreement was that legal consequences for disrespectful behavior with the national flag should not develop into a form of “censorship” or “fanaticism”:

L_05: Because for me such criminalization can quickly turn into some, I do not know, attempts to eliminate and some kind of censorship. What does it mean, “disrespect”? I understand if it [the flag] is torn or something, but if, for instance, someone should make a sweater with the flag and then perhaps suddenly for somebody it will seem like disrespect, then what happens—a criminal lawsuit?

R_05: And as to respect for the flag, I think, well, every flag is its own flag for each country and it carries something. In a sense, behind the flag stands a certain nation. That is why one should have some kind of respect for every flag, but not so that it becomes fanaticism. In a sense, if something happens, someone makes the flag fall down, and that would already mean showing disrespect to a country or something. Well [. . .] everything has to be within the limits of reason, I think.

Just like among focus group discussants, there seemed to be no consensus on the meaning of “disrespect.” For instance, permission to manufacture flags without first being granted a license from governmental institutions was favored by some MPs (and eventually adopted), but opposed

(unsuccessfully) by others who claimed that it put respect for the flag and the state at risk because of potential noncompliance as regards the quality of materials used and the correct proportions and colors for the flag:

Now every old lady will start to sew our flag—one of the main symbols; who will supervise the proportions, materials, etc. . . . Do we respect our flag or will they do as they please now? (Edvardas Žakaris, July 7, 2009)

Thus, except for the most dramatic forms of burning, soiling, or ripping up the national flag, neither focus group participants nor MPs could agree on one single understanding of “respect” for the flag.

Conclusions

This article has offered several snapshots of Lithuania as a newly reestablished state in the process of building legitimacy by symbolic means. The empirical material highlights various points on which representations of the nation and state in the institutional and social discourses on the national flag coincide or are relatively similar, and points on which they are divergent.

The official and semipublic discourses around the representation of the tricolor as either a formal sign of the state or an emotionally/ideationally charged symbol focus on the way an individual or the entire nation should relate to the state. It is here that the relation between the ideational measures of the legitimacy of the state and the instrumental means comes to the fore. Should the state be perceived as an object of an emotional attachment, or should it be considered from a pragmatic perspective?

On the one hand, there is a persistent through time, yet minor in terms of those expressing it, focus within the official discourse on utilitarian ways of harnessing legitimacy of the state, by aiming to create and cultivate an identity of an efficient state that provides instrumental benefits for its national community. Similarly, some focus group discussants argued that investment in the symbolic policies and practices should not be prioritized or even considered necessary. However, certain discussants, while sharing the formal perception of the tricolor, differed in their interpretation of its instrumental value. They argued that, even as a formal symbol, the tricolor may serve certain instrumental goals: easing interethnic coexistence, maintaining traditions, and strengthening the prestige of the state.

On the other hand, the major focus within official discourse is on the identity of the state as an object of respect and affection. The main means of claiming this legitimating identity is by “educating” the nation and its individual members about the significance and the value of the state and its political independence, rather than, for instance, solving issues relating to national unity or ethnic cohesion. It is not the relationship between individual members of the nation or their groups that appears to concern the politicians or that is expressed in the text of the Law on the National Flag and its amendments, but their relationship with the state: is the state sufficiently valued and respected? Do all those who live in Lithuania fully comprehend the significance and importance of its political independence?

The depiction of the state as an educator discursively positions the nation as its “pupil” in the process of learning about its civic duties and rights. The discourse of the MPs employed two distinct and somewhat contradictory images of the nation as a pupil. That none of the MPs singled out any of the ethnic groups in this context indicates that perhaps the entire nation is seen as requiring civic education. An image of the state and political affairs as a concern reserved for politicians, political institutions, and experts but not for the nationals, due to their “lacking” capacities as fully “aware” citizens, does appear to indicate that official discourse strongly leans toward cultivating authoritative rather than subordinate aspect of the state’s identity, which may contribute to the sense of alienation between the state and its people.

The relation between the state and the nation was a central topic in focus group discussions as well. In particular, this theme emerged in connection with whether the state should force private individuals

to display the national flag. Here the representation of the state as a coercive educator was predominant. Though it was perceived both positively and negatively, it raises the question of whether cultivating the image of the state as an educator is serviceable legitimating identity of the state.

Finally, the point about teaching the nation to love and respect the state leads to the image of the tricolor as an object of particular respect. The tricolor came through as an object of at least formal respect as the symbol of the nation and the state both in the institutional and semipublic discourse. Although opinions differed regarding the meaning of showing *disrespect* to the flag and whether some instances of disrespect should be penalized, the provision in the Law on the National Flag that *desecration* of the national flag will result in legal liabilities was never really challenged in either the parliamentary debates or the focus group discussions.

