

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITHUANIAN STATEHOOD IN YEARS 1918–1940

*by Kinga Dudzińska & Renata Runiewicz-Jasińska*

The Lithuanian historiography is not a novelty in Polish academic literature. The attempts undertaken many times by historians to examine the Lithuanian past are fully justified by the common history of the Polish and Lithuanian lands.<sup>1</sup> It is worth stressing that there are still many controversial questions in this area, which have not been answered in both Lithuanian and Polish academic circles.<sup>2</sup> Taking into account the basic facts from Lithuanian history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Lithuanians

---

<sup>1</sup> Here are the most important Polish studies concerned with Lithuania: Jerzy Ochmański: *Historia Litwy*, Wrocław 1982; *Dawna Litwa*, Olsztyn 1986; *Studia z dziejów Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego XIV–XVIII wieku*, (ed.), Poznań 1971; Grzegorz Błaszczyk: *Litwa na przełomie średniowiecza i nowożytności 1492–1569*, Warszawa 2002; *Elity polityczne Litwy w latach 1988–1992*, Warszawa 1993; *Polacy na Litwie: zarys problematyki historycznej i współczesnej*, Warszawa 1991; *Chrzest Litwy*, Poznań 2006; Henryk Wisner: *Unia*, Warszawa 1988; *Litwa*, Wrocław 1999; *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės valstybingumo pavojai*, Vilnius 1991; Piotr Łossowski: *Litwa a sprawy polskie*, Warszawa 1982; *Litwa*, Warszawa 2001; *Stosunki polsko-litewskie 1921–1939*, Warszawa 1997; M. Kosman: *Reforma na Litwie. Przebieg – programy – realizacja*, [in:] *Chrzest Litwy*, Lublin 1990; *Uniwersytet Wileński 1579–1979*, Wrocław-Kraków-Gdańsk-Łódź 1981; *Zmierzch Perkuna czyli ostatni poganie nad Bałtykiem*, Warszawa 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Č. Bauža, P. Setkauskis, *Lietuvos valstybingumas XX amžiuje. Atkūrimas ir tęstinumas*, Vilnius 2002, p. 8. See also: E. Aleksandravičius, A. Kulakauskas, *Pod władzą carów. Litwa w XIX wieku*, Kraków 2003, pp. 23–56; R. Lopata, *Lietuvos valstybingumo raida. Lietuvių atgimimo studijos*, Vilnius 1996, vol. 11; This issue is also discussed by Lithuanian historians: R. Miknys, Č. Lauranavičius.

undertook the first actions towards developing a state which would be officially recognized by the international community, it should not be surprising that it is a subject frequently discussed by the newest studies, which continually refer to the equally rich literature of the earlier period.<sup>3</sup> The researchers ascribe considerable significance to the circumstances, in which the independent Lithuanian state came into being and to its functioning in the interwar period, in years 1918–1940 (Č. Bauža, P. Čepanas, Z. Kiaupa). What also had a strong influence on this process were the following events in the history of the state, when Lithuania was in the end incorporated into the Soviet Union.

In this study, the characteristics of the development process of Lithuanian statehood in the period of the First Republic 1918–1940 will serve the main purpose, i.e. to discuss these issues on the basis of literature in Lithuanian language, and at the same time the explanatory purpose, as a base for discussing these issues from the analytic and political points of view.

In order to avoid polemics, we should refer to and present the most important political events of this period. The analysis of the development of the beginnings of Lithuanian statehood, dating to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and constituting a logical consequence of the events of that time, is based on essential facts from the social and political areas. The periodization of the interwar period in Lithuania can be based on the following turning points:

- 1) 1918–1920 the process of evolution of the state,
- 2) 1920–1926 the period of a democratic parliamentary republic,
- 3) 1926–1938 the authoritarian system of A. Smetona,
- 4) 1938–1940 the crisis and loss of independence.<sup>4</sup>

Lithuania is one of the three Baltic states, along with Latvia and Estonia, which had experienced the rules of democracy before their annexation by the Soviet Union. It was the period when Europe entered the phase of modernization after World War I. It was then that these independent states, the so called Baltic republics, were formed.

Re 1) – The War of Independence and the recognition of the Lithuanian state 1918–1920 and the sources of national identity of Lithuanians.

In this part of the study the most important issues concern the development of national identity among Lithuanians; the events of World War I and their effect on

---

<sup>3</sup> The other examples of studies are concerned with Lithuanian statehood: P. Čepanas, *Naujųjų laikų Lietuvos istorija*, Chicago 1986, vol. 2 p. 35–311; V. Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė, *Lietuvos istorija*, Vilnius 1990, p. 298–323; D. Žalimas, *Lietuvos Respublikos nepryklausomybės atkūrimas: Pagrindiniai klausimai pagal tarptautinę teisę*, Vilnius 1990, pp. 208.

<sup>4</sup> Z. Kiaupa, op.cit., p. 321–368.

the development of the state, as well as the summoning of the first Vilnius Conference in 1917 as a prelude to the recognition of the Lithuanian state, which was what Lithuanians consistently solicited for in years 1918–1920.

Due to the importance of the events of those years there is a broad choice of Lithuanian literature on the subject of state formation. However, the richness and variety of interpretations of facts sometimes makes it difficult to systematize the material. This statement is confirmed by the monograph “Lietuvos valstybingumas XX amžiuje. Atkūrimas ir tęstinumas” by Česlovas Baža and Petras Setkauskis. By referring to many text sources, including those from the interwar period, the authors have distinguished several basic trends in Lithuanian historiography, e.g.: romantic, apologetic or rational and critical trends.

The fact that they adopted the chronological criterion indicates that the issue of Lithuanian statehood was topical. It is connected, above all, with divergent attitudes of authors of studies to historical facts, which may be observed, among other things, in their interpretation of official documents, the content of which expressed the establishment of the Lithuanian state.<sup>5</sup>

While the formal sources of Lithuanian statehood are to be found in years 1918 – 1920, the national identity had been developing already since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his studies, Jonas Švoba describes the circumstances in which the Lithuanian society was developing and draws our attention to one of its specific features. The sense of national identity was forming among Lithuanians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, with enhanced dynamics of transformations, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, unlike in the case of other European states at that time, where we can observe a certain transformation pattern, in case of Lithuania it is difficult to say that these transformations diversified the social classes. It cannot be said that Lithuanians constituted a kind of social monolith but, at the same time, it is not possible to indicate any distinct social divisions.<sup>6</sup> The vast majority of Lithuanians of that period were peasants, mostly Lithuanian-speaking, whereas the upper social classes consisted

---

<sup>5</sup> The controversies relate mainly to two important documents, the first and the second Declaration of Independence (1917 and 1918). The difference was that in the next year the sentence about the connection of Lithuania and Germany was removed and there was a regulation added which stated that Lithuania had become a democratic country. Views on this matter are divided among academics and scholars. See also: V. Trumpa or A. Eidintas and compare: Č. Bauža, P. Setkauskis, *Lietuvos valstybingumas XX amžiuje. Atkūrimas ir tęstinumas*, Vilnius 2002, p. 7–13.

