

## Political crisis in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 1430s<sup>1</sup>

*Sergey Polekhov, Ph.D.*  
(Russian Academy of Sciences  
Institute of Russian History Moscow)

By 1430, the year of grand duke Vytautas' death, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was stretching "from one sea to another", i.e. from the Baltic to the Black sea, embracing the historical core, *Lithuania propria* of contemporary sources (modern east Lithuania and west Byelorussia), Samogitia (Žemaitija) – the land between *Lithuania propria* and Prussia, as well as huge Ruthenian (Russian) lands – the inheritance of Kievan Rus'. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was one of the leading powers of East Central Europe, supported by its ally Poland, and would intervene not only the struggle for power in the Golden Horde, the nomadic state coming to its decline, but also the interrelations between the Russian states – the Grand Duchies of Moscow, Tver', Ryazan' as well as the republics of Novgorod and Pskov. By the end of his life Vytautas was even going to shift his status inside and outside the country by receiving a crown from the Roman king Sigismund I von Luxemburg, making his Grand Duchy a kingdom.

Everything changed immediately after the death of Vytautas on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1430. The new grand duke Švitrigaila (rus. Svidrigailo, pol. Świdrygiełło) came into open conflict with the king of Poland (paradoxically, his native brother) Władysław II Jagiełło and was soon overthrown by a group of nobles, but fled to the Ruthenian lands and started a war with the new grand duke Žygimantas Kęstutaitis (rus. Sigismund Keistutovich, pol. Zygmunt Kiejstutowicz), who was supported by Poland. During the war waged from 1432 till 1438, Žygimantas' base inside the Grand Duchy was *Lithuania propria*, and Švitrigaila gained support from its Ruthenian lands. Although Žygimantas won the war, he was assassinated a few years later, in 1440. This was followed by a series of uprisings in the provinces of the Grand Duchy against the central power (the data on Smolensk, Volhynia, Samogitia are extant). Casimir Jagiellończyk, a 13-year-old son of Władysław II, was proclaimed grand duke, and the situation on the country's periphery was settled by 1443.

The main question posed by these crisis events is their reasons and character. It is clear neither why Švitrigaila was overthrown nor why this caused the split of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, leave alone the uprisings in its provinces at the beginning of the 1440s. The historians were trying to follow the scarce direct explanations of the sources and see these events as a conflict (religious, national or territorial) between the two parts of the

---

<sup>1</sup> This text is a summary of the unpublished PhD thesis defended in 2011.

The lands of Rus' belonging to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania are hereafter referred to as Ruthenian, their inhabitants as Ruthenians, according to the Latin tradition, in order to distinguish them and the modern Russians whose ancestors inhabited the North-Eastern and North-Western lands of Rus' – Moscow, Tver', Novgorod etc. For the personal names, the basic forms are those established in the English tradition, i. e. the Lithuanian ones for the grand dukes of Lithuania and the Polish ones for the kings of Poland.

state, the Lithuanian and the Ruthenian ones. According to them, Švitrigaila was especially favoring either the Orthodox Church or the Ruthenians, introducing them to the ruling class. That must have displeased the Lithuanian Catholic nobility (boyars), and thus the coup d'état in 1432 was their reaction. The reason for the subsequent events must have been an attempt to get rid of the Lithuanian predominance in the country, either by winning the first place in the grand-ducal milieu or by reviving in some way the Ruthenian statehood of the Grand Duchy's regions.

However, that scheme, widely spread in historiography, is very contradictory, for it takes into account only a part of facts and ignores the other ones. It was created at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the names of such scholars as Anatol Lewicki, Matvey Liubavsky, Oskar Halecki or Henryk Łowmiański are worth mentioning) and seems to have been to a certain extent politically influenced. That's why the social and political history of the period is worth re-examining.

The period is covered with quite many sources of different types. The traditional basis has been the narrative sources – the Russian/Ruthenian chronicles (first of all the so-called “Smolensk chronicle” written by a contemporary) and *Annales Poloniae* (often also referred to as “The History of Poland”) by Cracow canon Jan Długosz, written in the second half of the same century. Both are very fragmentary, however important, and it is necessary to distinguish between the facts of Grand Duchy's political life they reflect and their authors' images of the past. The second major group is acts – both treaties with neighboring states (Poland, the Teutonic Order etc.) as those confirming the donation of land and serfs (to borrow an English word). Of great importance are their lists of attestants/guarantees, providing important contemporary information on noble groupings. Several unpublished acts were obtained in the archives and libraries of Cracow, Kórnik, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vilnius and Warsaw. The third group of sources is political correspondence of the 1430s. Letters of Lithuanian and Polish monarch and nobles as well as those of the Teutonic Order's dignitaries are of principal significance for the research, since they reflect an immediate picture of events, not distorted by the knowledge of their subsequent course and outcome. The largest part of political correspondence relevant for the topic of my dissertation is unpublished and preserved in Berlin, among the papers of the so-called historical Königsberg archive which once belonged to the grand master of the Teutonic Order – Švitrigaila's main ally (nowadays in: Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, XX. Hauptabteilung, Ordensbriefarchiv, Ordensfolianten). However, that type of sources covers only several regions of the Grand Duchy – first of all *Lithuania propria*, then Švitrigaila's court wandering with the duke himself, Samogitia and Volhynia. Thus, the extant sources allow to investigate the political and social situation in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 1430s.

