

# Political monuments in Lithuania: Artistic aesthetics and national identity

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*Monuments can be treated as an empirical entry point into the symbolism of national politics and the formation of national identity. Following the elitist perspective on monuments by Forest and Johnson (2002), Begic and Mraovic (2014) and Atkinson and Cosgrove (1998), different political elites and regimes should cause change in monuments that, in turn, lead to change in the construction of national identity. The aesthetic analysis of monuments in Lithuania reveals the contrary: that there are some constant aesthetic characteristics, i.e. visual canons that can be observed in the monuments built in different political regimes and elites. In this context, the main task of this article is to answer how we can account for both the continuities and the changes in monuments. To do so, an analysis of monuments in Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania, was conducted using the discourse analysis of documents representing the analyzed monuments together with the semiotic analysis looking the discursive level of monuments and especially their figurative and thematic aspects.*

**Keywords**

National Politics, National Identity, Soviet and Post-Soviet Monuments, Discursive Analysis, Lithuania

In February 2018, local and national authorities proposed to build a memorial in Lukiškės Square, one of the most important squares in Vilnius. The proposed memorial was to honor the history of Lithuania. The projects were submitted to and assessed by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania. There were visual and aesthetic disagreements about the value and appropriateness of various submitted projects in the public space. These disagreements revealed a strong clash between different concepts of national identity and national narratives that caused intense debate between various groups of society and political community.

The emptiness of Lukiškės Square emerged after the removal of a Lenin monument in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As this removal demonstrates, the changeover of monuments and their interpretations reflects political and regime change: the changes in the

political regime have an impact on the changes in the monuments. Despite a direct relation between the needs of the political elite formed after the collapse of Soviet Union and the practices of erecting and removing monuments, not all the monumental remains built by the Soviets were removed from the public spaces in Lithuania. At the beginning of the process of restoration of Lithuanian sovereignty, most of the Soviet monumental heritage was dismantled. According to written documents, 42 monuments were removed during this period. Soviet monuments were also taken away from public spaces during the whole restoration of independence in 1989-1994. However, there are still standing Soviet monuments, twelve of which are in Vilnius. In this perspective, the clashes of theoretical and practical assumptions that disclose the survival of monuments in the context of different political regimes are evident in Vilnius.

### **Theoretical problematization: From elitism to aesthetics of monuments**

The academic interest in monuments as media through which national identity is constructed has grown during the post-Soviet period and especially in post-Soviet countries. Academics have a broad agreement that monuments can be treated as an empirical entry point into the symbolism of national politics and the formation of national identity (e.g. Riegl 1903; Mitchell 2003; Benton-Short 2006; Shaya 2013; Kwai 2017). Scholars, such as Forest and Johnson (2002), Osborne and Osborne (2004), Merewether (1999), Buivydas (2011) and Krzyzanowska (2016) perceive monuments as essential for the legitimation and articulation of the national narratives through which political elites set dominant political agendas and legitimate political power. Thus, public places occupied by monuments are not neutral: usually they are intended to commemorate a particular person or historical event. Far from being accidental, this marks a conscious process of selection imposed by a dominant political power of what is important in forming the main national identity narratives. Thus, monuments presenting commemorative values are political tools to narrate national stories and reveal national identity.

Looking at the concept of national identity can be useful in response to the need for a theory that combines interaction between the material, symbolic and political dimensions (Bellentani and Panico 2016) of monuments. Benedict Anderson's theoretical position of the space and time of modern nations as embodied in national narratives suggests that a national story can be constructed through material and symbolic practices such as monuments (Anderson 1999: 226). The approach developed by Homi K. Bhabha claims that the narrative revealing the identity of the nation can be read through a variety of written and visual texts and sub-texts:

Nation as narration will establish the cultural boundaries of the nation so that

they may be acknowledged as 'containing' thresholds of meaning that must be crosses, erased and translated in the process of cultural production. (Bhabha 1990: 4)

It is noteworthy that national identity narratives do not develop itself considering monuments as the expression of cultural production able to combines material and symbolic levels. In retrospect, from the Middle Age to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – when the first monuments interrelated with the sociopolitical aspects were built – the prevailing position in building and analyzing monuments was filled by the elitist perspective: monuments were strongly interrelated with a dominant political elite. It is precisely this aspect that links monuments with specific political regimes; and the material and symbolic aspects add a third, analytically significant political dimension to monuments.

The elitist concept of monuments functions through a simple scheme: the main objective of political elites is to legitimate their power, construct and consolidate a political narrative related to their ideological presuppositions through which a national identity is created. In this case, monuments serve as visual tools for the realization of the political goals mentioned above. Based on this scheme, changes in monuments are accompanied by the changes in the construction of national identity after the change of political regime.

