

# The Role of the *Kresy* Discourse in Constructing the Contemporary Identity of Poles in Lithuania

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The consequence of establishing new Polish state borders after the Second World War was the mass resettlement of citizens of the pre-war Second Polish Republic (II Rzeczpospolita) from the so-called *Kresy* – now newly established Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian republics of the Soviet Union – to the Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa). The 240,000 Poles, who left the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic as part of the post-war resettlement, were only part of a group of over 1.4 million people resettled to 'new Poland'. With extraordinary strength, they revived the 19th century myth of the *Polish Kresy* – one of the most important Polish national myths – which soon became an inseparable part of the Polish national discourse and the main element of Polish identity policy towards Poles who stayed in *Kresy*. This article is an attempt to answer the following question: What is the meaning of and role played by *Kresy* myth/discourse in constructing the identity of contemporary Poles living in South-eastern Lithuania – on the territory of these mythical *Polish Kresy*? The article is based on a series of interviews with Poles from Lithuania and representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations operating for the *Kresy*, as well as an analysis of the content of these organisations websites with a project offer addressed to Poles in Lithuania.

**Keywords:** *Kresy*, *Kresy* myth, *Kresy* discourse, national identity, Poles in Lithuania, Polishness

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of the *Kresy*<sup>1</sup> was born in 19th-century Polish romantic literature (Kolbuszewski 1995: 6). It was written to uplift hearts and arouse patriotic spirit when Poland did not exist

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<sup>1</sup> The word *Kresy* (written with a capital letter) does not have an accurate equivalent in English. Although literally the word *Kresy* could be translated as 'borderlands', there is a fundamental difference between these words – borderlands is a universal term (all countries have some borderlands), borderland is also most often multicultural, *Kresy* is a specific land (although without clear geographical borders) and more importantly – *Kresy* in the collective Polish consciousness and Polish national discourse are Polish. I use this word in the text in italics, which is intentional and is to emphasise my distance from its evaluative or even colonial overtones.

on the map of Europe as a result of all the partitions. The term *Kresy* quickly became the main axis of the *Kresy* myth (*Mit Kresów*) and synonymous with the lost mythical land stretching east of the Polish borders<sup>2</sup> – the land of Polish idyll and heroic Polish history. This myth developed throughout the struggle for independence, during the 19th and 20th centuries mainly as a literary motif<sup>3</sup> but in the interwar period it began to infiltrate the national discourse.<sup>4</sup> After the fall of the Soviet regime in Poland in 1989, the *Kresy* discourse became an inseparable element of national political narrative and an essential element of Polish national discourse.

This article is an attempt to answer the question: What is the meaning of and role played by the Polish nationalism rooted *Kresy* myth/discourse in constructing the identity of contemporary Poles living in South-eastern Lithuania – on the territory of these mythical (Polish) *Kresy*? The article is based on a series of interviews with Poles from Lithuania and representatives of organisations operating for the *Kresy*, as well as an analysis of the content of websites with a project offer addressed to Poles in Lithuania.

It should be noted in the introduction that the researched region – Southeast Lithuania – is a multi-ethnic territory, which in the historical past belonged to different countries. Therefore, the identities of the people living here are complex, situational, context-determined and defined in relations with others (see: Frejute-Rakauskiene et al. 2016).

Here, national identity will be understood as a complex process of assigning meanings and as symbolic capital to be contested. In this context, it is important that national identity is ‘a powerful foundation or repository of *identity politics*, extremely important not only for *identity politics*, but also for choosing identity strategies’<sup>5</sup> (Čiubrinskas 2008: 21). Undoubtedly, the *Kresy* discourse is Polonocentric, because the space it concerns is defined from the perspective of Polish statehood (Bakuła 2006; Jakimowicz 2015; Kotler 1997). This serves to strengthen national identity and political power, and is generated from the top. G. Bauman’s (1997) observations analysing the ethnic discourse can be confidently applied when discussing the national discourse, in this context, the dominant discourse. It represents the discourse that is perpetuated and spread in the public sector and the media, and in which culture, society and ethnicity merge into a single community. The dominant discourse identifies nationality with a cultural community, thereby simplifying and distorting reality, and creating the impression of a cohesive homogeneous ethno-national group. In the *Kresy* discourse, the areas east of the current Polish borders are inhabited by *Kresowiaks* (*Kresowiacy*), who constitute a homogeneous group regardless of whether they live in Minsk, Lviv or Vilnius.