The main directions of my investigation were: (1) the reconstruction of the course of events, (2) revealing the composition of political groupings (with the help of

prosopographical and terminological approaches), with special attention to the principles they were based on, (3) the interpretation of their behavior during the wars and uprisings of the 1430s and 1440s. The main conclusions are as follows:

The main problem of political life of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the 1420s onwards was not the rise of the Ruthenian elites and their alleged struggle for power, not mentioned by any contemporary source, but the relationships with neighboring countries, first of all with Poland. The latter were regulated not so much by the legal acts (treaties of the Polish-Lithuanian union) as by the personal relations of the monarchs. Vytautas managed to maintain good relations with his cousin Władysław II Jagiełło, but they were deteriorated by Švitrigaila who was eager to rule as “*heres naturalis*”, not as the king’s viceregent (the view expressed by the union acts). Combined with a struggle on vast and rich border lands of Podolia and Volhynia, the dispute lasted for almost two years. Švitrigaila was reluctant to reconcile with Poland, but was nearing politically to the Teutonic Order and building an anti-Polish coalition. I am inclined to think that the very conflict with Poland led to the coup d’état in 1432, Švitrigaila’s deposition and Žygimantas’ elevation to the grand-ducal throne. By delaying the peace negotiations with Poland (or helping the grand duke to do so) the Lithuanian ruling class didn’t gain anything, neither settlement of the problem nor personal security, because feeling of an approaching new war was in the air. In my opinion, that explanation fits the source data best; however, I don’t reject another explanation, namely, that Švitrigaila was overthrown because there was a violation of some rights of nobility (or its certain part) not reflected in the extant sources. Anyway, there is no reasons to believe that Švitrigaila was protecting the Ruthenians and/or their faith: no evidence on his donations to the Orthodox Church of this period is known, and the composition of the ruling elite practically didn’t change since the last years of Vytautas’ reign.

The supporters of Žygimantas Kęstutaitis were initially a respectively small, but very influential group of Lithuanian boyars and princes. What they had in common was their membership of the Grand Duchy’s ruling elite rather than their Catholicism (the princes taking part in the coup d’état were actually Orthodox). These people were politically broad-minded and could adequately understand international as well as inner relations of their state – a feature the Ruthenian (i.e. local) elites were lacking for. In addition, the conspirators were holding important posts in the territorial and central (court) administrative structures of *Lithuania propria*, where they had large estates, so that they could take the territory under their control in the name of the new grand duke. The supporters of Švitrigaila were those, who didn’t take part in the conspiracy and could treat his deposition as a riot against the legitimate ruler, mostly the Ruthenian princes and boyars, although there were some Lithuanian nobles in his milieu. That grouping was strengthened by personal connections: some of Švitrigaila’s active partisans were his old “friends” (or, to put it in modern terms, political allies) he had won during his long career in the Ruthenian lands.

Besides, very much depended on his relations with the most prominent Ruthenian princes and boyars (the latter were sometimes called *pany* meaning “higher nobles”), whose influence in their regions was deeply enrooted in their origins, land property and personal qualities. It must be stressed that the sources do not notice any special ties between Švitrigaila and the Ruthenian elites “as a whole”; an eventual mechanism of their creating and working is also hard to imagine. There are numerous facts “inconvenient” for the adherents of the traditional explanation of the conflict, namely, that such influential individuals and even regions en masse would change their monarch, leaving Švitrigaila for Žygimantas Kęstutaitis and vice versa. Case studies show that the reasons were not estate privileges, actual participation in ruling the state or land donations, though these measures were used by both rivals to win new adherents and win back the former ones. The success of a “grand duke” struggling for power depended on whether he managed to come to terms with its elites. The sources are rather scarce, for their evidence is undirect and has to be additionally explained, but there are reasons to believe that the object of the struggle was the position of the elites (both nobles and prominent townspeople) in “their” lands where they were enrooted and not elsewhere.