Following the elitist perspective on monuments, the history of the Lithuanian monuments from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present can be classified into two periods characterized by specific political elites: 1) monuments built during the Soviet period, 1940-1990 and 2) monuments built in the post-Soviet period<sup>1</sup>.

Researches in the field of the Lithuanian art by Šapoka (2009), Kučinskaitė (2011), Jankevičiūtė (2015) and Antanavičiūtė (2018)<sup>2</sup> revealed that there are some constant aesthetic characteristics among monuments built in the two periods, i.e. visual canons that can be observed in the monuments built in different political regimes as well as by different political elites. While some material forms are replicated<sup>3</sup>, a conservative image of massive heroes on a pedestal prevails in monuments despite the ideological differences of the regimes that erected them (Antanavičiūtė 2019: 352).

The findings showed that it is possible to find the same visual and aesthetic forms and characteristics in monuments regardless of different political elites and their needs to legitimate their power and their particular political discourse in the Soviet era and in post-Soviet Lithuania. Resisting from the discussed theoretical perspective based on the idea of strong interrelationship between monuments and dominant political regime, these aesthetical similarities raise some unanswered questions: if indeed there are some constant aesthetic and visual features, what does that portend for political meanings? Do political meanings change or not? Is it possible to find a relationship between stable aesthetic forms and dynamic political meanings or do stable aesthetic forms necessarily entail stable political meanings? To address these

questions raised from theoretical problematization, there is a need to assess both the changes and the continuities in the aesthetics and political meanings of monuments in Lithuania.

## The discursive and semiotic analysis of monuments

Observing a significant aesthetic interrelation between Soviet era and post-Soviet monuments, monuments in Vilnius were chosen as relevant case studies to account for the continuities and the changes in Lithuanian monuments. The analysis was conducted using the discourse analysis of existing documents and the semiotic analysis of the discursive level of monuments in general and their figurative and thematic aspects in particular (Greimas 2005).

### *Strategy for analysis*

In the analysis of monuments, a strong relationship is assumed between the messages that monuments express through a visual vocabulary and their interpretations circulating in the public sphere. The visual vocabulary is decoded in highlighting thematic and figurative aspects of monuments by using the semiotic analysis based on the European semiotic tradition.

Following Greimas (2005), there are three main levels of the semiotic analysis: logico-semantic (the central analytical tool in this level is the concept of the semiotic square), narrative and discursive levels. Due to the main question of this analysis – how to account for both the continuities and the changes in monuments – the biggest attention is paid to the discursive level of the semiotic analysis, that is in turn divided into the figurative and thematic analytical levels (Nastopka 2010). The figurative aspect is a unit of contents of a monument that is related to the equivalent of the natural world in the plane of expression. The thematic dimension refers to the units of content that have no counterpart in the sensory world and function through the constructs of the mind.

It is important to note that combining figurative and thematic levels firstly indicate the *form* and visual grammar and then, based on the thematic values of the analyzed monuments, it allows to provide for the *content* it is filled with. Following Roland Barthes (Barthes 1991: 87), such distinction between the *form* and the *content* levels correspond to the semiologic system that links the figurative level with a signifier, while the thematic level may mark a signified, thus creating a certain significant set. Having reviewed the figurative and thematic levels, the monuments are grouped by applying the principles of typological analysis. Grouping the monuments semiotically, typological analysis was chosen as a descriptive analytical method allowing to form a set of categories applicable for the explanation of a certain phenomenon of social sciences – in this case the material, symbolic and political dimensions of monuments – by distinguishing interrelated but different characteristics categories that explain the same

phenomena (Given 2019). The typological analysis in accordance with the principles of similarity and differences allow the comparison of distinguished categories by revealing the similarities and differences of the categories (Wikander 2010).

In this article, the analysis is carried out in three stages. The first stage determines the meanings attributed to the monuments by performing the semiotic analysis, including its figurative and thematic analytical parts, at the discursive level. The second stage distinguishes the categories of monuments considering the recurring meanings by applying the principles of typological analysis. The third stage looks for the isotope-based relations among the distinguished monument categories.

In keeping with the methodological notion that 'the term *object* itself has no meaning [...] intercourse is a prerequisite for meaning' (Greimas 2005: 47-51), the semiotic analysis of the discursive level is supplemented for the analysis of the currently existing texts. The latest texts of newspapers and portals and their analyses act as a complementary analytical instrument allowing a more precise identification of monument references at the thematic level. Analyzing monuments as dynamic sites of meaning, the discourse analysis of the existing texts creates an access to the multiple changing meanings of the political monuments in Lithuania.

