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Zbigniew Wójcik

WITOLD KAMIENIECKI'S CONCEPTION OF THE LITHUANIAN STATE*

I would like to remind you of the first years of Poland's Independence 75 years back, and Polish opinions in those days concerning one of our neighbouring states, namely Lithuania. Those were the years, when Piłsudski's federalist plans, or, to be exact, conceptions were in the making and developing. Piłsudski never stated them precisely, with full particulars, he only hinted that his principal purpose was to bring about the destruction of the Russian Empire, above all by the formation of independent national states situated in many regions of the former Tsar's empire.

The so-called Belveder – camp, with its outstanding representatives such as Tadeusz Hołówko, Leon Wasilewski and Witold Kamieniecki, tried to specify Piłsudski's general outline.

I would like to recall an interesting booklet written by the Polish historian Witold Kamieniecki (1883–1964), entitled *The Lithuanian State* and published in Warsaw in November 1918, i.e. in the first days of Independent Poland. The essence of this booklet was the Author's vision of a new Lithuanian State which was coming into existence after the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and Germany's defeat in 1918.

In accordance with Kamieniecki's conception Poles should consider all the peoples living in the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania as their equals. Poles must renounce all their historical rights to Lithuanian and

* Some Polish historians (Józef Lewandowski, *Federalizm. Litwa i Białoruś w polityce obozu belwederskiego, XI 1918–IV 1920*, Warszawa 1962) and Iwo Werschler, *Z dziejów obozu belwederskiego. Tadeusz Hołówko. Życie i działalność*, Warszawa 1984) paid attention to Kamieniecki's conceptions described in his booklet, but they did not examine them closely. Tekst referatu wygłoszonego na sesji naukowej zorganizowanej przez Columbia University, Fundację Kościuszkowską i Instytut Piłsudskiego w Nowym Jorku w 1993 r. („East Central-Europe during Wilson's presidency”).

Byelorussian lands, whereas they ought to try to create the best conditions for a full development of the peoples living there and, at the same time, to come to the best, neighbourly relations with them.

The very complicated ethnic problems will determine the basic difficulties of the future Lithuanian State. On its territories there is an unusual national mosaic, therefore it is, not seldom, very difficult to answer the question, who in those lands is a Pole, who a Lithuanian, and who a Byelorussian?

In spite of laying emphasis on the fact, that in Polish-Lithuanian-Byelorussian future relations a principle "free people with a free man, equal men with equal peoples" should be obligatory for all nations, the author of "The Lithuanian State" maintains without any hesitation that Lithuanians and Byelorussians are mostly non-political masses, very poor in state-building elements. On the contrary, Poles are the one and only politically educated and enlightened ethnic group among the Christian population on the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The educational domination of Poles resulted in such a paradox that a considerable part of Lithuanian and Byelorussian national leaders descend from the Polish intelligentsia.

The Polish enlightened stratum is another element integrating Lithuanian-Byelorussian lands. One should reckon with such a state of affairs when creating a new state in Lithuanian-Byelorussian territories.

The thesis is, without any doubt, very clear. It is absolutely impossible to build a new Lithuanian state without the participation of Poles, without the Polish intelligentsia.

Only the Poles, who have state traditions, professional competence for administering the state, or, perhaps with a certain exaggeration, a knowledge of statecraft.

Simultaneously, Kamieniecki lays stress on one absolute necessity – this new Lithuanian state must be fully tolerant, based on entirely equal rights for all nationalities. It cannot be a nationalist state of one nation because it would lead to the oppression of national minorities, permanent ferment and unrest, very perilous for Lithuania's neighbours.

Kamieniecki's opinions, however, raise doubts and must be criticized. There is one problem for instance, entirely passed over by the Author. I mean the land question. Talking of an important role to be played by Poles, it is necessary to take into consideration the social aspects of the question. Poles were, first and foremost, noblemen, landowners, while Byelorussians as well as Lithuanians, for the most part – peasants in a poor, under-developed country.

In such a situation any national quarrels and conflicts in those territories would be practically or even automatically, connected with social conflicts.

The second question – the problem of the Jewish population. Only one sentence concerning this question was written by Kamieniecki. He maintained

that he would not deal with this problem, because "the Jewish population is territorially scattered and artificially assembled". To my mind this interpretation is insufficient.

Allow me, please, to return to Kamieniecki's exposition. Vilna should, as a matter of principle, be an unquestionable capital of Lithuania, with another centre, as the second capital – Minsk.

The multinational character of the country would point out the problem of autonomous, ethnic districts. The author of the project recognizes five of them, namely: 1) Lithuania with Vilna, 2) Samogitia with Kaunas, 3) Podlachia with Bialystok, 4) Byelorussia with Minsk and 5) Polesie with Pinsk.

All the above-mentioned districts would have their own parliaments similar to that of Galicia. They would decide the administrative language, while in the national administration and in the army three languages would be equal – Polish, Lithuanian and Byelorussian.

Kamieniecki realized that his project would encounter serious difficulties and strong opposition from the Lithuanian nationalists (national activists). He also rightly pointed out that Lithuanian nationalists would be afraid of stronger nations, such as Polish, which could dominate or even absorb weaker ones. Such apprehension must be respected and that is why the author of *The Lithuanian State* presents an alternative plan, or better, an idea, for solving such a historical problem. "Instead of a unified state – he says – the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania could constitute a federation of its independent units". These would be:

1. Kaunas with its dominating Catholic Lithuanian population (about 85% to 90% – 2 m.) and territory of about 50,000 km². Besides Kaunas, there would be cities like Szavle, Rosienie and also Tilsit, Memel, Lipava as well as the Northern administration of the former Suwalki Guberniya and a small part of East Prussia.