That conclusion seems to be confirmed by the subsequent events. The uprisings in the Grand Duchy’s lands were caused not by Žygimantas Kęstutaitis’ assassination *per se* (it was planned and carried out by a small group of dignitaries for unclear reasons), but by the Lithuanians’ attempts to interfere into the regions’ inner affairs. What those lands’ elites needed was indeed not a place in the grand duke’s milieu, but some guarantees of their leading position in their homelands and a certain level of autonomy within the frames of the common state. The same impression is left by other political conflicts of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Grand Duchy of Lithuania, such as the emigrations of Chernigov nobles to Muscovy 1406–1408, the uprising in Samogitia 1418, the conspiracy of the Volhynian nobles 1453 or the so-called “princes’ conspiracy” against grand duke Casimir 1481. Returning to the events of the 1430s and early 1440s, it is characteristic that without Švitrigaila (who was invited only to the Volhynian ducal throne in 1442) the rebels made no attempts to unite. The careers of Švitrigaila’s active noble adherents also tell us a lot: none of them tried to make a career on the level of central administration afterwards, except the Lithuanians, who belonged to the ruling elite by birth. Thus, although the expansion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to Rus’, which had started in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, had come to its end in the reign of Vytautas, the real integration of the newly acquired territories was still far from its end for a very long period of time.

## Bibliography

- Барвіньский Б.* Жигимонт Кейстутович Великий князь Литовско-русский. (1432 – 1440). Исторична монографія. Жовква, 1905.
- Варонін В.А.* Князь Юрай Лынгвеневіч Мсціслаўскі. Гістарычны партрэт. Мінск, 2010.
- Грушевський М.С.* Історія України-Руси. Т. 4. XIV – XVI віки – відносини політичні. Київ, 1993.
- Гудавичюс Э.* История Литвы с древнейших времён до 1569 года. Т. 1. М., 2005.
- Любавский М.К.* Литовско-русский сейм. Опыт по истории учреждения в связи с внутренним строем и внешнею жизнью государства. М., 1900.
- Błaszczyk G.* Burza koronacyjna. Dramatyczny fragment stosunków polsko-litewskich w XV wieku. Poznań, 1998.
- Błaszczyk G.* Dzieje stosunków polsko-litewskich. Т. 2: Od Krewa do Lublina. Cz. 1. Poznań, 2007.
- Dundulis B.* Lietuvos kova dėl valstybinio savarankiškumo XV amž. Vilnius, 1968.
- Forstreuter K.* Der Deutsche Orden und die Kirchenunion während des Basler Konzils // *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum.* Jg. 1. Amsterdam, 1969.
- Halecki O.* Dzieje unii Jagiellońskiej. Т. 1. W wiekach średnich. Kraków, 1919.
- Halecki O.* Litwa, Ruś i Żmudź jako części składowe Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego, [in:] *Rozprawy Akademii Umiejętności (hereafter RAU).* Т. 59. (Ser. 2. Т. 34.) Kraków, 1916.
- Halecki O.* O początkach parlamentaryzmu litewskiego, [in:] *Sprawozdania z czynności i posiedzeń Akademii Umiejętności w Krakowie.* Т. 20. Nr 8. Sierpień – wrzesień – październik 1915.
- Halecki O.* Ostatnie lata Świdrygiełły i sprawa wołyńska za Kazimierza Jagiellończyka. Kraków, 1915.
- Kirkienė G.* LDK politikos elito galingieji: Chodkevičiai XV–XVI a. Vilnius, 2008.
- Kolankowski L.* Dzieje Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego za Jagiellonów. Т. 1 (1377–1499). Warszawa, 1930.
- Korczak L.* Litewska rada wielkksiążęca w XV wieku. Kraków, 1998.