The combination of these three strategies of the analysis of monuments, i.e. the semiotic reading through the discursive level of the semiotic analysis and its figurative and thematic analytical parts, typological analysis and discourse analysis of currently existing texts allows the holistic view on the process of meaning-making of political monuments in Lithuania, overcoming the distinctions among the static, visual as well as preferred meanings and dynamic political meanings related to the concept of national identity expressed through monuments.

It should be noted that the development of the analytical strategy follows *the effect of reality* concept identified by Barthes because of the social realism style characteristic of the Soviet-era monuments. The style has remained recognized after the restoration of independence of Lithuania<sup>4</sup>. Based on Barthes' explanation (Barthes 2009: 28-29), the realistic tradition violates the trinomial nature of signs followed by direct interface between an object and its expression: 'the absence of the signified and prioritizing only to the referent becomes the signifier of realism. It allows to reject the stage of signifier articulation implemented through its fragmentation into statistical discreet units' (Greimas 2005: 23, 79). In other words, there is no necessity to ignore reference impression and limit the recognition of natural world figures. Sergei Kruk (Kruk 2008) also emphasizes the importance of the referent in the semiotic analyses of the social realism monuments by assuming that the aim of social realism and its works of art was not only to represent the reality but also to be a social agent that corresponds with the reality. In this context, the analyzed monument is not divided into separate objects and the main object of the semiotic analysis becomes the reference of the monument.

## *Generating data*

The question how we can account for both the continuities and the changes in monuments is answered through the case of Vilnius by covering the empirical parts of the Soviet era and post-Soviet period – two political periods that this paper claims having a strong aesthetic interrelationship. The case of Vilnius was based on the position implemented by the practical works of Atkinson and Cosgrove (1998), Benton-Short (2006), Janku and Nientied (2019) with the proviso that Vilnius represents a general situation nationwide.

The main attention is paid to the following two kinds of monuments: the extant Soviet-era and post-Soviet period monuments in Vilnius that are still found in public places and that still participate in the formation of the national identity and national narrative. Also, it is useful to note the logics of the selection of the analyzed monuments. Following the scholars, such as Krzyzanowska (2016), Jeffrey (1980), Shaya (2013), Osborne and Osborne (2004), Merewether (1999), the importance is placed on the monuments having commemorative values. They are built to commemorate an important person or event as a part of the national narrative or national identity and interpreted as political monuments participating in the formation, reformation, entrenchment and support of national identity.

Current and extant Soviet-era monuments have survived the clash of two different types of political regimes, i.e. the Soviet based on Communist ideology and the post-Soviet based on democratic values. The wide-known academic agreement introduced by Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson (Forest and Johnson 2002) explains that the existing monuments could experience one of the three possible fates during the significant critical junctures, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of the independence of Lithuania: coopted or glorified, disavowed and contested monuments (Forest and Johnson 2002).

The disavowed monuments are erased from the national landscape just as the demolished ones. The contested monuments remain the objects of political conflict. Despite the changes of political regimes, the coopted or glorified monuments are maintained or exulted further. Regarding this differentiation of the Soviet-era monuments, the analysis focuses only on the coopted or glorified monuments and the contested ones as they can be found in public spaces and perceived as a part of current national narrative expressed through political monuments. However, despite the mentioned differentiation introduced by Forest and Johnson (2002), it is noteworthy that the glorified or coopted and contested monuments explain the alternatives of their fates, however, they do not reveal why some monuments remain, while others are removed. In other words, in terms of content, it is unclear what political meanings are communicated through the glorified or coopted and contested monuments, how they get in line with the political messages of the new regime and integrate into the national identity constructed by the new political context.

Data from documents and texts were gathered by analyzing selected public documents that refer to and deal with the analyzed monuments.

## **Soviet and post-Soviet monuments: Language and culture on target**

Following the given theoretical assumptions and methodological provisions, this part of the article presents the selected monuments from the Soviet era and post-Soviet period. The insights of the semiotic analyzes are highlighted by discussing the monuments involved in the national narrative through which the national identity is revealed.