<sup>6</sup> J. Švoba, *Seiminė ir prezidentinė Lietuva*, Vilties Draugijos Leidykla Cleveland Ohio 1985, p. 12. See also: A. Parott, *The Baltic States from 1914 to 1923: The First World War and the Wars on Independence (Lithuania)*, „Baltic Defence Review”, vol. 8, 2002 no. 2, p. 151– 154.

mainly of Polish-speaking groups.<sup>7</sup> Already the 19<sup>th</sup> century is regarded by Lithuanian researchers as a turning point, from which the Lithuanian people can and should be referred to as a nation.

There are many divergences between Polish and Lithuanian researchers concerning this matter as well. For example, the Lithuanian academic circles highlight the fact of the Lithuanian community becoming independent from Polish influences. Consequently, the Lithuanian historical analyses speak of the phenomenon of Lithuanian separatism. It is due to this movement that the Lithuanian nation was to develop independently from other nations. On the one hand, the role of various external influences of foreign nations and traditions on the Lithuanian people were strongly stressed, on the other hand there were many efforts to find any signs of identity among Lithuanians and of actions which would confirm this identity.<sup>8</sup>

J. Švoba even states that the Lithuanian nation (*Lietuvos tauta*) has developed from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century peasants, who created the foundations of free culture and economy. He quotes the words of R. Račkauskas, who said that “*in 1918 the Lithuanian peasant landowners and their educated children built an independent Lithuanian state*”.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from that, the pioneering Lithuanian activity was directed mainly towards an independent state, as Lithuanians realised very well that it was their only chance for a full and independent cultural development.

As Antanas Rukša points out, at the moment the Germans were winning with Russia and the vision of defeating the Tsardom became realistic, many Lithuanians may have believed that of the three Baltic states it is Lithuania that would find it easiest to gain independence. However, as history has shown, the road towards independence has not necessarily proved long, but certainly very bumpy.

As World War I came to its end, the situation of the Lithuanian nation became much more difficult compared with the Latvian and Estonian nations. If we make further comparisons, we can say that the reason why Lithuania gained its indepen-

<sup>7</sup> The situation was a result of the historical changes, which took place in Lithuania during the union – period. The most important was the fact, that the Lithuanian territory was settled by Polish gentry. Because of this fact Polish language became more common. See also: R. Petrauskas, *Lietuvos Diduomenė XIV a. pabaigoje – XV a. Sudeėtis-struktūra-valdžia. Mokslinė monografija*, Vilnius 2003, p. 103–152; Jūratė Kiaupienė, *Mes, Lietuva. Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės bajorija XVI a. (viešasis ir privatus gyvenimas)*, Vilnius 2003, p. 51–70; Vanda Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė, *Vytauto Didžiojo Laikai, Kovos dėl Lietuvos savarankumo. Kultūros kilimas*, [in:] *Lietuvos Istorija*, Vylnius Vyturis 1990, p. 78–177.

<sup>8</sup> A. Rukša, *Lietuvių separatizmas, Kovos dėl Lietuvos Nepryklausomybė*, vol. II, p. 45–65. See also: Idem, *Lenkijos pretenzijos į Lietuvos teritoriją*, p. 67–82.

<sup>9</sup> J. Švoba, *Seiminė ir prezidentinė Lietuva*, Viltis Cleveland Ohio 1985, p. 8. The problem of creation the Lithuanian state considers also Izidorius Tamošaistis. See also: I. Tamošaistis, *Tautos vienybės kelias*, [in:] *Lietuva 1918–1938*, Kaunas 1990, p. 14–27.

dence later than Latvia and Estonia was its particularly complex geopolitical situation. An additional impediment at that time were the battles between the Polish and Lithuanian armies.<sup>10</sup>

There is a phenomenon characteristic for the Lithuanian nation which is worth mentioning here, that is the well-organized activity in the United States. It resulted from the growing emigration, especially in the times of N. Murawjow's governorship which made life a real misery. Despite that, this wave of emigration should not be equated with and ascribed similar importance as the emigration in later years. It is, however, worth noting that it contributed to the development of Lithuanian cultural life in the USA. The first Lithuanian newspaper *Gazeta Lietuviszka – the Lithuanian Newspaper* (1879) was founded there at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A characteristic phenomenon for the process of formation of Lithuanian national identity, sense of solidarity and cooperation of intellectual circles for the strengthening of their tradition in the face of intensifying Tsar's politics of *returning to the roots*, was the activity of Lithuanian intellectuals undertaken in the emigration circles.

In 1883 the Lithuanian lands saw the first issue of the *Aušry* (Aurora)<sup>11</sup> – soon the most popular and pioneering newspaper, edited by Jonas Basanavičius. Unlike other periodicals published in the later period, *Aušra* did not have distinct connotations with any specific political movement. The initial timid aspirations towards independence have their source in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the nationalist movement in Lithuania was evolving among writers, clerics and students, who then most often gathered around Russian universities (e.g. J. Basanavičius who was mentioned above). The precursors of the formalized movement were the members of the so-called Twelve Apostles Circle, founded in Vilnius in 1895 among intellectual circles, while the church of the Holy Ghost became an unofficial meeting venue for Lithuanians.<sup>12</sup>

The watchwords concerning the independence of the Lithuanian state appeared at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when each of the forming political organizations shaped and expressed its world-views in the developing press. A good example is the text of the declaration published in the 12<sup>th</sup> issue of *Varpasa (Bell)* daily founded in 1896 by Kazys Grinius. The declaration announced the readiness to establish the Lithuanian state, independent from other countries and rulers. The committee which was convened at that time was an initiative group for the formation of *Lietuvos*

---

<sup>10</sup> The problem of Polish-Lithuanian battles was analyzed in details by Antanas Rukša. See also: A. Rukša, *Kovos su lenkais ligi 1920 m. liepos 1d.*, [in:] *Kovos dėl Lietuvos nepriklausomybės*, (ed.) A. Rukša, vol. II, Cleveland 1981–1982, p. 169–368.

<sup>11</sup> R. Runiewicz-Jasińska, *Litewskie media drukowane a początki transformacji politycznej*, [in:] „Athenaenum” vol. 12, Toruń 2004 and see also: R. Runiewicz-Jasińska, *Historia prasy na Litwie*, [in:] „Przegląd Politologiczny”, vol. 2, Poznań 2003.

<sup>12</sup> A. Eidantis, op.cit., p. 15.

*demokratų partija* LDP (Lithuanian Democratic Party), the members of which were called “*varpininkai*” from the daily’s name. The official founding convention took place in 1905. The Party’s activity initially concentrated on the issue of national language, very important for Lithuanians.<sup>13</sup> This issue returned after many years of ban on public use of the language. Whereas the first political party in Lithuania, founded in 1896 was *Lietuviškoji socialdemokratų partija* (Lithuanian Social Democratic Party), which called for the establishment of an “autonomous democratic republic.”<sup>14</sup> It embraced at that time mainly the largest social groups in Lithuania: peasants and peasant landowners. It officially ended its activities in 1920.

