

Discursive construction of Lithuania's "others:" the case of Belarus

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This article analyzes discursive representations of Lithuania and of Belarus as Lithuania's "Other" in the context of the recent political crisis in Ukraine. Focusing on the media discourse of Lithuanian intellectuals regarding the historical Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and its legacy, it examines how Belarus and its role vis-à-vis Lithuania have been depicted. The analysis is informed by the discourse-historical approach within critical discourse analysis, using thematic content and argumentation schemes for studying the images ascribed to the GDL, Belarus, and Lithuania in the selected texts. Focus in the discourse of intellectuals on the GDL as a historical homeland is found to shift from history as a scholarly endeavor to the politics of history and the uses of the past in today's political projects. Belarus and the GDL emerge as topics not only historically and politically salient but also potentially dangerous for Lithuania within the setting of the events in Ukraine.

Keywords: national identity; discourse analysis; Lithuania; Belarus; Grand Duchy of Lithuania; Ukraine crisis

Introduction

The situation in Ukraine remains precarious since the outbreak of the crisis in late November 2013, with national divisions and territorial disputes particularly visible. Has this also affected perceptions of nationhood and concerns about command over national territory in other states? Even at this early stage, opportunities for research open up at the micro-level, since "large-scale political transformations have ground-level sources and effects" (Auyero and Joseph 2007, 2). This article explores changes in discourses on national identity and territory in the context of the Ukrainian crisis by examining the case of Lithuania.

It was during Lithuania's presidency of the Council of the European Union (from 1 July to 31 December 2013) that Ukraine abruptly declined to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, one week before the Eastern Partnership Summit on 28–29 November in Vilnius. That decision precipitated a series of events: the Euromaidan demonstrations, the ousting of then-President Viktor Yanukovich, the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, and warfare in Donbas. Lithuanian politicians expressed support for the Euromaidan protests, citing "the right of all people in sovereign states to choose a better future for themselves" (Grybauskaitė 2014), for the new Ukrainian government (Seimas 2014b), and for Yanukovich's replacement, Petro Poroshenko (President of the Republic of Lithuania 2014). The annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas were depicted as Russian aggression against Ukraine (Foreign Ministry 2015).

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The period of the Lithuanian EU presidency marks a symbolic beginning of the crisis in Ukraine. Of course, these multifaceted developments have deeper political, economic, and social roots (see Sakwa 2015; Wilson 2014; Wolff 2015), where Lithuania is but one of many affected actors outside Ukraine. Still, I hold that Lithuania's concerns for its territorial security make it a pertinent case for inquiring into Ukrainian spillover effects on perceptions of nationhood.

I view "nations" according to the definition by Lowell W. Barrington: collectives of people who "are not just unified by culture; they are also unified by a particular – and powerful – sense of purpose: controlling the territory that the members of the group believe belongs to them" and "both these elements – culture and belief in territorial control – play powerful unifying roles in national identity" (2006, 7). Lithuanian political discourse became marked by apprehensions of possible threats to its own borders in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. In an interview with *The Washington Post* on 24 September 2014, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė called Russia a "state with terrorist elements," adding:

If we will be too soft with our sanctions or adapt sanctions but not implement them, I think he [Vladimir Putin] will go further trying to unite east Ukraine with south Ukraine and Crimea. He recently said that in two days he is capable to reach Warsaw, the Baltic States and Bucharest. So that is an open threat to his neighbors. (Weymouth 2014)

In its "Resolution on the threats from the Russian Federation to security in Ukraine and across Europe No XII-780" the Seimas (Lithuanian parliament) stated: "focused actions of the Russian Federation violating bilateral and multilateral agreements on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity threaten not only Ukraine's or its neighbors' security, but also security of EU and NATO member states and stability in Europe" (Seimas 2014b). These concerns are significant for at least two reasons. First, because they were used in justifying policies like reinstating compulsory military service from 2015 (Defense Ministry 2015); and, second, I will argue, because they influence how national identity is represented in public discourses.

Belarus and Lithuania: questions of territory in politics and scholarship

In the context of the Ukraine crisis, the ways of depicting Belarus, as compared with Russia, have been highly mixed in Lithuania. On the political level, Belarus and Lithuania have no territorial disputes. According to the 2011 census, there were 36,200 ethnic Belarusians living in Lithuania (1.2% of the population) and 2,561,000 individuals (84.2% of the population) identified themselves as "ethnic Lithuanians" that year¹ (Statistics 2013). The 2012 Lithuanian governmental program expresses the intent to "support Belarusian efforts to strengthen independence, to develop democracy and civil society" (Seimas 2012). This political orientation was re-emphasized prior to the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU, and the Eastern Partnership policy was marked as a key priority of the Presidency (Gedvilas 2013; Seimas 2013b). In his welcoming speech at the meeting in the Seimas with the representatives of Belarusian political parties on 26 June 2013, the Deputy Speaker of the Seimas and Chair of the Committee on European Affairs, Gediminas Kirkišas, stated:

Belarus is a crucial partner for Lithuania. Not coincidentally, all the four main priorities of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, including energy security, the Baltic Sea Strategy, protection of EU's external borders, and the Eastern Partnership, are associated with Belarus. [...] I would like to emphasize that Lithuania is looking forward to the membership of Belarus in the European Union. (Seimas 2013a)

After the Euromaidan events, Lithuania's official political discourse regarding Belarus did not change significantly. Expectations of continued negotiations and dialog with Belarus were expressed (Eastern Partnership Summit 2013). Belarus, with the other Eastern Partnership countries, was now described as the target of political pressure from Russia (Seimas 2013c). Following the annexation of Crimea, however, hints of tacit reservations about Belarus surfaced. One of the goals stated in the "Accord between the political parties represented in the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania on strategic guidelines for the foreign, security, and defense policy of the Republic of Lithuania for 2014–2020" is "increase of the country's deterrence potential by strengthening the protection of the state border with Belarus and the Kaliningrad Region (Russian Federation)" (Seimas 2014a). Nevertheless, even against the background of the war in Donbas, the Foreign Ministry stressed, "Lithuania appreciates the coherent position of Belarus regarding non-recognition of annexations of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Crimea" (2014).

However, territorial issues between Lithuania and Belarus are perceived as fairly complex within Lithuanian historiography. The current territories of both were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), a feudal polity that existed from the thirteenth century until 1795. Both countries can relate to the GDL as a historical homeland, but their national historiographies diverge in interpreting its history. According to Kamuntavičius (2013, 137–139), the major conflict lies between Lithuanian national historiography's view of the GDL as a mainly Lithuanian polity and what Nelly Bekus calls an alternative historiography of Belarus with the "GDL as a largely Belarusian state, as a political unit where Belarusian culture and language were the basis of the state" (Bekus 2010, 182). The latter view exists in the shadow of the official state ideology and historiography, which focus on "an appeal to Soviet experience" and consider "affiliation to state unions or federations outside Russia [...] as having a negative impact on Belarusian people and lands" (Bekus 2010, 280). However, Kamuntavičius argues that in Belarus "the idea of the Grand Duchy as a Belarusian state is much stronger than ever in the last hundred years" (2013, 138–139). Such differences are significant here not in terms of their objectivity or scientific accuracy, but as a reference point for studying images of Belarus and Lithuania.

Of particular interest is how diverging interpretations of history are perceived by Lithuanian intellectuals from various fields (not only by historians) and communicated to broader audiences. Just how are the GDL, Belarus, and Lithuania represented in their public discourse? Here an "intellectual" is defined as

someone who, on the basis of a specific authority acquired in struggles within the intellectual, artistic, or literary field, according to the inherent values of these relatively autonomous spheres, intervenes in the political field on the basis of an authority, a work, a competence, a virtue, or an ethic. (Bourdieu and Champagne 2014, 221)

Intellectuals are key actors in the process of knowledge (re)production and distribution, and in the political field.

Expressions of the discourse of intellectuals in mass media are important for two reasons. First, the media are highly significant arenas where discourses of nationhood can unfold (Mihelj 2011, 25). Second, the media have become key platforms for the ideas of intellectuals (Régis Debray, as cited in Le 2006, 33). Research on the national identity discourses of Lithuanian intellectuals has largely used their academic works as empirical material for analysis (see, e.g. Donskis 2002, 2005; Jokubaitis 2001; Rindzevičiūtė 2003). By contrast, my focus is on the role of the Ukraine crisis in the discourse of intellectuals on the GDL and Belarus in the Lithuanian mass media.

Discursive construction of national identities

I start from the assumption that ideational, symbolic, and ritualistic strategies are important in the process of consolidating national identity (see, e.g. Cummings 2009; Elgenius 2011; Eriksen and Jenkins 2007; Guibernau 2007; Kolstø 2014; Thiesse 2001). Further, I draw on an assumption proposed by Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Reisigl, and Ruth Wodak: “national identities – conceived as specific forms of social identities – are *discursively*, by means of language and other semiotic systems, *produced, reproduced, transformed, and destroyed*” (1999, 153 – emphasis in the original). Thus, my analysis deals with the symbolic level of national identity formation by exploring discourses about nationhood.

Modernist (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990) and ethno-symbolic (Hutchinson 1987; Smith 1991) approaches differ in their understanding of the extent to which and how national identities can be constructed. Richard Jenkins convincingly argues that “groups may be imagined, but this does not mean that they are imaginary” (2008, 11). My analysis focuses on the “imagined” or discursively constructed dimension of nationhood as a form of collective identity, but does not exclude “the experiential ‘presence’” (Jenkins 2008, 2011) of national collectivities.