### *The Soviet-era monuments: 1940-1990*

Starting with the glorified or coopted and contested Soviet-era monuments, twelve monuments in Vilnius have survived the clash of the Soviet and democratic regimes or present political democracy. The list of the survived Soviet-era monuments are presented through the following monumental artefacts: *Lithuanian Ballad*, a monument commemorating the 650<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vilnius city (1973<sup>5</sup>); *The First Swallows*, a monument honoring the Soviet cosmonauts (1987); a monument to Mikas Petrauskas, a well-known Lithuanian composer and singer (1974); *The Editor*, a monument to Pranciškus Skorina, a publisher of the first book in Lithuania (1973); a monument to Barbora Radvilaitė, Grand Duchess of Lithuania (1982); a monument to Kristijonas Donelaitis, a Lithuanian writer (1964); a monument to Žemaitė, a Lithuanian writer (1971); a monument to Petras Cvirka, a Lithuanian writer (1959); a monument to Salomėja Nėris, a Lithuanian writer (1974); a monument to Laurynas Stuoka-Gucevičius, one of the most famous Lithuanian architects (1984); a monument to Adomas Mickevičius, a Lithuanian writer (1984); a monument to Aleksandras Puškinas, a Russian poet, who had family ties in Lithuania (1955).

The semiotic analysis of the extant Soviet-era monuments explored their discursive level with a focus on the thematic and figurative aspects of the monuments. Pursuant to the significant sets that were distinguished in accordance with the figurative and thematic aspects of monuments and the analysis of recent documents addressing them, the Soviet-era monuments can be grouped into the following three types: monuments representing the promotion of the Lithuanian language and culture, monuments depicting the founders of Lithuania in medieval times and monuments having changed meanings.

Nine of twelve Soviet-era monuments were built to commemorate writers and humanists. Seven monuments were dedicated to writers: Petras Cvirka, Žemaitė, Salomėja Nėris, Kristijonas Donelaitis, Adomas Mickevičius, Pranciškus Skorina, and

Aleksandras Puškinas. Two monuments were created to honor the representatives of the Lithuanian culture: the composer and singer Mikas Petrauskas and the architect Laurynas Stuoka-Gucevičius. The humanistic element unfolds in the monument *Lithuanian Ballad*. It signifies the features of the Lithuanian culture.

One of the Soviet-era monuments erected in 1982 was devoted to Grand Duchess of Lithuania Barбора Radvilaitė, who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a golden period in the history of Lithuania. This monument marks a prominent figure in the creation process of the state of Lithuania. The monument was approved by the Soviet officials because of its modern, unrealistic and very decorative aesthetics. Based on the current text analysis and the figurative aspect of the monument and using the Aesopian language in the aesthetics of the monument, it could be perceived as a sign of the Lithuanian roots and history in the narrative expressed through the Soviet-era monuments in Vilnius.

The last in the list of the survived Soviet-era monuments is the monumental artefact *The First Swallows* honoring the Soviet cosmonauts. This monument represents the group of monuments having a changed meaning. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the monument was not demolished due to some changes. Now it is associated with the first swallows of the Lithuanian freedom in the period of the restoration of the independence of Lithuania. The initial meaning of the monument was altered with the change of regime and dominating political elite and adapted to the new narrative of national identity.

To summarize the analysis of the Soviet-era monuments, a dominant feature is distinguished. In the realm of the figurative and thematic aspects of the discursive level analysis, cultural and linguistic components prevail. The monuments that were not removed after the collapse of the Soviet Union are mostly related to the Lithuanian language and culture or well-known personalities of Lithuanian origin.

### *The Monuments of the post-Soviet period*

Of all the monuments built in independent Lithuania, 20 monuments have a commemorative value that is important for the formation of political meaning and national narrative. The overall sample of the monuments analyzed during this period are as follows: a monument to Grand Duke Gediminas, the founder of the city of Vilnius (1996); a monument to Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, a Russian and Lithuanian artist, scenographer, graphic artist and painter (2011);



a monument to King of Lithuania Mindaugas (2003); a monument to Chiune Sugihara built to commemorate the diplomatic aid to the Jews during the genocide (2001); a monument to Vincas Kudirka commemorating the national movement (2009); a monument to the Lithuanian deportees to Yakutia (2006); a monument to Vilnius Gaon Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1997); a monument to Cemach Shabad, a physician, therapist, scientist and activist of Vilnius Jewish Community (2007); a monument to the victims of the massacre of the Jews (1993); a monument to Taras Shevchenko, an Ukrainian poet, writer, artist, public and political figure, who lived and studied in Vilnius (2011); *Lazdynų Pelėda*, a monument to sisters Sofija Ivanauskaitė-Pšibiliauskienė and Marija Ivanauskaitė-Lastauskienė, Lithuanian writers (1995); a monument to the three Vileišis brothers, initiators of the Lithuanian National Revival and creators of the first independent state of Lithuania (2018); a monument to Dr. Jonas Basanavičius, a guardian of national consciousness and creator of the first independent state of Lithuania (2018); a monument to Roman Gary, a French writer and diplomat who lived in Lithuania and wrote about it (2007); a monument to Jan Zvartendijk, a Dutch Ambassador to Lithuania, who gave Jews about 2,200 visas and thus saved them from death in 1940 (1999); a monument to Jonas Žemaitis, a Lithuanian partisan commander (1992); a monument to Konstantinas Balmontas, a Russian poet of Lithuanian origin who contributed to the promotion and dissemination of the Lithuanian culture abroad in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (2010); *The Way of Freedom*, a monument dedicated to the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Restoration of the State of Lithuania and inviting all the Lithuanian patriots to continue the way of freedom and unity (2010); a monument in memory of the Lithuanian soldiers who died in the Soviet-Afghan War (2006); a monument to Vladas Jurgutis, a Lithuanian economist, first Chairman of the Bank of Lithuania and the founding father of the Lithuanian currency Litas during the period of the First Republic of Lithuania (2015).

