

## **Democracy and Catholicism in XXth century Lithuania**

Lithuania, like many other countries of Eastern Europe, has very complicated story of democratization during XXth century. After the crash of Russian Empire in 1918 it has entered the first experiment of democratic governance, which lasted unfortunately only one decade. In the end of 1926 the democratic political system was substituted by an authoritarian regime of nationalist origin, which wasn't able to preserve the country from aggressive plans of two totalitarian regimes – Nazi and Soviet. Experience of their rule, which lasted half a century, has left a very deep imprint in the political culture and even mentality of Lithuania's people thus causing many difficulties of the new democratization process, started after the collapse of the Soviet system in 1990. A critical rethinking of the Soviet past, even if quite dynamic in the academic sphere, is hardly visible in the public sphere, where nostalgia for „good soviet times” is still alive and strengthened by the efforts of former soviet officials to influence collective memory.

One of the principal questions, we must inevitably answer, when focusing on the contemporary history of Lithuania, is the role of Catholicism for the fate of democracy in the country. Was it advancing democratization or responsible for the failures of democratic culture? This question could be raised for all the above mentioned periods of Lithuanian history, thus constituting **main objectives of the research project**.

- 1) In the period since 1918 until 1926 public sphere and political scene in Lithuania was dominated by ideals of Christian democracy. It is important to point out the virtues as well as defects of this model in order to understand, why Lithuania so quickly retreated from the path of democratic development. Or maybe other factors there were of more relevance, such as the heritage of Russian rule or the general tendencies of political thought prevailing at the moment in Europe?
- 2) In the period of authoritarian rule (1927-1940) the dense network of Catholic social organizations has constituted one of few remaining alternatives to ever restricted field of free public self-expression. It can be presumed, that efforts of the Catholic Church to preserve its space of social activity against the attacks of political authorities have distinctly strengthened self-consciousness of the Catholic community and have prepared it for future challenges. More detailed research in this field would help to back up or deny such a thesis. This period was also a time of a very vivid development of Catholic intellectual life in Lithuania, which has generated quite original concepts in order to overcome liberal democracy without getting in totalitarianism. Their presentation can illustrate better the shape of Catholic intellectual culture in Lithuania.

- 3) The short period of Nazi occupation (1941-1944), which had interrupted incorporation of the country into the Soviet system, has brought the first significant test for the democratic values of Lithuanian Catholics. In the face of extermination of the local Jewish community and ongoing anti-Semitic sentiments the Church had a duty to witness tolerance and to offer aid for the persecuted. The issue continues to be controversial until today, so closer examination of it from the perspective Catholicism *versus* Democracy can offer new insights in the field.
- 4) Already during the Nazi occupation have structures of the underground activities emerged, which grew later into the strong armed resistance movement during the first decade of the Soviet rule (1944-1953). This proves, that in spite of authoritarian ruling system before the occupations, civil society there have been quite strong. The research and sources indicate that the social network of former Catholic youth organizations was very important as a tool of mobilization. Similarly the Catholic social philosophy constituted a large obstacle for the sovietisation of society. So the fight of Soviet authorities against the Church needs to be examined from that perspective as one of pivotal lines of the early period of Soviet rule in Lithuania.
- 5) The new wave of public protest against the Soviet system, inspired by Catholicism, did emerge in Lithuania since 1970's. Public defence of restricted believer's rights was at the centre of this movement. It was clear sign that the environment of the Catholic Church offered the best repository not only for eliminated national ideals, but also for democratic values. The main question in this field is: how important was the example of Catholics for the genesis of the massive liberation movement, which emerged in Lithuania at the end of 1980's. It can be suggested however that for a large part of Lithuanian society at the moment Catholicism (Catholic Church) remained only as a symbol of noncompliance but not as a significant system of values. The objective of the research would be to discover reasons as well as consequences of such a development.

The project will apply mostly traditional methods of historical research – description, problem-oriented and comparative analysis – summarizing already existing research on some objects as well as introducing primary sources. On the other hand the research will be open to interdisciplinary approach employing some elements of methodology used in sociology (*social network analysis*), culture studies etc.

The research project will present a broad look to the origins of the contemporary Lithuanian Catholicism, thus facilitating a more adequate understanding of it's positioning

in our days public life, perspectives of future development and probably helping to find answers to dilemmas, raised by democratization. Besides the fate of Lithuanian Catholicism in the XXth century represents quite a typical example for a development of Catholicism in Eastern Europe, especially when compared with countries, whose society and culture were strongly dominated by the Catholic Church (Poland, Slovakia or Hungary). So it can offer interesting material for a comparative analysis as well to Catholic responses to democracy in other parts of the world, which are bearing very different experience of the XXth century.

Possible publication outlets:

Religion, State & Society

Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte

Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture

The Journal of Ecclesiastical History