The aggressive Russification ended at the outbreak of the Revolution of 1905, which created favourable conditions for the development of left-wing groups in Lithuania. From 1904 the Russian Empire experienced a growing socio-political crisis, which resulted, among other things, in some concessions to the Lithuanian nation. It was then that the authorities decided to abolish the ban on printing in Lithuanian font. According to E. Aleksandravičius and A. Kulakauskas, further concessions proved that Lithuanians “constituted an ethnopolitical community, aspiring to the status of an independent, autonomous political nation (...)”<sup>15</sup> already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After the fall of the Revolution of 1905, Lithuania unintentionally became the theatre of shifting battlefronts, although it did not officially take part in World War I. Moreover, Lithuanians were often conscripted into the armies on both sides of the front.

To continue the characteristics of the functioning political organizations we could make a generalized but still quite informative division into the conservative and radical movements, with the reservation that, as A. Eidintas points out, the notion “radical” should be understood in this context as supporting radical democratic transformations. This group included *Lietuviškoji socialdemokratų partija* LSDP (the

<sup>13</sup> The Russian policy during the years after the uprising was changing, but still was intended to circumscribe the rights of Lithuanian people. For example publications in Lithuanian (Latin alphabet instead of Cyrillic alphabet, so called *algradžanka*) were banned. See also: A.E. Senn, *Introduction* [in:] *Lithuania in European Politics. The Years of the First Republic, 1918–1940*, New York, 1997, p. 2–6.

<sup>14</sup> E. Aleksandravičius, A. Kulakauskas, *Skrzyżowanie kultur: swojskie i obce*, [in:] *Pod władzą carów. Litwa w XIX wieku*, Kraków 2003, p. 256–257. The authors identify four general approaches in historiography in half XIX century: 1) Lithuania as the provinces of Poland 2) Lithuania as the equal partner in the federation with Poland 3) Lithuania as independent country 4) Preservation of cultural and ethnic rights according to unclear conception of indifference.

<sup>15</sup> See quotation: E. Aleksandravičius, A. Kulakauskas, *Ku nowoczesnemu narodowi*, [in:] *Pod władzą carów. Litwa w XIX wieku*, Kraków 2003, p. 341.

Lithuanian Social Democratic Party) and *Demokratų Partija* DP (the Democratic Party).

On the other side there were the conservatives, called *Tautininkai* (the Nationalists) and consequently representing nationalist views. This group also included the *Lietuvių demokratų partija* LDP (the Lithuanian Democratic Party). First of all, it wanted to be viewed as the representative of peasants' interests, and it presented its programme objectives in *Lietuvos Žinios* (the Lithuanian News) published in the years 1909 – 1915. The fundamental political aim of the democrats was a free and independent Lithuania in its ethnographic borders, and they decidedly acted against the interference of the Church in the activities of the state. In the literature the Democratic Party is sometimes even referred to as in fact a peasant party – this issue was brought up in doctor's dissertation of R. Miknys quoted by E. Aleksandravičius and A. Kulakauskas.

Meanwhile, after 1907 the influence of the social democrats on the Lithuanian society began to decline visibly. The reasons of this phenomenon are, according to the researchers, the Tsar's repression and the propaganda of Catholic clerics, as well as quite a meaningful opposition expressed by Christian democrats. However, it is worth pointing out that in the LSDP itself two trends may be indicated. One of them, called pro-Bolshevik (led by V. Kapsaukas), headed towards close cooperation with social democratic party in Russia. Consequently, this fraction soon left LSDP and started its independent activity in 1912, while the second group, led by Steponas Kairys, remained faithful to the idea of Lithuanian independence.

To sum up the importance of the Revolution of 1905 for the Lithuanian nation we should say that it was, above all, the period of a real uprising, which made it possible for the nationalist idea to spread among Lithuanians. Moreover, it was then that the political attitudes became significantly diversified.

In 1914 the territory of East Prussia was invaded by Russian forces, and already from March 1914 to September 1915 Lithuania found itself under German influence. On the so-called Ober – Ost territory the power was handed over to military authorities. These lands were used mainly to collect high quotas. In the initial period of occupation Germany completely passed over the issues of the future of these lands, while Estonia, Courland and Livonia were often regarded as “German culture countries”,<sup>16</sup>

Although the outbreak of war was a surprise for Lithuanian activists, they did not cease their activities. For example they wrote a memorial to the US president W. Wilson, in which they invoked the right of nations to self-determination. Lithuanians

---

<sup>16</sup> Compare: A. Eidintas, *Restoration of the state*, [in:] *Lithuania in European Politics. The Years of the First Republic 1918–1940*, New York 1997, p. 22.

acted abroad, in Lausanne (The Congress of Oppressed Nations), in Berne (Conference of Lithuanians of 1916) and in the Hague, where the Lithuanian emigrants once again spoke for the striving of Lithuanian nation towards independence from Russia. At the same time, at home, the main tasks were performed by the Assistance Committee, the aim of which was to assist persons harmed in result of war.<sup>17</sup>

In August 1917 the Lithuanian activists obtained a permission from German authorities to organize a conference. 296 delegates gathered in Vilnius on 18–22.08. 1917, to discuss issues concerning future Lithuania, in both political and territorial dimensions.<sup>18</sup>

During their meeting the delegates also appointed the *Taryba* (Council) composed of 20 persons, which was to perform functions similar to executive powers as the representative of the Lithuanian nation. The presidium of the Council was composed of Antanas Smetona, Jurgis Šaulys, Stanislovas Narutavičius, Jonas Smilgevičius, Jonas Vileišis, Aleksandra Stulginskis. The chairman of *Taryba* was A. Smetona. The fundamental function of the *Taryba*'s chairman at that time focused on mediation within *Taryba* itself between the radical democrats (the Left) and conservative circles (the Right).

All attempts to negotiate the future of Lithuania within *Taryba* were quite effectively controlled by occupation authorities (e.g. by censorship in the only periodical which the authorities agreed for – *Lietuvos Aidas*, *The Echo of Lithuania*). Hence, in such unfavourable circumstances, the members of the Council constantly undertook actions towards solving current problems of people living in the occupied area.

An illustration of the fact that the fate of Lithuania was correlated with the events in the international arena is the last quarter of 1917, when Germany and Russia began separate negotiations to end the war. Although the Germans promised to liberate Lithuania from the Russian yoke, at the same time they demanded the dependence of the state from Berlin. Preliminary negotiations in this issue took place between *Taryba* and the Chancellor G. Hartling, who tried to put as much pressure on Lithuanians as possible, first of all by demanding incorporation of Lithuania into the German Empire. Despite the Council representatives' efforts, the German side (the Ober – Ost administration) rejected their amendments to the text of the submitted resolution underlining that *Taryba* is only an advisory body.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> See also: Č. Bauža, P. Setkauskis, *op. cit.*, p. 32. It is worth to emphasise that before the redaction and the publication in the Declaration (16.02.1918) the word *įkūrimas* (the rise, the beginning) was replaced with the word *atkūrimas* (rebirth).