2. Vilna with its visible dominance of Polish Catholic population and small enclaves of Lithuanian and Byelorussian groups. The territory of this part of the state would be about 60,000 km² and about 3,000,000 inhabitants. The territory would cover the former Vilna Guberniya, then North-Eastern part of the Grodno Guberniya and the Western part of the Novogrodek administrative district.

3. Minsk. The region would first of all, cover the territory of the Minsk Guberniya, Polesie and a larger part of the Grodno Guberniya. Minsk, Pinsk and Brest would be the main cities here with 80%–90% of Byelorussian members of the Orthodox Church and about 10%–20% Poles.

"The cooperation of the above-mentioned three organisms could be seen as a union – says Kamieniecki – similar to the federation of Swiss cantons. The central federal government in Vilna would consist of the following ministries: Foreign Affairs, Finances-Trade-Industry, Army, Communication-Post-Telegraph.

There would be a common Head of State and a unified foreign policy, unified customs zones, the same monetary system, one army consisting of separate contingents commun used by administrative bodies in the central government.

All other spheres of public life would be governed by the authorities of the mentioned three countries. Their governments would be appointed by the head of the new Lithuanian State and cantons would have their own parliaments.

Kamieniecki points out one particular problem. “The principle of national equality would have to be a sacred matter of the system for all parts of the federation. The special Highest National Tribunal should be established to guard such equality. The Tribunal would consists of representatives of all nations – Poles, Lithuanians and Byelorussians”. It is interesting to know that Kamieniecki thinks that foreign policy would not probably play any vital role in the life of this new Lithuanian State. In such a situation Lithuania would have no other way but to look outside for: 1) financial and technical assistance in order to solve its internal problems and 2) military assistance to guard its independence.

“The outside danger”, Kamieniecki writes, “can come only from the East, since Russia, sooner or later, will return to its expansive policy. In such a case Lithuania will have to choose: with Russia or with Europe?”. The only answer would be – with Europe against Russia. If so, Lithuania will have to look for a military alliance with Poland.

Kamieniecki concludes, writing with Cassandrian vision: “Somebody, who solving the Eastern question tries to create, to the North and South of Poland, some artificial enemies and sees a goal in blowing up mutual antagonism – can start a fire which could grow to unknown proportions”.

Historical events of the first years of Poland’s independence crossed out the federalist conceptions proposed by the Belveder or Pilsudski’s camp in solving the Lithuanian question.

The Polish-Lithuanian war in 1919–1920 (I want to call a spade a spade, there was actually a war), where after the “revolt” of general Żeligowski, Central Lithuania was created and Vilna with its districts was joined to with Poland, caused a gulf between Poles and Lithuanians which could not be filled up to the present days. It seems important that in all those plans or conceptions both Kamieniecki and his followers in Pilsudski’s camp (Hołówko, Wasilewski) saw that only a Lithuania friendly to Poland should possess Vilna.

Despite the 1918–1921 experiences Witold Kamieniecki still had a vision of Poland and her neighbours in the East. In his brief but interesting book (*Ponad zgiełkiem walk narodowościowych. Idea Jagiellońska*, Wilno 1929 – *Above the Noise of National Fight. Jagiellonian Idea*, Vilna 1929) he returned to the conception of a peaceful and harmonious coexistence between Poland, Lithuania, Byelorussia and the Ukraine. This conception of coexistence of nations and respect for their identities, their own national visions, should become a strong weapon

against extreme nationalisms. It is worth quoting Kamieniecki's opinion, which is a question of the day also at present. "Unfruitful, thoughtless war between nationalisms blind to facts fought on nationally mixed territories caused in many souls discouragement from all forms of national patriotism".

Witold Kamieniecki's conceptions played a significant role in the federalist ideas in Pilsudski's camp (Hołówko, Wasilewski). Pilsudski himself neither supported nor disavowed them, but in practice he directed the Polish policy towards Lithuania and Byelorussia in a different way.

Kamieniecki's idea was based on a profound and deep knowledge of history. History determined this idea. That is why Kamieniecki's conceptions are a classical example of drawing on history while building a present policy. It would not be proper to use only historical experiences in solving today's vital political problems, it would be nonsense, but one should not forget the roots of present problems. One has to remember how it was in the past, having in mind Ranke's always current thought: "Wie es eigentlich gewesen".

One of the reasons why I decided to recall Kamieniecki's conception is the current political situation. As I mentioned above, Pilsudski never classified his idea of federalism. His men tried to do so. The details of such federalist conceptions, presented by them, among others also by Kamieniecki, were sometimes contradictory in some vital points. They did not take into account the aspirations and tendencies expressed by the newly born nationalisms, in the first place the Lithuanian one. These aspirations and tendencies should be noticed and understood.

From what the federalists were saying, especially as regards Lithuania, we can gather that there was a clear attempt to keep the primacy of Poland and the Poles over newly arising, independent states in the territory of the former Tsars' empire.

In 1918–1921 it was too late for such a primacy. In spite of all, one of Pilsudski's federalist ideas is still of great importance, still current and of a great value. It is to form independent national states in the territories of the former Soviet empire, such as Lithuania, Byelorussia, Ukraine and the Baltic states.

They should once and for all separate Poland from Russia and at the same time would make it impossible to allow a rebirth of the Russian Empire – no matter red or white.

This was Pilsudski's leading idea. It was important that the new states would be friendly and allied to Poland or, at least, would have correct relations with her. For me this is the most important and fundamental value which remained from the, so called, Jagiellonian idea, probably the only one, that has lost none of its immediate interest. The history of the last few years has created for Poland and her neighbours in the East a unique opportunity, which may never repeat itself.

It seems that this opportunity has been irrevocably lost.