Research on the discursive construction of national identities, mainly involving various types of critical discourse analysis (Krzyzanowski 2010, 46–47), is of particular interest within the discourse-historical approach (DHA)² (see, e.g. De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999; Krzyzanowski 2010; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak and Kovacs 2003; Wodak et al. 2009). “Discourse” in the DHA framework is defined as “a form of social practice. It assumes a dialectical relationship between particular discursive events and the situations, institutions, and social structures in which they are embedded” (De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999, 157). This definition facilitates inquiry into development of discourses in the light of their sociopolitical setting by establishing them as mutually interdependent forces; it also responds to Rogers Brubaker, who noted that, besides stating that nationhood is constructed, constructivist theorizing ought to elaborate in detail on how it is constructed (2006, 7). Examining discourses within specific thematic and sociopolitical contexts provides insights into the details of the specific content with which the image of national identity is imbued. Here I take discourse about the GDL as historical homeland as the topical background, and the Ukraine crisis as the sociopolitical background for analysis.

The territorial aspect of national identities does more than distinguish it from other possible types of collective identities: ideational perceptions of homeland also relate to how difference is constructed among national collectivities. “Understanding a particular group’s idea (or ideas) of homeland is necessary for understanding its political and social conduct and its relations with a national ‘other’” (Barrington 2006, 15). Thus, I propose that specific understandings of homeland concern not only the national “other” within the borders of the state but also the external “other” – other nation-states.

Theoretical reflections about the role of the self–other dichotomy in the process of identity formation, first developed by Hegel (Neumann 1996, 141; Taylor 1994, 26, 36), refer to a relational content of a collective identity pertaining to the definition of “an identity group by what it is not – that is, the way it views *other* identity groups” (Abdelal et al. 2009, 19 – emphasis in the original). In nationalism studies and international relations, “analyses of self/other nexuses hold out the promise of a better understanding of who ‘the actors’ are, how they were constituted, how they maintain themselves, and under which preconditions they may thrive” (Neumann 1999, 37). Discourses about national homeland and its control form the terrain where various interpretations of the “self” and the “other” can be examined.

Empirical material: sampling and analysis

To explore how the Ukraine crisis impacted the discourse of Lithuanian intellectuals on the GDL as historical homeland, I have examined texts published in Lithuanian mass media before and after Russia's annexation of Crimea, a pivotal point in the process of the Ukraine crisis relating to territorial issues. This choice was informed by the emphasis put within the DHA framework on following "the diachronic change which particular types of discourse undergo during a specified period of time" (Wodak et al. 2009, 8).

Sampled texts were divided into two periods. Period 1 starts on 12 January 2007 (the date of the earliest text found, see below). The signing of the Treaty on Accession of the Republic of Crimea to Russia on 18 March 2014 marks the start of Period 2, which runs until 31 August 2014. After August 2014 the data reached a saturation point, not providing significantly new topics or topoi.

Texts were searched in online versions³ (Lithuanian-language⁴ for all sources) of the major national and regional press.⁵ The following search keywords were used: "Lietuvos Didžioji Kunigaikštystė" (Grand Duchy of Lithuania), "LDK" (acronym for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania), and "Vytis" (the Lithuanian coat-of-arms, associated with the GDL period)⁶ combined with "Baltarusija" (Belarus) in all grammatical forms. Texts were then selected where opinions of intellectuals (e.g. scholars, writers, political analysts) were expressed, either directly or through interviews and quotes. For Period 1, 14 texts satisfied the sampling criteria, as did seven texts for Period 2. Texts were counted only once; with texts published more than once, only one of the sources was used. Various genres are represented: commentary, round-table discussion, lecture, interview, and academic articles (first published in an academic journal, later disseminated in mass media). Each text was assigned a number – e.g. Text 2_1, where "2" indicates Period 2, and "1" that it is the earliest text in that period.

The empirical data were analyzed applying several elements of the DHA analysis model. First, main themes belonging to the overall discourse of the GDL as historical homeland were identified. The content of the chosen discourse was summed up by the main topics revealing what was actually being talked about (De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999, 157–158; Krzyzanowski 2013, 116). The analysis focused on the argumentation schemes used to justify claims within these topics. With argumentation schemes, "topos" is the key concept. Deriving from Aristotle's works on rhetoric, the term (plural "topoi") has multiple interpretations within argumentation theory (Walton, Macagno, and Reed 2008, 275). Here I view "topos" as belonging to "the obligatory, either explicit or inferable, premises. They are the content-related⁷ warrants or 'conclusion rules' that connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 74–75). The definition of "topos" as not only an abstract formal and functional but also a content-related concept is based on "the observation that argumentation is always topic-related and field-dependent (i.e., depending on the configuration of social domains, disciplines, theories, etc.)" (Reisigl 2014, 77). Thematic and argumentative exploration of the data is used to examine the images ascribed to the GDL, Belarus, and Lithuania in the texts selected.