<sup>19</sup> A. Eidintas, *Restoration of the state*, [in:] *Lithuania in European Politics...*, p. 28. Then with the beginning of December initial form of the declaration was signed. *Taryba* and German Foreign Office committed themselves to make Lithuania independent from Russia, but

Heated debates also took place within Taryba, where a conflict existed between the left-wing group and the Council leaders. As a result of the fact that the Germans refused to recognize the aspirations of Lithuanians, and that Lithuania had not been invited to the negotiations with Russia which were carried on in Brześć, the members of Taryba, who were standing down by turns to express their protest (e.g.: A. Smetona resigned from the post of the Council's chairman and was succeeded by J. Basanavičius) and then returning to their posts, gathered on 16 February 1918 and ratified the final version of the resolution. The declaration contains several interesting fundamental issues. First of all, the Taryba clearly referred to the conference of August 1917, during which the intent of establishing an independent state based on fundamental democratic principles, with its capital in Vilnius, had been announced. The establishment of exact specification of the principles for the functioning of the state, both in internal matters and in foreign affairs, in the diplomatic field, was left to *Atkūrimasis Sijmas* (the Legislative Parliament).

Antanas Eidintas links the fact that Taryba ratified the Declaration of Independence of 16 February (today it is the Lithuanian national holiday) directly to the difficulties with performing current activities by the Council, e.g. assistance for the harmed people. The Germans recognized the right of Lithuanians to an independent state after a special meeting of Taryba members with the highest German authority (the Chancellor - Georg von Hertling). Germany made reservations to mutual relations of both countries. They were supposed to be based on the regulations of the earlier declaration (December 1917). However, the situation was not clear. Rumours began to come from all directions about the idea of incorporating Lithuania into Germany in the form of a union with Saxony and Prussia.

Describing the process of formation of the Lithuanian state from the point of view of the adopted or planned institutional and legal solutions, we should mention the intention of introducing a governing system based on constitutional monarchy. The idea of making Lithuania a monarchy was born in a group of 13 Council members, who made a decision and wrote a letter in which they invited Wilhelm Duke of Urach to ascend to the throne. He was supposed to receive a royal title of Mindaugas II. However, as Č. Bauža points out, this action of the small group of Council members was illegal because in the document adopted earlier it was agreed that the Council would hand over the authority to govern the country to the Legislative Parliament. The author analyzed the potential possibility of accepting the monarchical system

---

on the other hand Lithuania became dependent on Germany, only the army, administration and finances were excluded. In the same time Lithuania tried to gain self-determination and self-rule. Finally, the Ober – Ost Administration rejected all Lithuanian proposals. Taryba had only a consultative and advisory function.

in Lithuania, underlined its constitutional character, and pointed out that it would have been known and accepted by Lithuanian society to a very small extent. As a result, general lack of understanding of this kind of decisions spread among the Lithuanian society.<sup>20</sup> The low significance of this undertaking was also indicated by the fact of ignoring this “idea” by the German authorities of that day.

With the deteriorating situation of Germany in the international arena, which in 1918 indicated the coming defeat, Taryba gained a broader scope of possibilities to act and already dissociated itself from conciliatory pro-German policy. After the fall of the western front, the new chancellor of Germany, Max von Baden, permitted for the formation of a Lithuanian government. It is one of the moments regarded as real efforts of Lithuanians towards rebuilding their formal statehood.<sup>21</sup> Then, in 5.11.1918 the Taryba appointed Augustas Voldemaras to the position of the Prime Minister, while until the convening of the Legislative Parliament the executive power had been held by the Presidium of the Council, with Antanas Smetona as the Chairman and Justinas Staugaitis and Stasys Šilingas as Vice-Chairmen. The legislative power was given to the existing *Valstybės Taryba* (the State Council). This situation lasted until 1920, when, in April, the Constituent Assembly was convened. And so the “commitments of Germany towards Lithuania, including the introducing of a monarchy, got lost in the shadows of the past.”<sup>22</sup>

To sum up the first period of Lithuanian struggle for the establishment of their own state, it should be said that formalized actions were undertaken by *Lietuvos Taryba* (the Lithuanian Council) renamed in 1918 as *Valstybės Taryba* (the State Council), which was appointed at the Vilnius Conference in 1917.<sup>23</sup> At that time Taryba was a name for the council representing the Lithuanian nation, but it did not hold any legislative or executive powers – it served only as an auxiliary body. Meanwhile, all efforts of Lithuanians to obtain a permission from the German authorities to undertake independent actions in Lithuania were rejected. The occupation authorities, until the change of government in Germany on the local level, remained constant in their character. The Ober – Ost administration even intensified the collection of quotas after 1918 harvest. In these circumstances, when the members of Taryba struggled in vain for any form of independence, it should be underlined that the Lithuanian activists were additionally forced to manoeuvre on the political stage.

<sup>20</sup> Č. Bauža, P. Setkauskis, *Lietuvos valstybingumas XX amžiuje. Atkūrimas ir tęstinumas*, Vilnius 2002, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> A. Eidintas, *Lithuania in European Politics. The years of the First Republic, 1918–1940*, New York 1997, p. 33–37. See also: Č. Bauža, P. Setkauskis, *op.cit.*, p. 35–37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> See also: R.J. Misiunas, R. Taagepera, *The Baltic States years of dependence 1940–1980*, Los Angeles 1983, p. 122.

They acted from the position of an occupied country, when the Red Army started to approach from the east. Moreover, the process of creation of fundamental institutions of Lithuanian state took place in unfavourable conditions, both internal and external. When German troops retreated to Prussia, in the middle of December 1918 the left-wing labour organizations led by P. Eidukievičius announced the intent to create the Committee of People's Councils in Vilnius. On 8 December the self-appointed Provisional Revolution Government was established, which intended to overthrow the Lithuanian authorities.<sup>24</sup> The government of A. Voldemaras, together with the State Council, found itself in a critical situation. When V. Kapsukas proclaimed the establishment of the Council of Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, Russia annulled the Treaty of Brest, which had been the guarantee of integrity and inviolability of Lithuanian territory, and dissociated itself from any previous commitments that it would not demand anything from Lithuania.

In this situation, one of the fundamental tasks of the newly created government of Mykolas Šleževičius (after a sudden emigration of A. Smetona and A. Voldemaras) was to swiftly organize the defence against the soviet troops. On 5.01.1919 the Red Army was already occupying Vilnius. Soon, when power in Vilnius was taken over by the Polish Self-Defence, the Lithuanian government moved its seat to Kaunas. In April 1919 the Presidium of the Council was replaced by the office of President, given to A. Smetona, who was abroad at that time. Meanwhile, in Vilnius, L. Żeligowski established the Central Lithuania. The Lithuanian press called this the establishment of an artificial creation and was consistently announcing Lithuanian claims to Vilnius. It is indicated that in this period Lithuanians had a quite simple idea of a Pole. They discerned in him only aggressive acts which were to lead to making Lithuania dependent from the Polish government. At the same time, it was a part of the politics of the Lithuanian government itself as the authorities found it hard to come to terms with the loss of historic, ethnographic capital together with quite large territories.<sup>25</sup> The historians often highlight the role played in that period by Prime Minister M. Sleževičius in building the sense of solidarity among the people living on Lithuanian territories, including also Belarusian and Jewish minorities. His success in the process of formation of the sense of solidarity was the engagement of peasantry, who had long demanded an agricultural reform.