A very useful approach for analysing the construction of identities has been proposed by J. Hill and T. Wilson (2003: 3), who adeptly define the processes of going ‘top-down’ (*identity politics*), whereby various spheres of political, economic and social influence seek to create a collective identity based on the nation, race, language, or place, to give meanings to their actions,

<sup>2</sup> Geographically, the territory of *Kresy* changed over time. In the 19th century, it meant the south-eastern lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, lost to Russia as a result of the partitions. During the Second Polish Republic, the scope of this concept was extended to the area of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania and former eastern Galicia, and Lviv and Vilnius became the main *Kresy* cities (based on the PWN Encyclopaedia: <https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/borderlands;3927350.html>).

<sup>3</sup> This literature became such an important phenomenon in Polish culture that it constitutes a separate category – *Kresy* literature (*Literatura kresowa*).

<sup>4</sup> Józef Piłsudski was a great proponent of *Kresy* and uttered the famous sentence: ‘Poland is like a bagel: fertile at the edges, empty in the centre’ [‘Polska jest jak obwarzanek: kresy urodzajne, centrum – nic’] (for more information, see, for example, Bumblauskas 2014: 78–80).

<sup>5</sup> All translations of the Polish and Lithuanian source material into English in this article are mine.

and the other 'bottom-up' processes (*the politics of identities*) where local populations act, change, or distort their identities to resist power structures that limit their lives. This suggests that we are always dealing with a double influence on the construction of identity. Various actors provide 'building materials' (Castells 2004: 7) for the construction of ethnic identity, which members of ethnic groups 'recycle' according to their own interests (Čiubrinskas 2005: 43). Identity politics and the politics of identities, despite being differentiated by scholars, are closely related to each other. One does not exist without the other and both depend on power relations. This article considers the impact of the *Kresy* discourse on the construction of the identity of Poles living in the contemporary territory of South-eastern Lithuania, from these two perspectives.

The top-down (identity politics) perspective was examined by analysing the project offer as well as the project financing programmes provided by the Polish government to the Polish minority in Lithuania from 2020 to 2022. This was an offer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Polish Embassy in Lithuania and also foundations financed by the Polish government: the Foundation for the Aid to Poles in the East (*Fundacja Pomoc Polakom na Wschodzie*), which is the main source of funding for Polish cultural projects in Lithuania, the Association for the Assistance to Poles in the East *Kresy* (*Stowarzyszenie Pomocy Polakom na Wschodzie Kresy*) and the Foundation for the *Kresy* in Need – Poles to Poles (*Fundacja Kresy w potrzebie – Polacy Polakom*).

The analysis of bottom-up processes (the politics of identities) is based on a series of interviews conducted by the author from January 2020 to June 2022, that included 31 in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted with Poles living in Vilnius and in the Vilnius and Šalčininkai regions. The interviewees ranged in age from 21 to 84, but a large proportion of this group consisted of young and middle-aged people, i.e. aged 21 to 60. All those interviewed hold a higher education degree or are currently in the process of studying. The choice of people with higher education as informants is dictated by the desire to learn about the attitudes of the reviving Polish intelligentsia in Lithuania. As a result of post-war resettlements, almost all of the intellectual elites left Lithuania (Hlebowicz 2011: 62) – despite the passage of more than 70 years, to this day, Poles are one of the least educated ethnic groups in Lithuania – in terms of the percentage of people with higher education, Poles are in the penultimate place, with only the Roma being a worse educated group than them (only 17.5 percent of Poles in Lithuania have a university degree compared to 27 percent for the country as a whole<sup>6</sup>).

In addition, 4 expert interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations in Poland (3 representatives) and in Lithuania (1 representative), all of which are working on behalf of Poles living in South-eastern Lithuania today.

At the outset, it should be noted that this article does not exhaust the subject, but rather initiates it and indicates certain research paths that certainly deserve further research and analysis.