Regarding the results of the semiotic discourse analysis and especially the thematic and figurative aspects of the monuments as well as the discourse analysis of existing documents, the following 6 types of the monuments constructed in Vilnius after the restoration of the independence of Lithuania can be distinguished:

*Monuments to the Lithuanian writers and humanists.* The four monuments erected after the restoration of the independence honor the Lithuanian writers and humanists, thus providing Lithuanian language and culture an appropriate role in the creation of the national narrative through monuments.

*Five monuments are devoted to the foreigners who participated in the Lithuanian cultural life and historical events.* The cultural and humanistic element is developed in the second category of monuments as well only here the objects of commemo-

ration and remembrance through monuments are foreigners who promoted Lithuanian culture abroad or lived in Lithuania and fostered Lithuanian values. By giving attention to the foreigners involved in the Lithuanian culture, a Lithuanian motif, pointed out in the first category of monuments, is reinforced in the narrative of national identity represented through the framework of monuments.

*Monuments to the founding fathers of the medieval Lithuania.* The monuments to Grand Duke Gediminas and King Mindaugas commemorate two medieval figures who laid the foundations for the origins of the Lithuanian state in the Middle Ages. Thematically and figuratively, they are related to the image of the Lithuanian origins and ancestry.

*Five monuments to the founders of the first Republic of Lithuania established in the interwar period.* The republic was established in 1918 after the liberation from the Russian Empire and the end of the First World War. The monuments of this group mark the practices of remembrance implemented through monuments and representing as well as involving the founders of the first Republic of Lithuania in the narrative of national identity. It is important to note that three monuments of the first and fourth categories overlap. The monuments to writers and humanists, i.e. the Vileišis brothers, Vincas Kudirka and Dr. Jonas Basanavičius, can be associated with writing, while the Humanism played an important role in the establishment of the first Republic of Lithuania during the interwar period. In this context, the elements of the Lithuanian language and the origins of statehood are strongly interrelated. The people who cherished the Lithuanian language also promoted the idea of the independence of Lithuania that laid the foundations for a modern state and political community. However, it is noteworthy that when we talk about the states that were established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, hence the first Republic of Lithuania, we talk about modern states having an institutional structure specific to the formation of modern political communities. On the other hand, analytically, the features of the formation of political community and political institutions are not remarkable. Only one integral feature of the modern state and political community represented through monuments is found in the monument to Vladas Jurgutis, i.e. the development of financial and monetary system. Yet another monumental artefact, i.e. the monument to the partisan commander Jonas Žemaitis could be related to the political community. Thematically and proved by the analysis of currently existing documents, this figure is associated with the fights for maintaining the independence of the

first Republic of Lithuania, i.e. the preservation of the established political institutions, self-government and fight against the Soviet intervention in the modern Lithuanian state established in the interwar period.

*Monuments marking significant events.* Of the three monuments, only the one in memory of the Lithuanian soldiers who died in the Afghan War is out of context, whereas the other two mark the continuity of the Lithuanian statehood. The monument to the Lithuanian deportees in Yakutia honors those who were deported to Siberia when the first Republic of Lithuania was occupied by the Soviets. Although Lithuania was incorporated in the Soviet Union, the state institutions established at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were destroyed and the people were deported to Siberia, the Lithuanian spirit was preserved by the people in diaspora. Furthermore, a considerable number of deportees to Siberia were the intelligentsia who in a significant number of cases are related to the first category of monuments for having a great knowledge of the Lithuanian language and culture and their promotion.<sup>6</sup>The restoration of the independence of Lithuania after the collapse of the Soviet Union is considered a natural continuation of the Lithuanian spirit preserved during the Soviet era. It is reflected in the third monument of this category *The Way of Freedom* dedicated to the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Restoration of the State of Lithuania. The restoration of independence is considered not as a new concept but as a restoration and continuation of what was created during the interwar period and preserved in the Soviet era by cultivating the Lithuanian spirit. What is more, based on the discourse analysis of the existing texts, the movement for the independence of Lithuania in 1990 was closely related to the intelligentsia, i.e. professionals in the fields of language and culture, who encouraged the National Revival and liberation from the Soviet Union.