#### Ad. 2) Parliamentary democracy in Lithuania in years 1920–1926

<sup>24</sup> A. Eidintas, *The Nation creates its state*, [in:] *Lithuania in European Politics. The Years of the First Republic 1918–1940*, (ed.) A. Eidintas, V. Žalys, A. E. Senn, New York 1997, p. 34. As A. Eidintas claims, the regime which was created under the manifesto (December 1918) was only a regime of Bolshevik's party connected with Russia which planned to make Lithuania dependent and to instil the revolution in the other countries.

<sup>25</sup> *Idem*, *The nation creates its state*, [in:] *Lithuania in European Politics...*, p. 40.

The authorities continually attempted to highlight the temporary character of the chaotic internal situation in the country and to act towards stabilization. In November 1919 an elections statute was adopted, as a preliminary element of the expected election campaign. The Lithuanians wanted to elect *Steigimamasis Seimas* (the Legislative Parliament), whose appointment had been heralded by the already mentioned Vilnius Conference of 1917. The elections held on 14 and 15 April 1920 were won by *Lirtuvos Krikščionių demokratų partija* LKDP (the Christian Democrats) with 46% of votes, which gave it 59 of 112 seats in the Legislative Parliament. This result determined the future shape and direction of actions of the Lithuanian authorities.<sup>26</sup> The first seating was held on 15.05.1920 and it was then that the Temporary Constitution, which defined Lithuania as a democratic republic, where the parliament was the expression of sovereign power of its citizens, was adopted. The next fundamental point on the agenda was the confirmation of the Declaration of 16.02.1918 and recognizing Lithuania as an independent state. The constitution included also provisions on the inviolable right of ownership and on the obligatory religious education at school, and the proclamation of the principle of equality of men and women.<sup>27</sup>

The greatest controversies arose around the issue of the presidential office. The Social Democrats LSDP and the populists wanted a weak position of president because they feared the possibility of tendencies to dictatorship on the side of Christian Democrats who, in turn, strived for the separation of two offices: the Speaker of the Parliament and the President, as well as for the extension of the President's competences. In the end, in the face of a difficult international situation, i.e. the Polish-Soviet war, the Christian Democrats settled on the coalition with the *liaudininkai* (populists from the nationalist circle).<sup>28</sup> As a result, A. Stulginskis was elected to the position of the Speaker, while K. Grinius was appointed Prime Minister. The coalition did not last long, mostly because there was no agreement on the issue of the agricultural reform. In consequence, already in 1922 new elections were held, which were however the first in which the representatives of the Lithuanian nation were elected to the legislative body, i.e. to the Parliament. The results once again showed the victory of Christian Democrats, who used their majority in the

<sup>26</sup> See also: A. Eidintas, *Electiions to the Constituent Assembly and New Constitution (The Nation creates its state)*, [in:] op.cit., p. 40–42. See also: D. Čičienė, Tarp nacionalinio indentiteto ir demokreatijos. Krikščionių demokratų santykiai su tautininkais 1918–1920 metais, „Darbai ir Dienos“, 1998 no. 7v (18), p. 92–116.

<sup>27</sup> A. Eidinantas, *Lithuania in European Politics. The years of the first Republic, 1918–1940*, Vilnius 2004, p. 43.

<sup>28</sup> D. Stakeliūnatė, *Liaudininkai koaliciniuose žaidimuose 1918 m. – 1919 m. spalio*, „Darbai ir Dienos“, 1998 no. 7 (16), p. 121–136.

Parliament (41% gave 38 of 78 seats)<sup>29</sup> to choose A. Stulginkasa for the first President of Lithuania. As there was no majority in the Parliament, next elections were held already a year later, and the Christian democrats received 43% of votes, that is 40 of 78 seats. E. Galvanauskas became the Prime Minister and, as expected, the President was re-elected..

The years 1920–1923 are an important period in the history of Lithuania because it was then that the fundamentals of the democratic system were forming. The Lithuanian society for the first time made use of its rights concerning the formation of principles of the system of their own state. An essential achievement was the constitution passed on 1.08.1922. Apart from the former *Laikinoji Lietuvos Konstitucija* (the Temporary Constitution) it was the most important legal act, which strictly defined the fundamental principles of state organization, as well as the most essential institutions. This Fundamental Law is very important in the historiography of Lithuania because it was to become the source of reference in the period of transformations and development of the country's modern political system.

The analysis of the most important issues contained in the Fundamental Law of 1922 should begin from the general provisions. They provided that Lithuania is an independent democratic republic, while the sovereign power belongs to the nation.<sup>30</sup> The state powers were entrusted to the parliament – the *Seimas*, to the government and to the courts. Lithuanian was proclaimed the official language. The constitution also introduced national symbols: the three-coloured national flag (yellow, green and red) and the Lithuanian Coat of Arms – red field with a white *Vytis* (Knight).

The civil rights and duties were included in Chapter II, which stresses the exclusive character of Lithuanian citizenship. In addition, it indicates that the acquisition of the Lithuanian citizenship by a foreigner is possible only if the person had lived on the territory of Lithuania for at least 10 years.

Article 10 provides that all Lithuanian citizens, both women and men are equal before the law. Moreover, any discrimination based on origin (*kimė - birth*), faith and nationality was forbidden. The set of rights pertaining to citizens included also the right to privacy, private correspondence, the freedom of expression and the freedom of press (Articles 13–15). The set of civil rights included also a provision on the legislative initiative pertaining to all citizens (the initiative required 25 thousand signatures of citizens with the right to vote).

<sup>29</sup> *Idem*, *Lithuanian politics...*, St. Martin's Press New York 1997, s. 44.

<sup>30</sup> 1922 metų Konstitucija („Vyriausybės Žinios“ No. 100, eil. No. 799) Page 1. Lietuvos Valstybė yra nepriklausoma demokratinė Respublika. Suvereninė Valstybės Valdžia priklauso Tautai. According to the first article of Constitution the power of independent state belongs to the nation. See: J. Jakštas, *Nepriklausomos Lietuvos istorija 1918–1940*, Chicago 1992, p. 213.

The Parliament was composed of the representatives chosen by the citizens in universal, equal, direct and proportional elections. Article 24 provided for that “the right to vote pertains to all Lithuanian citizens who have full civil rights, both men and women, who attained the age of 21 (the right to vote) or 24 years (the right to be elected).”<sup>31</sup> The Parliament’s term was determined for 3 years with the possibility of prolongation in case of war. The Parliament was led by its chairman – the Speaker, who also presided over the Presidium of the Parliament. The Parliament had legislative powers and the right to monitor the work of the Cabinet, as well as the right to submit inquiries and interpellations to the Cabinet. In addition, its function was to approve the Budget for passing and to accept its execution. The Parliament ratified the peace treaties, all documents concerning the Lithuanian territory, etc., which had been signed by the government. It conducted debates in the system of sessions and was convened in accordance with internal provisions. Whereas the emergency sessions could be convened by the President or by the ¼ of the Parliament members (Article 34). Each representative had a mandate due to his public functions.