- Korczak L.* Monarcha i poddani. System władzy w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim w okresie wczesnojagiellońskim. Kraków, 2008.
- Kotzebue A.* Switrigail. Ein Beytrag zu den Geschichten von Litthauen, Rußland, Polen und Preussen. Leipzig, 1820.
- Krupska A.* Nos (Nosch, Nosek) Aleksander Iwanowicz, [in:] Polski Słownik Biograficzny (hereafter PSB). T. 23. Wrocław etc., 1978.
- Krupska A.* W sprawie genezy tzw. spisku książąt litewskich w 1480–1481 roku. przyczynek do dziejów walki o “dominium Russiae”, [in:] Roczniki Historyczne. R. 48 (1982). Warszawa; Poznań, 1983.
- Kuczyński S.M.* Jursza, [in:] PSB. T. 11. Wrocław i in., 1964.
- Kurtyka J.* Podole w czasach jagiellońskich. Kraków, 2011.
- Lewicki A.* Powstanie Świdrygiełły. Ustęp z dziejów unii Litwy z Koroną. Kraków, 1892. (A reprint from: RAU. T. 29.)
- Lewicki A.* Przymierze Zygmunta w. ks. litewskiego z królem rzymskim Albrechtem II, [in:] RAU. T. 37. Kraków, 1899.
- Lietuvos istorija. T. 4. Nauji horizontai: dinastija, visuomenė, valstybė. Lietuvos Didžioji Kunigaikštystė 1386–1529 m. Vilnius, 2009.
- Łowmiański H.* Polityka Jagiellonów. Poznań, 2006.
- Łowmiański H.* Uwagi w sprawie podłoża społecznego i gospodarczego unii jagiellońskiej, [in:] *Łowmiański H.* Studia nad dziejami Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego. (Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza. Ser. Historia. Nr 108.) Poznań, 1983.
- Matusas J.* Švitrigaila Lietuvos didysis kunigaikštis. 2-as leid. Vilnius, 1991.
- Nikodem J.* Polska i Litwa wobec husyckich Czech w latach 1420–1433. Poznań, 2004.
- Nikodem J.* Przyczyny zamordowania Zygmunta Kiejstutowicza, [in:] Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne (hereafter BZH). 2002. T. 17.
- Nikodem J.* Spory o koronację wielkiego księcia Litwy Witolda w latach 1429–1430, [in:] Lituano-Slavica Poznaniensia. T. VI. 1994. Poznań, 1995; T. VII. 1995. Poznań, 1997.
- Nikodem J.* Stosunki Świdrygiełły z Zakonem Krzyżackim w latach 1430–1432, [in:] BZH. 2000. T. 14.
- Nikodem J.* Uwagi o genezie niedoszłego przymierza Zygmunta Kiejstutowicza z Albrechtem II, [in:] Docendo discimus. Poznań, 2000.

- Nikodem J.* Wyniesienie Świdrygiełły na Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie, [in:] BZH. T. 19. Białystok, 2003.
- Petrauskas R.* Die Staatsstrukturen des frühen Großfürstentums Litauen, [in:] Litauisches Kulturinstitut. Jahrestagung 2003. Lampertheim, 2004 (a revised and updated Lithuanian version: Ankstyvosios valstybinės struktūros Lietuvoje XIII amžiuje – XV amžiaus pradžioje, [in:] Lietuvos istorijos studijos. Vilnius, 2005. T. 16).
- Petrauskas R.* Lietuvos diduomenė XIV a. pabaigoje – XV a.: Sudėtis – struktūra – valdžia. Vilnius, 2003.
- Petrauskas R.* Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės seimo ištakos: didžiojo kunigaikščio taryba ir bajorų suvažiavimai XIV–XV a., [in:] Parlamento studijos. T. 3. Vilnius, 2005.
- Petrauskas R.* Valdovas ir jo karūna: Neįvykusios Vytauto karūnacijos aplinkybės, [in:] Lietuvos istorijos metraštis. 2009 metai. T. 2. Vilnius, 2010.
- Petrauskas R.* Žemaičių diduomenė ir politinė padėtis Žemaitijoje XIV a. pabaigoje – XV a. pradžioje, [in:] Žemaičių istorijos virsmas iš 750 metų perspektyvos. Vilnius, 2004.
- Rowell S.C.* Bears and Traitors, or: Political tensions in the Grand Duchy, ca. 1440–1481, [in:] Lithuanian historical studies. Vilnius, 1997.
- Rowell S.C.* Išdavystė ar paprasti nesutarimai? Kazimieras Jogailaitis ir Lietuvos diduomenė 1440 – 1481 metais, [in:] Lietuvos valstybė XII – XVIII a. Vilnius, 1997.
- Saviščevas E.* Žemaitijos savivalda ir valdžios elitas 1409–1566 metais. Vilnius, 2010.
- Semkowicz W.* O litewskich rodach bojarskich zbratanych ze szlachtą polską w Horodle roku 1413, [in:] Lituano-Slavica Poznaniensia. T. 3. Poznań, 1989.
- Skrzypek J.* Bitwa nad rzeką Świętą. Studium historyczno-wojskowe, [in:] Przegląd Historyczno-Wojskowy. 1938. T. 10. Zesz. 1.
- Tęgowski J.* Jeszcze o pochodzeniu kniazia Fiodora Nieświckiego, [in:] Genealogia. T. 8. Poznań; Wrocław, 1996.
- Tęgowski J.* Pierwsze pokolenia Giedyminowiczów. (Biblioteka genealogiczna. T. 2.) Poznań; Wrocław, 1999.
- Tęgowski J.* Pochodzenie kniazów Iwana i Fiodora Nieświckich, [in:] Genealogia. T. 7. Poznań; Wrocław, 1996.