*Monuments dedicated to the Jewish history.* Five of twenty monuments are associated with the Jewish history in Lithuania. The history and genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are presented through monuments as an integral part of the national identity narrative. Although much attention is paid to the Jewish history in the general context of the national identity narrative, in quantity terms, the monuments that incorporate the Jewish history into the Lithuanian identity narrative do not dominate. It is proved by the monuments of this category in the context of the national identity narrative. The history of the Jews, especially those who lived in Vilnius, plays a significant role in monument construction, however, figuratively, it is considered as a period intervening in a common representation of identity through

monuments but having no features of continuation connecting Lithuania in the Middle Ages, the First Republic of Lithuania and the current Republic of Lithuania.

The post-Soviet period monuments in Vilnius and their thematic categories raise a question as to what they reveal. Grouping monuments in line with the principles of typological analysis and monument meanings revealed by figurative and thematic aspects outlined certain patterns of monuments, erected after the restoration of independence, narrative of national identity. Two dominating narrative lines of national identity are singled out. The first line links the first and the second category of the post-Soviet period monuments, while the second one connects the third and the fourth category. Also, the narrative lines display a motif of the Lithuanian language and culture through nine monuments to writers and humanists representing Lithuanian identity. The second line highlights the construction of national identity through the search for the origins of the ancestries. Seven monuments are associated with the attempts to find the origins of Lithuania starting with the Middle Ages and continuing to the establishment of the modern state at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the thematic values of the three founding fathers of modern Lithuania overlap with those of writers and humanists, thus reinforcing the importance of the Lithuanian language and culture in the process of constructing identity. The domination of the language and culture motifs is connected not only with the third and fourth categories, but with the fifth category of monuments marking the events related with the Lithuanian intelligentsia and thus the knowledge and maintenance of the Lithuanian language and culture as well.

To sum up, the dominance of the Lithuanian writers and founding fathers of the medieval and modern Lithuania as well as the attention to foreigners who were an integral part of the Lithuanian cultural life and the dissemination of the Lithuanian culture implicate the importance of the Lithuanian language and origins. Moreover, it represents the idea of common ancestry based on the Lithuanian language and culture. In other words, perceiving monuments as symbolic entry points in reading and interpreting the narrative of national identity implicate political meanings with strong cultural connotations.

### **Monuments as visual tools to construct national identity: The importance of ethnicity**

Following the elitist perspective on the relation between monuments and politics, especially when the change of political regime leads to the change of monuments and through them to the changes of constructing or reconstructing national identity, we have an answer to the question why there are changes in the Lithuanian monuments after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The change of political regime results in the political implications that are

implemented and consolidated through monuments. However, the aspect of their continuity through aesthetic characteristics and visual canons common to the monuments of the Soviet era and post-Soviet period remain uncovered.

According to the visual analysis of the extant Soviet and post-Soviet era monuments carried out by researchers Šapoka (2009), Kučinskaitė (2011), Jankevičiūtė (2015) and Antanavičiūtė (2018)<sup>7</sup>, semiotic reading of monuments in Vilnius showed that ‘a deep-rooted belief that a monument must be big, heavy, shiny and have a shape resembling a man comes from the Soviet times’ (Jankevičiūtė 2015: 38–42). It is evidenced by the visual grammar similarities among Soviet and post-Soviet period monuments in Vilnius. From the perspective of similarities and differences, it is noted that aesthetically eleven of twelve Soviet-era monuments and twelve of twenty monuments erected after the restoration of independence use a human-shaped aesthetic expression of monuments. In quantity terms, massiveness, majesty and realistic expression dominate the aesthetics of both period monuments.

If based on the theoretical assumptions made at the beginning of the article we perceive monuments as texts that, as a whole, develop a narrative revealing national identity and look for the answer to the question how we can account for both the continuities and changes in the Soviet-era monuments and the ones erected in independent Lithuania, we can see characteristic features of both periods reflected in the monuments. These include not only similar aesthetic and stylistic features of monuments acknowledged by the visual grammar similarity revealed during the semiotic reading. Certain similarities were noted also in the terms of political meaning. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the extant Soviet-era monuments that still play a role in the narration of the history of national identity in Lithuania are mostly related to the Lithuanian language and culture or well-known personalities of Lithuanian origins. The dominance of the linguistic and cultural motifs is also recorded in the monuments of the post-Soviet period.