## THE *KRESY* DISCOURSE

The eastern borderlands of the Kingdom of Poland gained sacral significance as early as the 15th century, when, defending itself against the Tatar and Turkish invasions, they became an *Antemurale Christianitatis* (Bulwark of Christendom) (Beavois 1994; Jakimowicz 2015). The term *Kresy* was used for the first time in the meaning of the eastern borderlands

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<sup>6</sup> Data from the Lithuanian Department of Statistics based on the 2021 census: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/informaciniai-pranesimai?articleId=9843270> (accessed 07.02.2022).

of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by the Polish writer Wincenty Pol in the chivalric poem *Mohort* published in 1854, which quickly became very popular and had a huge and wide impact on the ideas about the spatial concept of the future Poland, which was to be reborn after the partitions (Kolbuszewski 1995: 7). Today, the term *Kresy* (written with a capital letter) covers the territories of the five eastern Voivodeships of the Second Polish Republic (1918–1945) which were lost in 1945 to the USSR and today part of the following five countries: Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova (Jakimowicz 2015: 283). However, M. Jakimowicz (2015: 283) aptly notes that ‘In the common understanding of the *Kresy* territories, Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania are most often mentioned.’

As we can see, *Kresy* stand for a specific territory, but without clear geographical boundaries. Back in the 19th century, *Kresy* became an axiological category, full of idealised cultural and ethical meanings. In the *Kresy* discourse, this idyllic, somewhat backward land, full of ‘true’ values, ‘true’ Catholic faith and ardent patriotism, is inhabited by Poles who long for Poland (Kolbuszewski 1995: 57).

A huge impact on the shape of the contemporary *Kresy* discourse – an important component of contemporary Polish nationalism – was the loss of the eastern territories belonging to the Second Polish Republic to the USSR in 1945, following the decisions made at the Yalta Conference. The consequence of establishing new Polish state borders was the mass resettlement of citizens of the Second Polish Republic (*II Rzeczpospolita*) from the newly established Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian republics of the Soviet Union to the empty post-German territories that belonged to the new Polish People’s Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*). The 240,000 Poles, who left Lithuania as part of the post-war resettlement (Eberhardt 1997; Paczoska 2003; Stravinskienė 2005), were only part of a group of over 1.4 million *Kresowiaks* resettled to Poland from the eastern areas of pre-war Poland (Sienikiewicz, Hryciuk 2008).

Although all forms of the official cultivation of the memory of the abandoned Polish ‘little homelands’ left in the *Kresy* (Tracz 2019: 9) were prohibited in the communist Poland as inconsistent with the official version of history, the *Kresy* myth did not disappear. On the contrary, as noted by B. Tracz (2019: 8), the effect of the absence of *Kresy* in the public discourse of the time was even stronger mythologisation of *Kresy*. Especially since the theme of the *Kresy* was still very present among the Polish diaspora, and even penetrated into mass culture through the extremely popular television comedy *Sami swoi* (*All Friends Here*<sup>7</sup>, dir. by Sylwester Chęciński 1967),<sup>8</sup> of course, presenting a version of the history of resettlement, consistent with the propaganda of the time (Wylęgała 2016: 182).

After the fall of the Soviet regime in Poland in 1989, the memory of resettlements from the so-called *Kresy* could be officially cultivated as the memory of the lost *Kresy*. The *Kresy* myth was therefore revived on an unprecedented scale (Kolbuszewski 1995; Czupryński 2015). Numerous literature sources – primarily memoirs, but also fiction – about *Kresy* appeared,<sup>9</sup> regular commemorations of the *Kresy* culture began to be organised – festivals, conventions (including the World Reunion of *Kresowiaks*<sup>10</sup>), regular fairs (e.g. *Kaziuki* in the cities of Poznań, Szczecin and Białystok) and pilgrimages of *Kresowiaks*. The *Kresy* organisations

<sup>7</sup> Sometimes translated as *Our Folks*.

<sup>8</sup> The film is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knvldAlI0hI>

<sup>9</sup> One of the websites lists over 300 titles of books published after 1989, classified as the Borderlands literature. See: [https://literackiekresy.blogspot.com/p/lista-lektur-kresowych\\_8.html](https://literackiekresy.blogspot.com/p/lista-lektur-kresowych_8.html) (accessed 07.12.2022).