Period 1: GDL as an object of history

The texts from Period 1 are dominated by two main topics: the political and cultural characteristics of the GDL and the implications of the GDL legacy today.

Political and cultural characteristics of GDL

The first topic is mostly expressed as academic debate over historical facts and their interpretation. Arguments here employ the topos of historical “truth” or historical “evidence.” This topos relies on the conditional: since the GDL is an object of history as a science, one should accept only those interpretations of its history that are based on scientific definitions, facts, and evidence. The object of this discursive battle is the “correct” scholarly interpretation of history, with claims justified in terms of scientific accuracy.

The overall theme of the GDL’s political and cultural characteristics or its political and cultural nature encompasses two related subtopics: what type of polity the GDL was, and the ownership of this polity. The latter appears as a question either of the sociopolitical ownership of the GDL during its historical existence, or of who should be considered the heir to the legacy of this polity today. In the texts, the owner is determined by the GDL’s political and cultural traits. In Examples 1 and 2 below, justification of ownership rights is based on the GDL’s political form.

Example 1: In evaluating the GDL we cannot transfer the current understanding of a federal state to the Middle Ages. In the medieval state, vassal relationships existed between rulers and various vassals. [...] Agreements existed, but between unequal partners: rulers and vassals. (Text 1_2, 8 September 2009)

Example 2: I am interested in more specific questions that arise when we assume that the GDL was an empire: what kind of empire was it, what made it similar to and different from other empires? (Text 1_4, 13 December 2009)

Conceptualizing the GDL as a medieval state based on vassal relations or as an empire is directly linked to the idea of ownership as associated with political elites and not the general population within the GDL’s territory. Thus, the rulers have the right to claim the GDL as their own even though they are a minority.

Example 3: In fact, the third section of the third chapter [of the book *Nepasiskelbusioji imperija* by Zenonas Norkus 2009] is titled exactly this – “Whose empire was the GDL?” It is aimed at a constructive polemic with Russian and Belarusian historiography. According to the former, the GDL is “western Russian” according to the latter, it is Belarusian or at least an “eastern Slavic” state. [...] Ethno-cultural processes in the GDL until 1387 differed little from those that happened many times in many political formations created by bellicose ethnic groups without their own written tradition that became the politically dominant stratum, numerically overshadowing ethnic groups speaking different languages. A similar fate awaited Lithuanians (Balts) in Ruthenian lands. [...] The Catholic baptism of ethnic Lithuania and the abandoning of the goal of conquering all of Rus changed the situation. The GDL remained the state of Lithuanians, but different Lithuanians than you and me. (Text 1_4, 23 December 2009)

Example 4: The political elite in the GDL starting from the 13th century, during the rule of Mindaugas⁸ and later, was ethnically Lithuanian. [...] The Lithuanianness of Mindaugas is testified also by the name of this GDL ruler. [...] The GDL was not created in Navahrudak.⁹ This city became a part of the GDL after the expansion. [...] It is not proven that Mindaugas was crowned in Navahrudak. (Text 1_2, 8 September 2009)

Representations of the early rulers stress non-Slavic characteristics such as language, territory (as in Example 4), and/or religion (first, polytheism with reference to Baltic tribes, then Catholicism, as in Example 3). The topos of historical “truth” is exemplified within this image of GDL political elites by citing as evidence precise names and dates, providing a specific chronology of the events, as well as the verbs “to testify” and “to prove.”

Poland, as both a Slavic and a Catholic country, is of interest here. It is represented as an indispensable ally of the GDL rulers against Russia – but the union with Poland is described as the end of the political sovereignty of the GDL.

Example 5: [...] in the 16th century this was not enough to withstand the might of Moscow, and that is why the Union of Lublin was absolutely necessary for Lithuania. Here [in Lithuania] many are convinced that the Union of Lublin destroyed the state of Lithuania because it fell into Poland's embrace. However, after the Union of Lublin, the territory, the treasuries of the two states, the armies, the ministries remained separate. [...] Later this union grew into a united federal state, where the former sovereignty of the GDL was almost gone, and the Constitution of May 3, 1791, consolidated this state arrangement. (Text 1_2, 8 September 2009)

Non-Slavic characteristics are underscored to dissociate GDL rulers not so much from the Poles (at least not until the Union of Lublin in 1569),¹⁰ but from Ruthenians¹¹ and Russians – with some differences. The Ruthenian territories are positioned as inner, albeit culturally different, “others” (Examples 3 and 4), whereas Russia is an external “other” of the GDL (Example 5).