Considering monuments as the objects of identity expression and with respect to the linguistic and cultural aspects, it is useful to look at the classical concept of identity. Smith (Smith 1991) introduced two concepts of national identity: political and ethnic concepts of a nation. Political nation is related to common laws and political institutions, while ethnic nation is seen as tracked down by native intellectuals having strong relationship with language and common origins and ancestry.

Historic territory, legal-political community, legal-political equality of members, and common civic culture and ideology are the components of the standard Western model of a nation. [...] At the same time, a rather different model of the nation has developed outside Western Europe, namely in Eastern Europe and Asia. [...] We can term this non-Western model an *ethnic* concept of a nation. Its distinguishing feature is the emphasis on the community of birth and native cul-

ture, while the Western concept states that an individual can choose a nation to belong to. The non-Western or ethnic concept allowed no such latitude. (Smith 1991: 21)

In this context, the two classical concepts of the nation allow a unanimous reading of the analyzed monuments as texts and reveal the direction of the formation of meaning revealed through the isotopy of national identity: ethnic concept *versus* political concept of the nation.

Having in mind that geographically Lithuania belongs to East-Central Europe and with regard to the expression of culture- and language-related connotations and domination of the extant Soviet-era monuments and those unveiled after the restoration of independence in 1990, it is obvious that the national narrative created through the remaining political monuments of the Soviet era and post-Soviet period could not be related to the symbols of self-determining political nation but could be associated with a passive cultural community bounded by language and common culture as well as common origins and ancestry.

Ten of twelve Soviet-period monuments that remain in the public spaces in Vilnius and still participate in the constructing process of the narrative of national identity, represent the significance of language and culture. If we look at these monuments from the perspective of Smith's two concepts of national identity, we could notice that they have no links with the political concept of the nation. None of the extant monumental artefacts are related to common political or legal institutions. On the contrary, the figures of writers and humanists point out the direction of reading the meaning and highlight the motif of intelligentsia directly connected with the ethnic concept of the nation.

An analogous situation is noticed in the analysis of the post-Soviet monuments in Vilnius. Certain connections with the political concept of the nation can be traced in the monument dedicated to the founding father of the Lithuanian currency or the monumental artefact honoring the resistance fighters who during the Soviet occupation aimed to preserve the first Republic of Lithuania and its institutional and political system developed in the interwar period. The monuments to the creators of modern Lithuania that was established at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be considered to have political messages aiming to develop a political concept of the nation having characteristic features, such as legal-political community, legal-political equality of members, common civic culture and ideology. Unlike the case of Soviet-era monuments, the monuments built after the restoration of independence include the semes related to the political concept of the nation for the formation of meaning. However, the semes directing the monuments' reading to the meaning related to the ethnic concept of the nation take up a dominant position. The key founding fathers of the first Republic of Lithuania are considered the persons represented through the monuments, i.e. writers and ambassadors of the Lithuanian culture. The interrelation of the state formation, cultural figures and the monuments' thematic aspects which reveal the figures of the Lithuanian intelligentsia,

who fostered Lithuanian language and culture in the narrative of national identity, emphasize the importance of language and culture related to the ethnic concept of the nation.

Comparing the monuments of both periods, it becomes clear that similar aesthetic and visual features of monuments built in the context of different political periods in the analytical position based on semiotics, and particularly the discursive level of semiotics, lead to thematically overlapping monument values that are strongly interrelated in common political meanings. The dominance of language and culture becomes one of the most significant features of the monuments in the creation of national identity linked with the ethnic concept of the nation. The statement is supported by the researches carried out by Miroslav Hroch. He revealed that: 'intelligentsia is in general considered to be the most active factor in the Lithuanian national movement (Hroch 1985: 87) and functioned as the guardian of the language and cultural traditions. The narrative of the Lithuanian language and culture emphasized by Hroch presents the Lithuanian national identity based on the concept of ethnicity.

Ethnicity is evident in the analysis of the Lithuanian national identity shaped through the still standing Soviet monuments and those erected in independent Vilnius. If a political concept of the nation is present in the analysis of the monuments constructed after the restoration of independence, there are no Soviet monuments representing this concept in Vilnius. As the Soviet monuments that testify the political concept of the nation would also express the identity of any other country, they are not present in the current national narrative of Lithuania. In a political context, Soviet monuments and the ones erected in independent Lithuania are not united by a political concept of the nation related to national identity created through political, legal and economic institutions but the ethnic identity constructed on the basis of the native language and culture that dominate the monuments of both periods.