The Cabinet was composed of the President of the Republic and the Ministers (Article 40). Every member of the Parliament could be elected President, provided that he or she had attained the age of 35. The President’s term of office (no longer than two subsequent terms), as in the case of the Parliament, was determined for 3 years. The President was also elected by the Parliament, with the consent of ⅔ of all representatives. One of the most important competences of the President was the right to dissolve the Parliament (Article 52).

The subsequent Chapters of the Constitution defined the principles of self-governing, and Chapter VII, *Tautinių mažamų teisės* (The national minority rights), contained provisions which were directly connected with the rights of national minorities living on the territory of Lithuania.<sup>32</sup>

The function of extra parliamentary opposition was performed by *Tautos pažanga* (the Party of Progress), who in years 1920–1926 struggled in vain for parliamentary seats for its representatives. In 1924 it transformed into *Lietuvių tautininkų sąjunga* (the Nationalists’ Union), to which only ethnic Lithuanians could belong. Since then it continually called for introducing a strong-arm government and for creating

<sup>31</sup> The statute book of Lithuanian constitutions from the interwar period. See J. Jakštas, op.cit., p. 218.

<sup>32</sup> Making the characterization of the Constitution of Lithuania is worth emphasising that when the titles of the first chapters are quite common, the rest is quite untypical: VII *Tautinių mažamų teisės* (The rights of nation minorities), VIII *Respublikos gynimas* (Republic defence), IX *Švietimi reikalai* (Education issue), X *Tikybės ir kulto dalykai* (Faith and cult), XI *Valstybės ekonominės politikos pagrindai* (Economic politics), XIV *Socialinė apsauga* (Social welfare). See: Ibidem, p. 210–226.

a strong army. Although the party itself, which was not very big, did not gain much support in the elections, its leaders: A. Smetona and A. Voldemaras were very popular among the society. Their importance for the Lithuanian citizens grew mainly because of nationalist elements in their programme.

After all the efforts of the governing party to establish a diocese in Vilnius proved ineffective because the Vatican recognized only the Polish authorities, the Christian Democrats LKDP experienced the an increasing loss of support, often transformed into an open discontentment and disapproval. The declining role of the party was confirmed by the elections of 1926, when the nationalists (*Lietuvių tautininkų sąjunga* – LTS) for the first time entered the Lithuanian parliament. Up to this moment, in years 1924–1925, the democratic bloc governed independently and appointed its own Prime Minister three times (A. Tumėnas, V. Petrulis, L. Bistras). But in May 1926 the *tautininkai* received 4% of votes (3 seats). The general results made it possible to build a coalition of peasant activists and social democrats, which was supported by the votes of national minorities.

The central left-wing government led by Šleževičius, and with K. Grinius on the position of the President (LSDP), acted decidedly against the actions the Christian Democrats had undertaken before, first of all in the field of Church privileges, which it was consistently abolishing. Moreover, it enacted many laws which strengthened the democratic system of the state.

Meanwhile, conservative and nationalist feelings, which were inconsistent with the cosmopolitan vision of politics represented by the government, were growing in the society. These tendencies had their representatives in the organizations calling for acting in best national interest of Lithuania, especially when they were tinged with nationalism. In the Parliament it translated into a distinct polarization of opinions between the left wing and the radical right wing, which was for the introducing of a vaguely defined programme of *Lietuvos tvarka* (the Lithuanian state order). The attacks on the government of that time were to be seen first of all in the left-wing newspapers. For example *Tautos Valia* (the Will of Nation) called social democrats the Bolshevik collaborators. The government opposition continually deemed the progressing transformations too liberal. Moreover, political battles took place in public life between the former democratic government and the current coalition of peasant activists and social democrats. The main actions of the new coalition, as a contrast to the former governing group, consisted in cancelling earlier arrangements and adopting a distinctly anticlerical position, which could be seen for instance in the new legislation, which considerably worsened the economic situation of the Church. In addition, the cooperation within the coalition with the representatives of national minorities was found outrageous. The lack of visible effects in the execution of the planned agricultural reform made the situation even worse. Hostile

attitudes towards the central left-wing government were shown also in military circles, after over two hundred conservative officers had been dismissed. A secret organization of officers emerged within the army and started to plan a coup d'état modelled on the coups of B. Mussolini and J. Piłsudski.<sup>33</sup> The next step of the coalition, which met with opposition, was to sign a nonaggression pact with Russia on 26.09.1926. The police, in turn, acting on the government's orders, dispersed student groups demonstrating against Polonization and Bolshevization of Lithuania.

Farmers constituted a considerable social group opposing the government of that time. As a group, they were definitely pro-catholic and conservative. They demanded additional favourable rights for themselves. Taking into account the changes that were taking place during the process of formation of the Lithuanian society, it is worth pointing out that in this period the youngest generation, with the same nationalist views, decidedly opposing any cosmopolitan ideas, was raising to become the main social force.

Ad. 3) The coup d'état and the authoritarian regime of Antanas Smetona 1926–1938

Meanwhile, the Parliament became an arena of quite an aggressive politics within the public discourse of political parties. Verbal skirmishes took place mainly between the LKDP Christian democrats and the LSDP social democrats, who called each other Bolshevik confidants or fascists respectively.<sup>34</sup> The nationalist circles negated any left-wing government and directly engaged in actions against such government. Their additional motive was a quite prosaic issue of passing the Budget, which included considerable reduce of donations for the Church of the financing of the army.

This is why the *coup d'état* was performed already on the night between 16 and 17.12.1926 which resulted in the introduction of authoritarian rule in Lithuania. It had significant negative effects on the parliament, which had previously been sitting and now was excessively limited in its actions with the most basic principles of its functioning violated. Military commanders who were responsible for the coup announced their subordinates that the whole venture was necessary in order to hold off the Bolsheviks. On the other hand, on the morning of the next day the inhabitants of Kaunas could read official notes in which the provisional military government tried to convince the people that the events of the previous night and the introduction of martial law were necessary due to the policy of the former government, which

---

<sup>33</sup> A. Eidintas, op.cit, p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> In this issue the speech of M. Krupavičius is mentioned very often; he stated that the fascism is the opposition of the socialist regime. He also said that “if you call the nation – consciousness, patriotism, the national ideals – the fascism, so it in this meaning I’m a fascist, just like all the other Lithuanians who are nationalists (...)”; See also: A. Eidintas, *The Nation creates...*, p. 55.

was selling Lithuania to the Bolsheviks and other representatives of not-Lithuanian descent.