Post-Soviet implications of the GDL legacy

The second focus of Period 1, implications of the GDL for the present, draws on three different topoi: of political ideals of independence, democracy, ethnic inclusion, and civic solidarity; of challenge concerning the GDL legacy; and of danger and threat. The first one can be summed up as follows: since such commendable political ideals as independence, democracy, ethnic inclusion, and civic solidarity were prevalent in the GDL, one should accept and continue this tradition. The second topos, of challenge, relies on the following: Belarus seeks to proclaim itself as the sole heir to the GDL, and that challenges Lithuania's rights to the legacy of the GDL. The topos of danger and threat can be reduced to the following conclusion rule: “if there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something against them” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 77).

The focus of discussions on the GDL legacy in post-Soviet times remains on the issues of ownership of the GDL and its political-cultural features. However, the topos of political ideals emphasizes the ideational nature of the GDL and the political ideals it represents today. In Period 1, these ideals are independence, democracy, ethnic inclusion, and civic solidarity, which should be maintained.

Example 6: After the collapse of the Soviet Union and gaining independence, Belarus chose Vytis as its coat-of-arms, just like Lithuania (a rare and eloquent heraldic oddity); truly everything changed after Lukashenka came to power. (Text 1_3, 2 October 2009)

Example 7: 14 years ago in Belarus, Vytis was featured as soon as the seeds of democracy sprouted. [...] The dictator came, hid Vytis away, replacing it with his own state emblem. (Text 1_1, 12 January 2007)

Vytis is represented as a symbol of democracy and breaking away from the Soviet Union. Moreover, the issue of Lithuania sharing the same symbolism with Belarus is not problematized. Within the frame of aspirations for democracy and independence from the Soviet Union, the notion of ownership of the GDL expands to include Belarus as an heir to the GDL legacy. A distinction is made between Belarus before and after the Lukashenka regime came to power: it is the “before” and not the “after” Belarus that is depicted as a legitimate ideational successor to the GDL.

The GDL as a multi-ethnic polity is invoked in arguments for broadening the understanding of the current Lithuanian national identity (Example 8):

Q: Perhaps this history can be a new basis for Lithuanian identity? History that passed through different changing identities among a certain group of people and their ancestors living in a certain territory?

A: Without doubt. [...] On this basis we could integrate Lithuania's Poles, and Lithuania's Jews, and Lithuania's Russians, and Lithuania's Lithuanians. [...] Here the Poles and some

of the Russians, and Belarusians, and Jews would be able to recognize themselves. It could provide a background for communication and cooperation with these states. (Text 1_9, 24 January 2013)

Constructing the Lithuanian national identity in terms of the territories of the GDL rather than on an ethnic or cultural basis is supported by claims that it would enhance both inner integration within the current borders, and Lithuania's international relations. With this appeal to the multicultural nature of the GDL, the current Lithuanian national identity is given the normative objective of inclusion of ethnic minorities.

In Example 9, discussion about Lithuania's attitude toward the Lukashenka regime is anchored in the topos of political or civic solidarity:

In Belarus there is an absolute majority of "sleepers," people who support Lukashenka, there is a very small divided and tragic opposition. [...] And nearby there is a drowsy, peasant-like, consumerist, with no civic solidarity, no historical self-respect, Lithuania. [...] I remember that when Lukashenka first came to power 17 years ago, some very friendly people in Lithuania were rejoicing, saying that finally they [Belarusians] will stop using Vytis, Vytis will be ours alone. [...] That open way of talking, a remnant from GDL times, is characteristic of only a few intellectuals, most probably a historian or a poet, who seem ridiculous to everybody else. (Text 1_6, 3 June 2011)

This text sets the GDL against both contemporary Lithuania and Belarus. The GDL is represented as a space of openness and civic solidarity among its members. Both countries are linked to the GDL but have abandoned its ideational heritage in their own ways: Belarus by succumbing to Lukashenka's regime, and Lithuania by being indifferent to the situation. The sarcastic portrayal of the wish to monopolize GDL symbolism hints that sharing the legacy between Lithuania and Belarus would not go against the ideational nature of the GDL.

However, the topos of challenge concerning the legacy of the GDL continues to problematize the issue of sharing it with Belarus. Arguments emphasize potential challenges to Lithuania's rights to the GDL. Compared with the topoi of historical "truth" or political ideals, the agency of Belarus is different within the topos of challenge. The former topoi portray Belarus as a passive actor, either yielding to the external pressures in the GDL epoch or giving in to an authoritarian regime after the Soviet collapse. Within the topos of challenge, however, Belarus is described as acting independently from other countries, a proactive agent taking the initiative to ensure its own interests.