<sup>10</sup> *Światowy Zjazd Kresowian*.

were established and at the end of 1989 there were as many as 20 municipal branches of the Society of Lovers of Vilnius and Vilnius Land (*Towarzystwo Miłośników Wilna i Ziemi Wileńskiej*) in Poland (Namsółek 2019: 334). According to the data of the non-governmental organisations portal ([www.ngo.pl](http://www.ngo.pl)), at present there are over 100 organisations registered with the keyword 'Kresy/kresowy' in their name in Poland.<sup>11</sup> New *Kresy* initiatives appear on the Internet on a regular basis. In addition to actively operating information portals, such as, e.g. [kresy.pl](http://kresy.pl), [kresy24.pl](http://kresy24.pl) and [kresy.info.pl](http://kresy.info.pl), numerous social media profiles are created that bring together many followers, including, e.g. *Kresy Wschodnie* (13,000 followers), *Kresy nie obce* (5,300 followers) or *Kresy* (2,200 followers). Since 2015, the Day of Unity of *Kresowiaks* (*Dzień Jedności Kresowian*) is also officially celebrated on 2 October. The topic of resettlement and the so-called eastern *Kresy* is present in the school curriculum in Poland as early as in the primary school. With the collapse of the communist system in Poland, the myth of the *Kresy* has quickly transformed from a myth to cultural practices and ideological discourse. The *Kresy* discourse has become an important part of the nation-state ideology. To this day, it is a very important discourse present in official speeches of politicians at all levels, in scientific and popular publications and everyday culture, especially strongly associated with Polish nationalism. For example, the participants of the annual Independence March or football fans very often wear T-shirts with the symbolism of the *Kresy*<sup>12</sup> (Tracz 2019: 8).

The *Kresy* discourse has several important features. First of all, *Kresy* forms one common and homogeneous space. In this discourse, there is little difference between Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania – all of it is the East, one *Kresy*. Secondly, an important feature of the *Kresy* discourse is a kind of postcolonial nostalgia or, to use Paul Gilroy's term, 'postcolonial melancholy' (Gilroy, 2004) toward territories east of the modern Polish border. More and more often, researchers point to the need to analyse the *Kresy* discourse from the perspective of postcolonial studies (Bakuła 2006, 2007; Borkowska 2010; Łozowska 2002; Nakoneczny 2019). Although Poland has never had its literal colonies, the *Kresy* has undoubtedly become a territory mentally colonised by Poles. This is evidenced, for example, by the results of a public opinion poll commissioned by the *Wprost* weekly in 2007, which shows that 52.2 percent of the Poles consider the former eastern borderlands with Vilnius and Lviv to be still Polish lands.

The third important feature of the *Kresy* discourse, obviously related to the two previous ones, is the peripheralisation and marginalisation of *Kresy*. As Jakimowicz (2015: 283) writes:

'The concept of the *Kresy* <...> denotes a specific geographic and political land, it is a sentimental, even magical concept for Poles, the quintessence of Polish of homeliness <...>. However, the *kresy* as a general term is also synonymous with peripheries, frontier land <...>. The peripherality of the *Kresy* as a borderland is defined in relation to more economically, culturally and politically developed centre. The relationship between the centre and the periphery is a relationship of power, which is also evidenced by the characteristics of the centre usually associated with development, material wealth, but above all spiritual wealth, prestige, innovation.'

The *Kresy* discourse is a story that both sanctifies and marginalises its heroes, characterised by economic, social and cultural backwardness, peripherality and isolation (Czupryński

<sup>11</sup> More information is available at <https://spis.ngo.pl>

<sup>12</sup> Examples of such T-shirts: *Kresy – koszulka damska – koszulki damskie w Zapisane w Kronikach* ([cupsell.pl](http://cupsell.pl)) or <https://wielkopolskakibolska.cupsell.pl/produkt/1402219-Koszulka-Kresy.html>

2015: 56). It is worth noting here that the peripherality of South-eastern Lithuania as the *Kresy* is complemented by a sense of peripherality within the state – this region is commonly perceived as economically weaker and far from the centre (see: Frejute-Rakauskiene et al. 2016).