As a result of current events, when in practice the executive power was held by Major P. Plechavičius, the command turned to A. Smetona, who enjoyed high popularity and respect in military circles, with a request that he accept the function of the leader of the nation, that he lead it to normalization of the situation. Also on 17 December Smetona and Voldemaras invited LKDP to talks on the creation of a new government. While the democrats struggled to obtain any influence, the two generals tried to urge K. Grinus, kept in house arrest, to resign from office. On the next session of the parliament, boycotted by the social democrats and peasant activists, A. Smetona was sworn in the office of the president of Lithuania. Soon A. Voldemaras himself received a nomination to the office of the prime minister and from the very first moments the government was appointed only waited for an excuse allowing him to dissolve the parliament. This was provided to him by the events of 12.04.1927, when the prime minister himself received a vote of no confidence (in protest against the arresting of one of the members of parliament). Furthermore, A. Voldemaras asked then about the date of next elections answered they would be held in spring, he did not however specify a precise date (or even a year). Both Smetona and Voldemaras were trying to avoid the elections as they feared they would lose power to the democrats. An attempt to establish a compromise by both parties to the conflict (Christian democrats vs. *tautininkai*) foundered with the end of 1927 (this is when the last Christian democrats stepped out of Voldemaras's government).

President Smetona argued that Lithuania had no need for liberalism or fascism, he perceived his personal system to be the best for the country. Officially, on a convention of the *tautininkai*, he criticized the attempts to introduce the principles of Italian fascism, as well as the attempt to transfer onto Lithuanian soil the principles of English parliamentary system. Smetona eliminated the democrats from the government and then successfully reduced the influence of the military.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile a next opponent appeared on the scene – it was Voldemaras himself and the organizations cooperating with him (chiefly young military officers and government activists). Mutual cooperation of Voldemaras and Smetona went rather well until the end of 1928, when both begun to disagree in many essential issues.<sup>36</sup> This is the reason why Smetona, who tried to maintain his popularity with the society, employed a direct method of contact with the inhabitants of the country and

---

<sup>35</sup> A. Eidintas, *The Presidential Republic (Constitutional Changes)*, [in:] *Lithuania in European Politics. The Years of the First Republic 1918–1940*, (ed.) A. Eidintas, V. Žalys, A.E. Senn, New York, p. 113.

<sup>36</sup> L. Truska, *Antanas Smetona ir jo laikai*, Vilnius 1996, p. 177–179.

visited almost every district and region. After the prime minister had resigned from office in September (1929) Smetona prevented Voldemaras from holding any public functions whatsoever.<sup>37</sup> At the same time Smetona, who in 1927 was still directly involved in establishing the new organization *Geležinis Vilkas* (Iron Wolf), two years later became the primary target of attacks by this paramilitary organization led by Voldemaras. Its fundamental aim were attempts of internal strengthening the state. However, despite a rather strong personal base of young military officers, students, and generally radicals from the generation coming out of age, attempts to overthrow Smetona himself were futile and ineffective. With complete removing of Voldemaras from public life the consolidation of the authoritarian system continued (in 1930 Iron Wolf was dissolved and many of its members lost their jobs or suffered other losses).<sup>38</sup>

Formal crowning of the principles of the „presidential republic” of A. Smetona was the new constitution introduced in 1928 which, only to start with, greatly increased the competences of the president. He was vested the power to dissolve the parliament. There was also a possibility that the Parliament would not be convened at all, which in practice lasted as long as eight subsequent years. Above all, however, from now on the president was to be elected for a period of seven years, though not as previously by the parliament, but by specially appointed electors chosen by state administration. Furthermore, as the head of the state, the president had the right to dissolve the government or to remove individual ministers from their office. His competences included also the appointing of officials and promulgation of law, as well as the commanding of the army. The body formed in order to cooperate with the president was the so called State Council, which prepared bills. Between the sessions of the parliament, the president also had legislative powers.

In view of the above entitlements provided for in the newly adopted constitution, the transfer of the right to elect “the representatives of the nation” – the elects who chose the president – onto the members of the *tautininkai* organization (directly connected to Smetona) was mere formality. In effect Smetona was re-elected to the office of the president subsequently in 1931 and 1938. Furthermore, A. Eidintas shows that political rights in the country were limited not only by means of legisla-

---

<sup>37</sup> A. Eidintas, *op.cit.*, p. 114. The professional literature in details discuss the problem of the Smetonas’s role in public life. There are a lot of controversies connected with his personage and character. See also: A. Eidintas, *Antanas Smetona, Politinės biografijos bruožai*, Vilnius 1990. Moreover, really important and interested question concerns the relations between Voldemaras and Smetona who were apparently quite opposites characters. See also: G. Rudis, *Ivadas*, [in:] *Voldemaras A.: pastabos saulėlydžio valandą*. Vilnius, 1992, p. 5– 9.

<sup>38</sup> Then Juozas Tūbelis performed the function and duties of the Prime Minister (Smetonas’s family member). See: A. Eidintas, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

tion, but above all in practice. All the limitations were felt by political parties and organizations which did not cooperate with the privileged *tautininkai*. This way the forces of opposition were deprived of any possibility to take part in the public life and all its marionette manifestations were strictly controlled.

Consolidation of the authoritarian system in Lithuania continued together with the development of a mystic idea of *national unity*, successfully popularized by members of the Nationalists' Union. This trend had significant support of broadly defined groups of farmers and peasants. What is more, the regime opposed the LKD Christian democrats and was definitely anticlerical.

This way the government strived for the strengthening of the authoritarian power in Lithuania. 1936 saw the enforcing of an act forbidding the patriotic parties to operate and establishing the only legal party, that is the Nationalists' Union. As it is in such circumstances that the elections to the parliament of the 4<sup>th</sup> term were conducted, the result was that the nationalists obtained 42 of 49 seats.<sup>39</sup> The crowning of the rules of the new government system in Lithuania was yet another amendment to the constitution of 11.02.1938. Its content lacked the term *democratic* and, what is more, it is not the mere Lithuanian nation that was mentioned, but the „ethnic Lithuanian nation“. The principal aim of the newly passed fundamental law was to underline and strengthen the significance of state authority. The progressing consolidation of the presidential competences constituted a continuation of the tendencies represented already in the constitution of 1922. However, this time there existed almost no sanctions against the president in relation to his holding the office. At the same time he kept all the rights which he had had under the earlier provisions of law. In the constitution the parliament's term of office has been set to 5 years, however its actual participation in governing remained doubtful in the face of such extended competences of the president. Representatives of the nation, that is electors specifically elected for this purpose, chose once more A. Smetona to be the president in January 1938.

However, while on the one hand, as time went by, the authoritarian system of state power was reinforcing, on the other hand the Lithuanian society experienced internal transformations of the opposite character (compared with the first years of the independent state).