Example 10: Sharing a common property is often difficult, even dangerous. By trying to ascribe to themselves all the GDL legacy, the Belarusians are behaving in a way unfriendly not only toward us, but also toward the Ukrainians, and partially toward the Poles and Russians. (Text 1_5, 1 February 2011)

Here the GDL is seen as a "common property" to which Belarus is making unilateral claims. The circumstance of Belarus acting independently from the other states brings it forward as an autonomous actor exerting its power. The status of Belarus as an independent agent is reinforced by attributing to it the image of challenger – a representation strengthened by listing Ukrainians, Poles, and Russians as well as Lithuanians as potential targets of "unfriendly" Belarusian behavior. Similarly in Example 11:

In his book, Norman Davies says that Belarus is the heir of the GDL. That is a debatable question. However, if for some reason the project of Lithuanian nationalism had failed, the Belarusians could have taken the whole history of the GDL and could have said that it was theirs – which, in fact, they are doing now. (Text 1_9, 24 January 2013)

By implying that the GDL's history is comparable to a property with potential successors, Belarus is set as a rival to Lithuania's rights to the legacy of the GDL. Example 12 elaborates on the actors within Belarus seen as responsible for this "appropriation" of the GDL:

I would say that four out of five historians [in Belarus] are convinced of the Belarusian nature of the GDL. For a long time it seemed that Lukashenka was slowing this down. But now this concept already features in official Belarusian newspapers. [...] Lukashenka can do anything, when he needs it, he can arm himself with such a concept. (Text 1_8, 2 September 2012)

The indication of historians, media, and Lukashenka in particular as leading actors in claiming the GDL legacy increases Belarusian agency in two ways. First, unlike other examples using general terms like "Belarus" or "Belarusians," this text points to specific, personalized agents, reducing the level of abstraction. Second, perhaps more importantly, depicting Lukashenka as having absolute power indicates that other political powers in Belarus do not stand behind his regime.

Such characterizations of Belarus are rare in the texts using topos of danger and threat. Here the influence of Russia on Belarus becomes the central question. An indirect reference to Russia is made in Example 13 below:

From an early age, from the school desk, for 30 years or more, Belarusians have been taught that Mindaugas, Gediminas,¹² and all others are Belarusian rulers, and all of that state is Belarus. [...] to produce a nation that would feel morally responsible and would rejoice at [...] the occupation of the Baltic States, because the old capital city for Belarusians today is Vilnius, not Minsk. [...] This is no longer a historical discussion, it is already politics. (Text 1_11, 23 September 2013)

Although Belarusians are named as a nation that would "rejoice" in case of the occupation of the Baltic States, the allusion to Russia is felt, as it is hard to imagine how Belarus could occupy the three Baltic States all by itself. The perceived threat of occupation transfers discussion on the GDL from the scientific to the political domain.

A further nuance to the topos of danger is expressed through apprehensions of Belarus as becoming completely controlled by Russia:

Example 14: Today Belarus is a nation that is creating its own historical narrative. The pro-Western opposition is weak and pressed from all sides by the hammer and sickle. If the Belarusians are not allowed to "share" the history of the GDL together with us, they will ultimately return to the embrace of Russia. "To share" does not mean to take away, to slice, or to cut: it means to love and to cherish together. At least I understand it this way. It should be understood that way by all people of common sense. (Text 1_12, 24 September 2013)

Here the GDL is as an object to be "loved and cherished" together with Belarus. Yet, this follows a statement indicating that Belarus needs permission from Lithuania to do so. Lithuania should be encouraged to grant this, because of the Russian menace. Once again, Belarus is assigned a passive role, dependent on either Lithuania or Russia. This depiction of Belarus as well as growing concerns about Russia become prominent in Period 2.

Period 2: GDL as an object of politics

Texts from Period 2 revolve around two topics: Belarusian politics of history and culture, and the physical heritage of the GDL.

Belarusian politics of history and culture

Here the topos of danger and threat (real or imagined) is dominant. The texts studied here discuss Belarusian interpretations of GDL history as potential dangers and threats, and the

question is raised whether Belarusian politics of history and culture are used as instruments in an “information war” against Lithuania.

Examples 15 and 16 demonstrate skepticism, if not of Belarusian intentions of making claims to the present territory of Lithuania, at least of dangers that Belarusian politics of history might pose.

Example 15: This, by the way, should also be recalled by so-called enthusiasts of the politics of history. A memorial to Algirdas¹³ in Vitebsk¹⁴ will not turn the Grand Duke of Lithuania into a more Belarusian hero. It will also not make Belarus more Lithuanian. The memorial will show only one thing – what Belarusians at the beginning of the 21st century thought about 14th-century Lithuanian dukes. (Text 2_6, 9 July 2014)

Example 16: A new wave of anxiety is rising in Lithuania. What will happen if Lithuania with Vilnius should be seized by Belarusians – more precisely, by Russians using Belarusians as a cover? [...] This is not to say that Belarus (or Russia via Belarus) does not pose a threat to Lithuania. Yet, also from this perspective, history itself is more important than the politics of history. [...] states are not lost because [...] “the enemies write different history.” More often, enemies win by building a bigger cannon. (Text 2_3, 2 May 2014)

Even if the politics of history is seen as a less-serious threat than military actions, the texts still make a point of affirming the Lithuanian identity of the GDL and its rulers. Also important here is the portrayal of Belarus as a tool in the hands of Russia, depriving Belarus of its power to act as an independent agent. Such an image of Belarus differs significantly from its representations in Period 1, where Belarus – whether passively as part of the GDL or actively as an independent actor after the dissolution of the Soviet Union – was differentiated from Russia.