### THE *KRESY* DISCOURSE AS A TOOL OF TOP-DOWN *IDENTITY POLITICS* OF THE POLISH STATE

The analysis of the guidelines for the state financing programmes addressed to the Polish minority in Lithuania allows us to see how the *Kresy* discourse shapes the *identity politics* pursued towards Poles in Lithuania. Firstly, *Kresy* are perceived through the prism of Polish history, which is why the cultural output addressed to these areas is often related to history. As S. C. Czupryński (2015: 39) notes, the *Kresy* are primarily associated with the past, and the *Kresy* discourse is ‘more historical than national’.

Poles in Lithuania, as the *Kresowiaks*, are perceived through the prism of the official Polish history ‘caught in a time warp’ (Bakuła 2006). And Lithuania as an open-air museum of Polish national memory. Most of the projects financed by Polish organisations are related to the commemoration of historical figures and events related to the moments of glory or martyrdom of the Polish nation.<sup>13</sup> The official website of the Government of the Republic of Poland, under the heading ‘Poles in Lithuania’, features the Places of National Remembrance in the main position.<sup>14</sup> The programmes to subsidise the activities of Poles in Lithuania are an example of the ‘closure’ for Poles in Lithuania in the perspective of the Polish history. The Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Vilnius mentions areas of financing, which include ‘organization of celebrations of important historical anniversaries, veterans anniversary celebrations’, ‘purchase or preparation of publications commemorating the history of Poles abroad’, and ‘care of the places of national remembrance’. The situation, however, is slowly changing and new areas of financing appear, for example, ‘supporting, promoting and organising activities for social, sports and professional development’<sup>15</sup>, as well as proposals to support more modern forms of culture than folklore, but the proposals relating to the commemoration of the Polish history of *Kresy* constitute the core of the Polish *identity politics* with respect to Poles living in Lithuania.

The second characteristic feature of the *Kresy* discourse used by governmental and non-governmental organisations, which is a visible part of the *identity politics* towards Poles in Lithuania, is the perception that they are the inhabitants of a backward (in terms of economy and civilisation) periphery, thus remaining dependent on the centre. It is sufficient to look at the names of the organisations operating in the area of cooperation between Poland and Poles from Lithuania: the Foundation for the Aid to Poles in the East (*Fundacja Pomoc Polakom na Wschodzie*), the Association for the Aid to Poles in the East *Kresy* (*Stowarzyszenie Pomocy Polakom na Wschodzie Kresy*) and the Foundation for the *Kresy* in Need – Poles to Poles (*Fundacja Kresy w Potrzebie – Polacy Polakom*). The largest cooperation platform between Poland and Poles in Lithuania is financed by the Polish State Foundation for the Aid to Poles in the East. The very name of the foundation places Poles in the East as recipients of aid. According to the foundation, the goal of its operation is ‘to improve the social, professional and material situation of Poles living abroad and to deepen the ties between them and other

<sup>13</sup> E.g. see the reports of the Foundation ‘Pomoc Polakom na Wschodzie’: <https://pol.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/RAPORT-Z-DZIA%C5%81ALNO%C5%9ACI-FUNDACJI-FPPnW-2020.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/litwa/miejscza-pamieci-narodowej>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/litwa/projekty-polonijne>

national communities, and to engage Polish and Polish communities in the West to help Poles in the East<sup>16</sup>. Every year, especially before Christmas, charity events are organised. One of them is the Christmas Parcel for Compatriots in the Vilnius Region. The organizer, Witold Wybult, says about the campaign: ‘This year we have prepared 240 packages for Polish families in the Vilnius region, which mainly contain food. This type of help was possible thanks to the financial support of the Enea Foundation and the involvement of the Deputy Minister of State Assets, Maciej Małecki, who has been with us for several years.’<sup>17</sup> As you can see, the *Kresy* discourse from the perspective of identity politics is a victimising discourse, which can certainly affect the construction of the identity of Poles in Lithuania.