The third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the first generation of Lithuanians brought up in a free country. It is among student groups, and organizations gathering young people that calls of opposition against the establishment of Smetona appeared. A good

---

<sup>39</sup> Three years before the bill was passed, the congress of National Union *Tautininka* took place. The commanding rule was introduced and the title of the nation's leader was given to A. Smetona. The rule of discipline and obedience was introduced into the organisation.

example is the manifesto – “Formation of an Organic State” of young democrats, which was made public in 1936. Young activists of the LKDP were accusing the establishment, they called it harmful for the state and its citizens. They criticized the principles of centralised authorities which prevented political parties from developing and operating, choked grassroots initiative. This is the reason why people were also demanding among others freedom in the field of cultural activity and calling for the creation of an *organic state* representing the whole Lithuanian nation. According to the declaration, clear provisions of law established by the parliament should be the basis for the functioning of the government.<sup>40</sup>

The younger generation (Domas Cesevičius) became significant also among the *tautininkai* and exerted tremendous pressure on Smetona, constantly demanding the strengthening of his personal power, even if it meant an unveiled dictatorship. Meanwhile, the support for Smetona in that time evidently started to decrease. Also the *tautininkai* organization suffered from decreasing popularity, correlated with a lower edition of their publishing houses and lower circulation of their papers (11 titles). At the same time the publications of the Catholic Church increased to 160% (26 titles). It is worth noting that in this very period it is the Church who considerably developed their social base and, what is more, gave it an amicably formalized form. So were for instance established the organizations that were directly connected to the Church’s mission – *Pavasaris* (the Catholic congregation „Spring”), the Catholic Union of Women, as well as the youth organization with Catholic character – *ateitininkai* (the Association for the Future). The fundament allowing these social organizations to develop was the already mentioned young generation of Lithuanians, described by A. Eidintas as „the generation of independence.”<sup>41</sup>

Characterising the authoritarian system of Lithuania Z. Kiaupa stresses that it was a certain tendency shared also by other European countries, for instance both neighbours of Lithuania: Poland and Latvia. Lithuania was no exception. At the same time the Lithuanian authoritarian system should not be equated with the fascist, as there were no mass organizations of totalitarian character in Lithuania (in 1938 *tautininkai* had approximately 15 thousand members). The establishment of that period is described by the author as: „authoritarian (...), based on loyalty of the majority of citizens and on the system of political bureaucracy.” Furthermore, it has to be noted that it is above political life that was under pressure of the authorities, they did not however interfere with economical changes and the activities of cultural organizations

<sup>40</sup> A. Eidintas, op.cit., pp. 121.

<sup>41</sup> A. Eidintas, *The Presidential Republic (The Generation of Independence)*, [in:] *The Lithuania in European Politics. The Years of the First Republic 1918–1940*, (ed.) A. Eidintas, V. Žalys, A. E. Senn, 1997, p. 129.

aiming at free development of the folk-life of the nation. All cultural activity was directed at reinforcing the status of the Lithuanian national language, in which, since then, independent Lithuanian literature was published. In that period Lithuania was mainly an agricultural country, where 70% of the national production was allocated to agriculture. This fact had a significant impact on the social structure.<sup>42</sup>

Re: 4) The crisis of the years 1938–1940 and the period of World War II.

The last years of Lithuania's independence, that is 1938–1940, were dominated by the international situation. The situation on Lithuania was at that time obviously and undeniably shaped by the circumstances that led to the outbreak of World War II.

An especially important issue for the Lithuanian state was the loss of Vilnius after the formal signing of the consent to the Polish ultimatum of 11.03.1938.<sup>43</sup> The widespread sense of humiliation among the Lithuanian nation, as well as the citizens' disappointment with the authorities resulted in a riot of the opposition parties against the government, whose head was at that time V. Mironas. The next defeat in the international arena was a further ultimatum, this time put forward by the Third Reich. It concerned a demand to return Klaipėda. In such circumstances, the "father of the nation", A. Smetona, was officially disapproved of and when it came to the push finally decided to form a new cabinet with general Jonas Černius as the new prime minister. One of the last political moves of A. Smetona was to turn down a German proposal to support the assault on Poland, for what the Germans committed themselves to return Vilnius to the Lithuanians.<sup>44</sup> Already in January 1939 Lithuania officially declared neutrality, nevertheless on 10 October, after the USSR invaded Poland in September 1939, it decided to sign a treaty with the Soviet Union. Under its provisions Vilnius was to be returned to Lithuania. This however was paid with the consent for the presence of Soviet armed forces on the territory of Lithuania. The following months were devoted to diplomatic efforts aimed at minimizing the country's losses. The government of that time assumed Germany would eventually loose and believed that in the given circumstances it would be more beneficial for the country to maintain the already employed policy of passive opposition to the eastern neighbour. However, even the attempts to invoke the nonaggression treaty signed a year before, when A. Smetona assured the Soviet party that Lithuania would

<sup>42</sup> Z. Kiaupa, *op.cit.*, p. 355.

<sup>43</sup> V. Žalys, *March 17, 1938: war with Polish or a Polish mission in Kaunas?/The Era of Ultimatums*, [in:] *The Lithuania in European Politics. The Years of the First Republic 1918–1940*, New York 1997, p. 154–158.

<sup>44</sup> A. Eidintas, *Lithuania in European Politics. The years of the First...*, p. 33–37 and p. 180. According to the secret Ribbentrop – Molotov protocol, which was designed on the 23<sup>th</sup> of August 1939, Lithuania was going to be dependent on Germany. Later on, when the protocol was amended and Lithuania became dependent on Soviets.

fulfil its obligations, did not protect the country from the events of June 1940. After Lithuania received an ultimatum, which was aptly assessed to be a request to surrender, Russian armed forces entered its territory. Studies concerning this period often cite the word of L. Natkievičius, who is said to have replied to the minister of foreign affairs: „no matter what your answer will be, Russian troops will enter Lithuania anyway.”<sup>45</sup>

Even though Lithuanian authorities did not avoid mistakes in conducting both internal and foreign policy in the interwar period, it has to be underlined that it was a vital period for the developing Lithuanian statehood.

Constitutional government was introduced, based on the representation of the citizens in the parliament, elected in accordance with the elections statute. Although in consequence of the following events the principles of a democratic state were shaken, Lithuania should not be examined as an individual example of authoritarian rule, since, as it has already been pointed out, the trend was rather common in Europe of that period. More attention should most definitely be directed to the development of the essential elements of the party and organizational systems of all kinds of associations. This phenomenon is a consequence of the changes taking place in social structures of the Lithuanian nation, which in time strived to a pluralistic representation of the interests of many groups.

### SUMMARY

Despite the fact that during the interwar period the First Republic of Lithuania, the government and generally people who were in power, did not avoid the problems of interior and foreign politics and chose bad solutions, it should be said that this time was very important and decisive for the country and state of Lithuania.

First of all, the constitutional power was introduced. The general rule was based on the rule of the representations of citizens in Parliament and the authority was elected by the democratic voting. Moreover, despite of the fact that the general idea of democratic country was undermined, Lithuania should not be perceived as an individual case of authoritarian regime. As it was said and emphasized in this text, this type of regulation of power was quite common in this period in Europe. The issue of introduction and development of the fundamental elements of party system as well as the organization of different kinds of associations was more remarkable. This event was the result of changes which appeared in Lithuanian social structures. The people of this state aimed to gain the representation of their social groups.

---

<sup>45</sup> A. Eidintas, op.cit., p. 182