Other opinions in the data perceive politics of history as considerably dangerous and a military threat as a possibility.

Example 17: From the perspective of history as a science, that the GDL “belonged” [to Lithuania] is not in doubt. [...] It was not Belarusians who created the GDL, it was the GDL that created the Belarusians and Ukrainians. [...] To prove the [Lithuanian] “ownership” of the GDL scientifically would be like attempting to prove that my hands are my own. However, there is another more important dimension of history – history as communication. The information war in Lithuania has finally become a publicly recognized reality. (Text 2_4, 7 May 2014)

The appeal to history as a science performs a double role: it provides additional legitimacy to the idea of the GDL as belonging to Lithuania while depicting Belarusian historiography on the GDL not as science but as a tool in an information war. This takes the debate about the GDL and its history out of the discipline of historiography and into the realm of politics. Argumentation in the name of historical “truth” is perceived as irrelevant in politics, so the topos of scientific accuracy yields to that of danger. Example 18 concerns not only an information war, but also the possibility of military attack:

This is a much generalized view, but the essence is clear – the GDL is Belarusian. And if so, then – if needed, agreed, and demanded by Putin – claims can be made to Vilnius and the Vilnius region. That may seem a fantastical notion – but, half a year ago, did not the occupation of part of Ukraine sound fantastical? (Text 2_2, 24 April 2014)

This refers openly to the situation in Ukraine, thereby placing discussions of the nature of the GDL within the context of a military threat. It also stands in sharp contrast to Example 12 in Period 1, where Lukashenka is singled out as all-powerful. Now Putin is given the central role: it is on the basis of his needs, his agreement, his demands that Belarus could lay claim to Lithuanian territory. The statements in Example 18 resemble the discourse of the Lithuanian political scene exemplified by the interview with Lithuania’s President Grybauskaitė.

The physical heritage of the GDL

The discussion of the physical heritage of the GDL (castles, palaces) builds on a topos of sympathy for Belarus, thus: since the GDL provides Belarus with an alternative to the Soviet historical narrative, one should sympathize with Belarusian attempts to embrace the GDL as part of its history. Unlike in Example 14, in the text below this sympathy is justified without relating it to danger or threat:

Example 19: I think, and some historians might agree, that Belarus is creating its own historical narrative now. The heritage of the GDL is very important, and the castles represent it. When the country was brought into the Soviet Union, this heritage was taken away. Belarus is the most deprived or the most self-deprived nation; it started to create its historical narrative in the geopolitical and cultural sphere very late. The castles serve as part of that historical narrative. (Text 2_7, 9 August 2014)

Here the incorporation of the GDL epoch into the Belarusian historical narrative is presented as a counterbalance to the Soviet legacy. The role of Belarus in this example is rather ambiguous, more of an “active victim.” Belarus is depicted as an independent actor writing its own historical narrative – but also as a belated, “deprived or self-deprived” nation. This weakens the capacity of Belarus to act as a full-fledged agent.

Conclusions

The analysis of the empirical material offers three main conclusions. First, after Period 1, the themes and arguments used in the discourse on the GDL as a historical homeland shift. The themes of the political implications of the GDL’s history and legacy for today are evident in both periods. However, themes related to scholarly discussions about GDL historiography, its political and cultural features, are more prominent in Period 1. In Period 2, debates about the political use of history come into focus, and Belarusian politics of history and culture regarding the GDL are approached not as a scholarly issue, but as belonging to the political domain.

Even more striking is the difference in the argumentation devices used in justifying the claims made in the texts in each period. In Period 1, the topic of the GDL and its history is largely framed by the topos of historical “truth,” referring to the GDL as an object of scientific inquiry. In Period 2, arguments focus not on debating historical “facts” and “truths,” but on their potential use as propaganda material and pretexts for military actions. The topos of danger trumps that of scientific accuracy.

The topos of danger is not the only politically charged topos found in the texts in both periods. The topoi of political ideals and of challenge also feature in Period 1. Interestingly, the topos of sympathy is present in Period 2. This is by no means politically neutral: it is connected to anti-Soviet sentiments. The (admittedly limited) appearance of this topos may seem unexpected, as the danger topos is otherwise so pronounced in Period 2, where the theme of the GDL’s material or immaterial legacy is often linked with the topic of politics of history and, thereby, the topos of danger.