### THE *KRESY* DISCOURSE AND THE BOTTOM-UP POLITICS OF IDENTITIES

Based on my interviews of the Poles in Lithuania, they notice the *Kresy* discourse ‘from below’ (or to use Hill and Wilson’s term from the perspective of *politics of identities*), but often contest or even reject it:

*Am I a Kresowiak? No, I’m not. I’ve never thought of myself as such. I am Polish in Lithuania. Me, and my grandparents were born here. We have never left. It was Poland that left, it left us. Poles in Poland have invented this Kresowiaks, the Kresy idiot, such a Wincuk<sup>18</sup> in Kaziuki [fair].<sup>19</sup>*

A characteristic feature is the correlation between the age of an interlocutor and their response – the younger the interlocutor is, the stronger he rejects the *Kresy* discourse as a feature defining his identity. Young people often reject being a recipient of aid from Poland. As one of the interlocutors said:

*I was also very irritated by the fact that at school they brought parcels from Poland, various pastas and some other products, such as apples, were handed to each child. Because we [supposedly] have nothing to eat? Nothing to wear? [irony].<sup>20</sup>*

Then further speaking about visits to Poland with a group of scouts at the invitation of various state institutions: ‘I don’t like these trips to Poland either because they are also perceived as if they are helping us.’<sup>21</sup> When asked about aid from Poland, older people usually answered more positively:

*Poland helps us a lot. It’s very important. Without the help from Poland, there would be nothing here. Our government wants to get rid of Polishness as soon as possible, so they don’t finance Poles. We have everything from Poland, and they give money to schools and to [folk] bands, for [stage] costumes.<sup>22</sup>*

It can be concluded that young representatives of the Polish minority in Lithuania reject the victimising identity policy – they simply do not want to be a victim or even a recipient of any help. One of the interlocutors said:

<sup>16</sup> <https://pol.org.pl/cele/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://zw.lt/wilno-wilenszczyzna/paczki-z-artykulami-spozywczymi-trafia-do-polakow-na-litwie/>

<sup>18</sup> Wincuk Bałbatunszczyk from Pustaszyski is the artistic pseudonym of Dominik Kuziniewicz, a stage and radio artist who played the comedy role of ‘a typical Pole from the borderlands’. Very often he is invited to Poland to perform. His performances are available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1vWc-Mdso4g>. During interviews, Poles in Lithuania quite often emphasise the desire to dissociate themselves from the image of Wincuk as a typical Pole in Lithuania.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with CN (aged 39), conducted on 17 January 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with KM (aged 22), conducted on 22 December 2021, Vilnius Region.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with KM (aged 22), conducted on 22 December 2021, Vilnius Region.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with KA, age 84, conducted on 2 August 2021, Vilnius.

*I worked in a Polish community centre for a short time. They came there on various occasions, for various anniversaries, gentlemen from all these foundations, everyone was shivering with fear there there. <...> They ingratiated themselves with the guests and put everything they wanted under their noses. Why? Because they donated money. Money for all the theatres, bands, and building of new schools that no one needs. I left there quickly and now I work far away from the Polish swamp. Far away from it.<sup>23</sup>*

### **'LIVING OFF POLISHNESS'**

Another interesting topic that the interviewees paid attention to, especially the younger ones, is that of *'living off Polishness'*. This was how one of the participants described the feeling of being employed in one of the institutions promoting Polish culture and being paid by the Polish government or 'Polish' local government in Lithuania. They are promoting the *Kresy* discourse's vision of Polishness because they are also financially interdependent on the Polish government. As the interviewee said:

*Many [people] here in Lithuania live off Polishness. If they didn't get paid for it, they would have left all these organizations and foundations a long time ago, and yes, they will stay in their posts until they die. Such is the case with Poles, if Poland did not give money, they would have forgotten about Polishness a long time ago.<sup>24</sup>*

Abstracting from the assessment, it should be objectively noted that at least several thousand people in Lithuania are professionally dependent on 'Polishness'. Among others, they are journalists and employees of other Polish media (three Polish radio stations, a TV channel, three internet portals, three traditional hardcopy magazines), employees and members of numerous Polish organisations (according to the official website of the Polish government [www.gov.pl](http://www.gov.pl), there are 59 Polish organisations in Lithuania), employees of Polish educational institutions (according to the *Macierz Szkolna* organisation, there are 71 Polish schools, 53 kindergartens and 47 preschools in Lithuanian Polish groups). In addition to these centers, there are numerous Polish folk ensembles, a Polish art gallery, three Polish cultural centres, a Polish political party and two municipalities (Šalčininkai District and Vilnius District), that, based on information gathered during this research, often apply the criterion of ethnicity when hiring. For all the people working in these institutions, ethnicity is a source of employment. This is clearly nothing new. As Eriksen (2013: 76) observes, many anthropologists see ethnicity simply as a potential tool to help realise specific interests or increase ownership. Utility as an essential function of ethnicity is considered by A. Cohen (Cohen 1974), who argues that ethnicity is a tool to compete for limited resources, overgrown with the ideology of common culture and common origin.

