



Weekly Briefing

Lithuania social briefing:

Lithuania holds a three-state funeral of the leaders of the 19th century uprising against Tsarist Russia

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On November 22, a reburial of the recently unearthed remains of the commanders and participants of 1863-1864 uprising against Tsarist Russia in Lithuania was given a state funeral in Vilnius organized by Lithuania's Government with participation of the heads of states of Poland, Ukraine and the representatives of neighboring Belarus and Latvia. The remains of two foremost leaders of the ill-fated uprising, those of a 37-year old Zygmunt Sierakowski (Zigmuntas Sierakauskas in Lithuanian) and a 26-year old Konstanty Kalinowski (Konstantinas Kalinauskas in Lithuanian, Kastus Kalinowski – in Belarusian), were discovered together with the remains of another 18 participants by accident - during the archaeological excavations on the historical site of Vilnius, the Gediminas Hill, in preparation for reinforcement construction in 2017. Having confirmed their identities by DNA analysis, after 155 years since their public execution by the Tsarist troops in Vilnius, the fallen heroes of the tragic episode of history, were put into coffins and taken in a public procession across the city from Vilnius Cathedral to their final resting place in the chapel of the Old Rasos Cemetery in Vilnius.

Presidents of Lithuania and Poland Gitanas Nausėda and Andrzej Duda, Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Petrishenko, and Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration Dmytro Kuleba attended the ceremony and made speeches at Vilnius Cathedral broadcasted on national TV channels in Lithuania and Poland. The members of the public observed the ceremony on screens outside the cathedral.

Below is a brief outline of the organized state funeral explaining the links between this event and broader context within which the historical memory linked to the former state of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which covered the territories of present-day Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, has been cultivated by the public authorities. It will try to explain the main drivers, which make the historical memories relevant to the cultural and, indeed, the international relations within a particular region.

The Office of the Government and the National Museum of Lithuania prepared a brochure for the occasion introducing the historical context for the commemorated events. An uprising that broke out on 22 January 1863 in the Kingdom of Poland aimed at the restoration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which existed as the union of the Kingdom of Poland and

the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from 1569 to 1795. The present-day Republic of Poland and the Republic of Lithuania (both declared independence in 1918) trace their statehood to the former Polish-Lithuanian state. Therefore, each episode related to the attempts to restore the statehood of the common state occupies a high place in the historical memory of those nations.

The reburial of the fallen heroes who fought against Tsarist Russia for the freedom of the nations of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine in Vilnius has to be viewed within the context of Lithuania's relations with the countries sharing the commemorated episodes of history. The key here is the symbolic declaration of Vilnius as the capital of the regional politics, involving Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. Vilnius, as the historical capital of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, has played a central role in the tradition of modern statehood of the Republic of Lithuania. The program of the state funeral made an explicit reference to the Grand Duchy. The coffins departed to the cemetery from the courtyard of the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania.

During the first half of the 20th century, Vilnius was the main bone of discontent between Lithuania and Poland. The Republic of Lithuania regarded Vilnius as its historical capital since it was for centuries the seat of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, while the pre-war Republic of Poland saw Vilnius and indeed the whole of Lithuania and Belarus as part of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with the capital in Warsaw, the seat of the former Kingdom of Poland and its successor Republic of Poland. Contrary to both, the Belarussian national movement claimed the Grand Duchy as the predecessor of Belarus and Vilnius as its former capital.

The shared past ran as a leitmotiv in the speeches of the heads of states confirming their shared vision and indeed apprehension that the shared past is an opportunity for dialogue rather than an obstacle. Indeed, the state funeral served as a backdrop to the meeting held between the Presidents of Lithuania and Poland.

During the state funeral ceremony Lithuania's President Gitanas Nausėda highlighted that the bond of the Lithuanian people with the participants of the 1863 uprising and their ideals has never been as strong as it was today. We now better understand that the ideas of civil rights, the freedom of faith, conscience and word, and social justice – all of which were put forward by the insurgents – marked the path for our nations towards the modern world. "Today, we realize that patriotism, loyalty, generosity of spirit, and resolve do not belong to a single nation or specific historical period," said President Gitanas Nausėda.

The President stressed that Lithuanians, Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Latvians remembered the times of a joint state, and all suffered much pain and anguish. However, they survived the challenges and eventually restored national independence. “It may have taken new forms, different from what the leaders and participants of the 1863 uprising perceived, but our shared memory is still alive. It speaks to us in old cemeteries and churches, towns and villages, forests and valleys. It inspires us to create close bonds, develop new visions of freedom, and engage in joint work”, Lithuania’s President said.

In his address after the church ceremony which was attended by the bishops and military chaplains from Lithuania, Poland and Belarus, Poland’s President said that the ceremony commemorated heroes common to Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Latvians, and Ukrainians, and stressed that the mentioned peoples shared everyday historical experiences and values, especially the love of freedom. In this context, he stressed that the unity of the Central-East European nations was a necessary mainstay of their strength and independence.

"The unity of the Central-European nations is a vital guarantee of our countries' freedom, sovereignty, strength, and independence. And I am deeply and strongly convinced that we will continue to act in this very spirit, building a prosperous Central Europe of many nations," President Duda said. Recalling the 1864 Uprising, Poland's President recalled that it was directed against Tsarist Russia, “which had destroyed the onetime Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and enslaved its peoples, and that the leading idea guiding the insurgents was the desire for freedom”.

"In the name of these values, they undertook an unequal battle for freedom, dignity, and independence. Today we stand here to pay tribute to our antecedents' heroism and sacrifice. But we also stand here to manifest that we, like they 156 years ago, share a common remembrance and a common fate, common values, and desires," declared Poland’s Duda.

The representative of Belarus, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Petrishenko, called on nations (obviously meaning Lithuania and Poland) not to claim the leaders of the 1863-1864 uprising against Tsarist rule, especially Konstanty Kalinowski (whom Belarusian regards as their national hero and refer to him as Kastus Kalinouski), as their own. However, he acknowledged the right of each nation to have its interpretation of historical figures such as Kalinowski. “Each country has its image of Kalinowski, but he must not become a historical figure used for political purposes. On the contrary, it is a page of our shared past that we must respect and that unites us now and will unite in the future,” said Petrishenko

When considering the political impact of the public funeral, the commentators noted that by staging a three-state funeral, Lithuania gained politically, showing the openness towards embracing not only a distant past but also the strengthening of multilateral dialogue with the non-EU countries, including Belarus and Ukraine. By placing itself at the centre of the web of historical linkages as personified by the commemorated historical characters Lithuania has created a precedent for using the historical memory for pursuing regional politics.

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