Common history that divides Belarus and Lithuania

On 28 January, Vilnius hosted a performance of the Belarusian ballet Vitaut (Vytautas in Lithuanian). The performance has courted controversy, with the Lithuanian culture minister describing it as a provocation six months ago.

The ballet shows how joint heritage, instead of uniting the two countries, actually divides them and puts Lithuania on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, it would like Belarus to transform into a Western democracy. But on the other hand, it recognizes that the Western identity of Belarus challenges Lithuania’s own identity since it requires both countries to draw on the same historical heritage.

Common heritage as the curse

Western historiography mainly looks at the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) similarly to how Alexander Lukashenka did a couple of decades ago. For many Westerners, in line with this interpretation, the Grand Duchy is a Baltic country. However, in reality, it was an alliance of Balts and Slavs, where the Slavs and their language dominated. For example, Lithuanian Statutes were written in Ruthenian; the language Belarusians often depict as the old Belarusian language.

With the passing years the history of the Grand Duchy becomes less exclusively linked to today’s Lithuania, either in the West or in Belarus. In 2012, Norman Davies, possibly the most well-known researcher of Eastern European history, published his book Vanished Kingdoms, where the chapter on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania opens with a photo of Lukashenka.
Recently, Belarus’s authoritarian leader has showed increasing enthusiasm about the Grand Duchy. In 2017, while discussing school textbooks, he argued that “Belarus needs to introduce into the minds of our people the truth: that Belarus started its history from the states of Polatsk and the GDL.” On 20 January, the commander of the Belarusian interior troops said that even the army now studies the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Many Belarusians enjoy joking that Vilnius belongs to them (as, too, do Poles). It’s no wonder that few Lithuanians find such jokes funny. They feel that Belarus is like a brother about whom no one knew, but he appeared at the moment a deceased grandmother’s estate was being shared out. Moreover, now the brother comes to Vilnius and starts to teach you the family history.

The ballet that separates

Back in September 2017, nearly six months before the performance, Lithuania’s minister of culture, Liana Ruokyté-
Jonsson, described the staging of the Belarusian ballet Vitaut as “a demonstration of soft power and a provocation.” The Lithuanian authorities seem worried about the ballet’s dedication to the centenary of Lithuanian independence, and the fact that the Belarusian organisers had not consulted with them about this. The Belarusian embassy in Lithuania immediately responded to Ruokytė-Jonsson on Twitter saying that “the local fashion of absurdity has no boundaries.”

Lithuanian media occasionally write that “Lukashenka has set his sights on the pride of Lithuania” or “The day when Belarusians will say ‘Vilnius is ours’ is coming.” Quite naturally, these ‘clickbait’ headlines bring traffic to websites, but damage mutual understanding between the two peoples, which has implications for policy-making.

For instance, the Lithuanian authorities seem to fear excessive collaboration with Belarus-centric organisations. The European Humanities University, a Belarusian institute exiled to Vilnius, serves as the most famous example. It receives assistance from a number of international donors, including Lithuania, and almost everyone in the Belarusian civil society remains dissatisfied with the work of the EHU. In 2014, 40 Belarusian intellectuals, including Nobel prize
winner Sviatlana Alieksijevich, wrote an open letter in support of preserving the EHU’s Belarusian heart.

The EHU spends at least $150,000 on the annual salary of the rector, despite its provision of a low-quality education. In December 2017, Lithuania’s Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education negatively evaluated the EHU and the Lithuanian Ministry of Education will deprive it of its licence by the end of 2018. But the Lithuanian authorities continue to support Professor Anatol Michajlaū, former rector and current president of the EHU. Insiders attribute this to Michajlaū’s promotion of a non-Belarus-centric vision of Belarus, which Lithuanians do not perceive as competition.

Disputes around historical heritage also intensify other conflicts, especially the controversy surrounding the Belarusian nuclear power plant. The station, which Belarus began building 55 km from Vilnius in 2013, has become a major stumbling block in bilateral relations, since Lithuania sees it as dangerous for its own security. According to a Belarusian public activist, “If the Lithuanians feel that you do not share their opinion about the Belarusian nuclear power plant, then you are a Russian agent.” Two-thirds of Lithuanians perceived Astravieč power plant as a threat, according to Lithuanian polling agency RAIT. According to another pollster, Spinter, only 6.5% of Lithuanians considered Belarus a friendly country in 2014.

Lithuania’s dilemma

On the one hand, Lithuania feels it should strengthen Belarusian identity in order to acquire a friendly European neighbour. Promoting common heroes such as Vitaut undoubtedly helps to that end.

On the other hand, the strengthening of the Belarusian identity may lead to sharing the history that Lithuania long
considered exclusively its. Things became more complicated as both nations are small and long for a strong simple identity.

A dialogue on the two states’ common history might help to build a shared vision of the GDL, but conflicts and misunderstandings such as the one over the nuclear power plant, sow distrust. Previously such dialogue took place during the International Congress of Belarusian Studies that was held annually in Kaunas, Lithuania. However, in 2017 the Congress moved to Warsaw and this year it will take place in Minsk. So, currently it remains impossible to speak about any kind of joint textbook or other historical projects.

Rather, the countries will develop with their own internal inertias. Belarus will rediscover its history, while Lithuania will feel that its history is being stolen. It remains unlikely that it will bring any positive fruits for cooperation between the countries.