As noted by K. Warmińska (2014), identity homogenisation in the case of *identity politics* takes two forms. First, it leads to the development of collective characteristics around one main axis. Secondly, such generalisations about the collective subject cease to have a purely definitional function and acquire the power of disciplining group members, imposing on them a certain vision that they must stick to. Thus, we are dealing with two disciplinary practices: an external one, carried out by the group, and the other, operating within the group. In this sense, *identity politics* is the use of identity to achieve political and economic goals, adjusting to a unified version of official expectations. This means that when, say, an employee of a Polish cultural centre in Lithuania faces the 'iconisation' of expectations towards him as

<sup>23</sup> Interview with KA, age 28, conducted on 12 June 2021, Šalčininkai.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with WW, age 45, conducted on 2 June 2021, Vilnius.

a Pole from *Kresy*, whether he adapts to this model or opposes it will have economic consequences – it is related to whether he will be hired or not. As one employee of the Polish cultural centre (not a member of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance) told me:

*You can't flaunt too much that you are more pro-Lithuanian, or you are for abortion, or for gay rights. Well, you can be whoever you want, but only at home. At work you're Polish, you don't criticize the Church, and you don't criticize Waldemar [Tomaszewski], God forbid. If you are with locals, you can, but not with a delegation from Poland. Officially, we all stick together and live in harmony. For them, Waldemar [Tomaszewski] is such an icon of a Pole in the Kresy, and we stick to that. Like Pilsudski. What would happen if someone criticized 'the Chief' [Waldemar Tomaszewski] in a press interview? They'd kick him out quickly. Everyone does their own thing, everyone 'cultivates their own field', and that's how we live here.<sup>25</sup>*

Young, independent Poles living in Lithuania, often cut themselves off from such imposed Polishness. Many of the interview participants emphasised a sense of compulsion to play the role of a *Kresowiak*, especially those for whom ethnicity is a source of livelihood, like employees of Polish cultural centres, or teachers in Polish schools. One of the interviewees called this phenomenon 'theatre': *'We play, we play all the time – they play that they love Vilnius, and we play the kind of dull Vilnius they want to see – patriots at Pilsudski's grave and children in folk costumes. <...> It's that kind of theatre.'*<sup>26</sup> Another interviewee, embittered by the need for her scout troop to perform an honour guard at the palace of the Polish president, said:

*I don't like it, but such a thing is that <...> in order to achieve that, for example, that we would receive some funds for projects, some cool trips or something, we have to show that we are and that, for example, we have to go there, to that president's palace.<sup>27</sup>*

A similar observation was made by T. Dalecka – a Lithuanian Polish researcher, who wrote an article entitled 'Freedom or Perhaps the Continuation of "Enslavement", or About New Polish Cultural Phenomena in Lithuania', the impulse for which was the publication in 2015 of two new novels written by Lithuanian Poles "hailed as novelties, so far unparalleled in Polish literature cultivated in Lithuania in recent decades" (Dalecka 2019: 469):

*They [the books] became a pretext to intensify the discussion that has been going on for several years in various forms on the tradition and condition of Polish culture [in Lithuania]. They can also be described as certain proposals for leaving the 'cultural ghetto' and abandoning the position of the 'besieged fortress' by artists writing in Lithuania in Polish. It would be more radical to say that they are an attempt to isolate themselves from the myth of the Kresy accepted by the majority of the local Polish community and the consequent need to cultivate tradition.*

The author further states that '*<...> freedom in the case of Polish-language literature in Lithuania in recent years is primarily an attempt to break free from the corset of Kresy'* (Dalecka 2019: 474).