The second conclusion concerns the discursive representations of the GDL, Belarus, and Lithuania. While the image of the GDL as a polity is similar in both periods, the characteristics and roles ascribed to Belarus and Lithuania differ. The GDL is represented as a multi-ethnic medieval polity created and ruled by ethnically Lithuanian elites, at least until the Union of Lublin in 1569. Here Belarus is depicted in an interdependent relationship with Lithuania. A connection between Lithuania and Belarus is established by representing the GDL as their common historical homeland. However, the association of Belarus with the GDL is depicted in terms of political affiliation after the creation of the GDL

through military expansion. Belarus is not included in the narrative of the GDL's inception. The role of Belarus is also reduced by the use of "Ruthenian" instead of "Belarusian" when speaking of the GDL period.

The GDL is set in relation to political ideals such as independence, democracy, civic solidarity, and ethnic inclusion, and in opposition to the Soviet Union and the Lukashenka regime. It is within this context that the roles of contemporary Belarus and Lithuania are discussed in Period 1. On the one hand, Belarusian politics of history are perceived as heavily influenced by Russia. On the other hand, the Lukashenka regime is depicted as demonstrating the desire and potential to make unilateral claims on the history and legacy of the GDL. It is here that Belarus escapes from its passive image and becomes an autonomous agent. Contemporary Belarusian historiography is depicted as challenging the ideas of Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian historical narratives.

Also Lithuania is pictured in a twofold manner. On the one hand, Lithuania is encouraged to hold on to the ideational legacy of the GDL: to introduce an ethnically inclusive understanding of national identity and to show civic awareness by supporting democratic processes in Belarus, instead of aiming to monopolize the GDL legacy. On the other hand, Lithuania's rights as the successor to the GDL are seen as endangered by Belarusian interpretations of history. Lithuania and Belarus become positioned as rivals.

Period 2 is characterized by descriptions of decreased agency powers for both Belarus and Lithuania. The capacity of Belarus to act as a proactive autonomous agent is compromised by its being a "belated," "deprived," and "self-deprived" nation with a persistent Soviet legacy and dependence on Russia. While the texts are written about Belarus, the major concern often proves to be Russia – especially how Russia might use Belarusian interpretations of history as a cover for military actions against Lithuania. Lithuania is thus positioned as an object of information wars and a potential victim of military threat.

Finally, in Period 2, the direct and tacit references to the Ukrainian crisis and Russia in discussing Belarus and Lithuania situate the otherwise narrow discourse on the GDL within larger political events. The interdependence between discourses and their sociopolitical contexts is exemplified by the discursive shift on the GDL, from an object of history to an object of politics. These two conceptualizations indicate contrasting attitudes toward Belarus: from regarding it as the insider of the GDL to considering it as the ally of present-day Russia. This latter representation is linked to perceived threats to the national homeland: to the GDL as the historical homeland through the means of the politics of history, and to contemporary Lithuania through potential military action.

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Notes

1. As reported by respondents themselves.
2. For an extensive overview of various approaches within critical discourse analysis, see Wodak and Meyer (2009) and Hart and Cap (2014).

3. Online versions of the print press were chosen to find texts that were accessible not only in print but also to wider audiences.
4. My translation of all examples from Lithuanian to English.
5. Dailies: national (*Lietuvos rytas* <http://www.lrytas.lt/>, *Respublika* <http://respublika.lt/>, *Lietuvos žinios* <http://lzinios.lt/lzinios/index.php>) and regional (*Kauno diena* <http://kauno.diena.lt/>, *Šiaulių kraštas* <http://skrastras.lt/>, *Klaipėda* <http://klaipeda.diena.lt/>, *Vakarų ekspresas* <http://www.ve.lt/>). Weeklies: national (*Veidas* <http://www.veidas.lt/>) and regional (*15 minučių* <http://www.15min.lt/>). Web dailies *Delfi* <http://www.delfi.lt/>, *Bernardinai* <http://www.bernardinai.lt/>, *Balsas* <http://balsas.tv3.lt/>, *Alfa* <http://alfa.lt/>.
6. Vytiis (Паго́ня in Belarusian) was also the coat-of-arms of the Republic of Belarus, 1991–1995.
7. On the operationalization of “topos” as a content-related concept, see Reisigl (2014).
8. Mindaugas (ca. 1203–1263) was among the first known grand dukes of the GDL and the only king of Lithuania.
9. Navahraduk is a city in Belarus.
10. The Union of Lublin signed in Lublin, Poland, in 1569, created the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.
11. “Ruthenian” is used in the texts in referring to the GDL population living in the territories of present-day Belarus and Ukraine.
12. Gediminas (ca. 1275–1341) was grand duke of the GDL.
13. Algirdas (1296–1377) was grand duke of the GDL.
14. Vitebsk is a city in Belarus.

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Empirical material

All texts were last accessed on March 16, 2015.

Period 1

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