Perhaps this can explain, at least partly, how the state can be perceived simultaneously as an object of respect and of criticism. I hold that the distinction that the official and semipublic discourses draw between “disrespect” and “desecration” may open one more way of understanding how a relatively stable democratic regime and limited degree of social and ethnic unrest can coexist with signs of political alienation in Lithuania: the overall acceptance of the state as an object of respect may not completely gloss over criticism and perceived problems by the national community, but it can serve as symbolic moderator of social dissatisfaction.

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Notes

- 1 For an in-depth overview of normative and empirical perspectives within research on legitimacy, see Hurrelmann, Schneider, and Steffek 2007.
- 2 According to the 2011 census, Lithuanians made up 84.2 percent (2,561,000) of the total population; Poles, 6.6 percent (200.3 thousand); Russians, 5.8 percent (176.9 thousand). From 1989 to 2011, the proportion of the population of Lithuanian ethnicity increased from 79.6 percent to 84.2 percent, whereas Russian dropped from 9.4 percent to 5.8 percent and Polish decreased from 7 percent to 6.6 percent (Statistics 2013).
- 3 The Lithuanian national flag has three equal horizontal bands: yellow on top, green in the middle and red on the bottom (a ratio of 3:5). Debates on a national flag began as early as 1905 at the Lithuanian Congress in Vilnius. However, it was not until April 25, 1918, that the Lithuanian tricolor, based on the colors of ethnic Lithuanian folk costumes and weavings, was finally established as the national flag. It remained as such throughout the interwar period until the Soviet occupation, and was replaced with the red flag on July 30, 1940. The latter flag was replaced with a red, white, and green flag with a sickle and hammer in the left corner on July 15, 1953. The tricolor re-emerged in public life in the summer of 1988 during the rallies and gatherings organized by the Lithuanian Reform Movement (*Sąjūdis*). Due to societal pressure, the tricolor was legally established as the national flag of the Lithuanian SSR on November 18, 1988. With the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union on March 11, 1990, the tricolor remained the national flag of Lithuania. Its legal status and use are regulated by the Law on the National Flag (adopted on June 26, 1991) and the Constitution (adopted on November 6, 1992).
- 4 In both its English translation provided by the Seimas and in the Lithuanian language, the official name of the law on the Lithuanian state flag (adopted, as noted above, on June 26, 1991, document no. I-1497, published in “Lietuvos aidas” no. 132-0 on July 6, 1991) has changed several times. Although since 2004 the official English translation has been the “Law

- on the National Flag and Other Flags,” for the purposes of this article and for simplicity of reference given the several previous forms of the name, I use the “Law on the National Flag.”
- 5 Based on the Law of the National Flag, administrative and criminal legal liabilities regarding national symbols are previewed in Lithuanian Code of Administrative Offences and the Criminal Code. For more on the topic, see Mesonis (2012).
 - 6 Translations of plenary sessions are my own.
 - 7 <http://www.lrs.lt/>.
 - 8 For wider discussion of focus groups, see Barbour (2007), Fern (2001), Kitzinger and Barbour (1999), Krzyżanowski (2008).
 - 9 For practical considerations of time, financial costs and logistics, I decided to choose persons who were residing (at the time of the focus-group discussions) in the capital, Vilnius, and environs. According to the 2011 census, the Vilnius region is the most ethnically diverse region in Lithuania (Statistics 2013).
 - 10 For similar—though not discourse analysis-based—approach of juxtaposing political and private perceptions of ethnicity across different temporal registers, see Brubaker 2006.
 - 11 March 11—the “Day of Restoration of Independence of Lithuania”—is the date of Lithuania’s declaration of independence from the USSR in 1990.
 - 12 February 16—the “Day of the Restoration of the Lithuanian State”—is the national holiday of Lithuania commemorating the adoption of the Act of Independence which declared Lithuania an independent state, by the Council of Lithuania on 16 February 1918.
 - 13 13 January—the “Day of the Defenders of Freedom”—commemorates civilian victims of Soviet military actions during the seizure of the television tower in Vilnius on January 13, 1991.
 - 14 Statistics on the number of violations of these articles of the Code of Administrative Offences and Criminal Code are not publicly available. I have contacted the police department under the Lithuanian Ministry of Interior. To date I have received only the following data regarding the violations of Article 188(1) of Code of Administrative Offences, the register for which, according to the police department, was started in 2010, by year and number of registered violations: 2010, 784; 2011, 394; 2012, 531; 2013, 575; 2014, 387; 2015, 634; 2016 (first six months), 295.

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