## CONCLUSIONS

The *Kresy* myth was revived in Poland with an incredible force after 1989, very soon becoming part of the dominant Polish discourse and part of Poland's foreign policy towards Poles living in the *Kresy*. The results of this research provide grounds for the presumption that Poles in Lithuania have become peculiar hostages of this discourse. It has become the main narrative of *identity politics* via the various spheres of political, economic and social influence that seek

<sup>25</sup> Interview with TE, age 47, conducted on 22 September 2022, Vilnius.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with BM, age 39, conducted on 12 September 2021, Vilnius.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with KM, age 22, conducted on 26 July 2021, Vilnius Region.

to create a collective identity to give meaning to their actions. Since the offer provided by Polish governmental and non-governmental organisations to Poles in Lithuania is dominated by the *Kresy* discourse, it plays a huge role in shaping the understanding of Polishness in Lithuania, reducing it to *Kresy-ness* (*kresowość*). Poles in Lithuania are, on the one hand, primarily perceived as the guardians of Polish heritage in Lithuania, and on the other, as the inhabitants of civilisational backward peripheries. It should be noted that the *Kresy* version of Polishness (*polskość*=*kresowość*), which is the only version of Polishness offered from Poland, only builds a relationship with historical Poland, which results in the increasingly weak identification, especially of young Poles, with contemporary Poland. This *Kresy* discourse, operating very strongly top-down, as part of Poland's identity politics towards Poles in Lithuania, is often rejected by Poles living in Lithuania today and, in particular, the younger Poles. It is perceived as limiting, marginalising, enclosing them in a '*Kresy* corset (Dalecka 2019: 474) – sewn from a post-colonial vision of Polish history, Polonocentrism and provincialism. At the bottom-up level, the politics of identities processes show that even work related to cultivating Polishness in its *Kresy* version does not mean identifying with a *Kresowiak*.

The importance and role of the *Kresy* discourse in constructing the identity of contemporary Poles living in South-eastern Lithuania is certainly huge and underestimated by researchers. In addition to the typical elements of Polishness in Lithuania, such as language, land and religion, one should certainly acknowledge the *Kresy* discourse imposed from the *top* but often negotiated on the *bottom*. Particularly worth further exploration is the perspective of the *Kresy* discourse in Lithuania in the light of postcolonial studies. A very interesting theme that deserves further development is the phenomenon of 'living off Polishness', which can be considered through the prism of the economic aspect of ethnic and national identity, in which the implementation of a certain vision of national identity facilitates access to resources.

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## ***Kresų* diskurso vaidmuo konstruojant šiuolaikinį Lietuvos lenkų identitetą**

### *Santrauka*

Po Antrojo pasaulinio karo nustačius naujas Lenkijos valstybės sienas, prieškario Antrosios Lenkijos Respublikos (*II Rzeczpospolita*) piliečiai, gyvenantys vadinamuosiuose Rytų *Kresuose* buvo masiškai perkelti iš naujai įkurtų Sovietų Sąjungos Lietuvos, Baltarusijos ir Ukrainos respublikų į naują Lenkijos Liaudies Respubliką (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*). 240 tūkst. lenkų, po karo išvykusių iš Lietuvos Sovietų Socialistinės Respublikos, buvo tik dalis iš daugiau kaip 1,4 mln. žmonių, perkeltų į naująją Lenkiją. Jie su nepaprasta jėga atgavino XIX a. Lenkijos *Kresų* mitą – vieną svarbiausių Lenkijos nacionalinių mitų, kuris netrukus tapo neatsiejama Lenkijos nacionalinio diskurso dalimi ir pagrindiniu tapatybės politikos elementu lenkų, likusių *Kresuose*, atžvilgiu. Šiame straipsnyje bandoma atsakyti į klausimą: kokia yra *Kresų* mito / diskurso reikšmė ir vaidmuo konstruojant šiuolaikinių lenkų, gyvenančių Pietryčių Lietuvoje – šių mitinių (lenkiškų) *Kresų* teritorijoje – identitetą? Straipsnis parengtas remiantis serija interviu su Lietuvos lenkais bei vyriausybinių ir nevyriausybinių *Kresų* labai veikiančių organizacijų atstovais, taip pat šių organizacijų interneto svetainėse skelbiamų kvietimų teikti paraiškas projektams, skirtiems lenkams Lietuvoje, turinio analize.

**Raktažodžiai:** *Kresai* (*Kresy*), *Kresų* mitas, *Kresų* diskursas, tautinė tapatybė, lenkai Lietuvoje, lenkiškumas