In conclusion, the answer to the question why we see changes of political elites, regimes and agendas but also notice similarities in the monuments of different periods is the ethnic concept of national identity evidently expressed through the monuments erected in both the analyzed periods in Vilnius. In this case, the Lithuanian national identity is based on the ethnic group, belonging to that group and the importance of intelligentsia, such as writers, in the formation of the Lithuanian nation. Therefore, in this situation, some similarities among aesthetic forms lead to the vocabulary of semiotics, stable thematic aspects of monuments and stable political meanings based on the ethnic concept of the nation.

## **Concluding remarks**

All the monuments that have a commemorative value make a text the analysis which allows to reconstruct national identity. If we refer to the traditional approach of explaining the relation between politics and monuments based on the elitist perspective that the change of

political regime lead to the changes of monuments related to the representation of national identity, we notice that the motive of the monuments change. Consequently, the change of political regime induces the change of the national identity narrative and its practices, i.e. the monuments. Nevertheless, the experience of Lithuania and other post-Soviet countries show that when a political system changes not all the monuments representing former systems are removed. The remaining ones are recontextualized in a certain way and integrated into the reconstructed national identity.

Furthermore, as previous researches carried out in Lithuania on the visuals of monuments revealed and the semiotic reading of monuments proved, the monuments built in the Soviet period and those erected after the restoration of independence actually have aesthetic and visual similarities, common characteristics and similar trends. The analysis of monuments as texts through which a narrative uncovering the national identity is presented revealed that the answer how can we account for both the continuities and the changes in monuments is the ethnic concept of national identity evidently expressed through monuments erected in both the analyzed periods. Although the component representing national identity – the political concept of nation – is present in the monuments erected after the restoration of independence, it is eliminated from the Soviet monuments. Therefore, what is related to the ethnic concept of nation in the national narrative becomes a factor explaining the aspects of monuments' stability that remains in spite of changes of political elite, discourse and regime, and the related changes in monuments. Comparing the monumental artefacts of these two periods, the dominance of the Lithuanian language and culture became one of the most remarkable features. It explains the signs of aesthetic stability of monuments essential to their political relevance. Some constant aesthetic and visual similarities of the Soviet-era and post-Soviet period monuments portend for recurrent political meanings based on the concept of ethnicity. The visual expression of political monuments and political meanings becomes the ethnic concept of the nation founded in both Soviet monuments and those erected in independent Lithuania.

## NOTES

1 A brief historical overview of the development of the Lithuanian state and key moments of statehood will help to better understand the specifics and problems of the case of Lithuania. The name of Lithuania was first mentioned in the written sources in 1009. Grand Duke Mindaugas, who was crowned in 1253, is considered the first ruler who united Lithuania and created the state. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania existed in the Middle Ages. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Grand Duke Gediminas expanded the territory of Lithuania quite significantly. In 1569, the Union of Lublin united the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Poland into a single Commonwealth of Both Nations that existed before the division in 1772-1795. After the division of



the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, the territory of Lithuania was incorporated into the Tsarist Russian Empire, where Lithuania remained till the end of the First World War. In 1918, the independent state of Lithuania was created and thus the first Republic of Lithuania emerged. It existed till 1940 when Lithuania was annexed to the Soviet Union by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. When the collapse of the Soviet Union began in 1990, Lithuania restored its independence.

2 The authors Kęstutis Šapoka, Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, Rasa Antanavičiūtė, Justina Kučinskaitė, etc., discuss the cases of aesthetic overlapping and coincidence from the perspective of art history and criticism. For more information and aesthetic analyses of monuments, refer to: Kęstutis Šapoka. *Kultūros barai [Bars of culture]* 9, 2009; Justina Kučinskaitė. *Vilniaus skulptūros viešojoje erdvėje sampratos pokyčiai po 1990-ųjų [Changes in the concept of Vilnius sculptures in public space after the 1990s]*, Master's Thesis, Vytautas Magnus University 2011; *State Cultural Heritage Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, Ministry of Culture Comfortable and Uncomfortable Heritage*, research seminar-discussion material: Giedrė Jankevičiūtė. *Soviet Heritage in the Face of Conflict of Values*, 38–42.

3 Grunskis, T. 2012. A Monument to Freedom – a Dilemma between Space and Object. In: Mikalajūnė, E., Antanavičiūtė, R. eds., *Vilnius monuments: A story of change*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 29.

4 It is proved in *Visuotinė lietuvių enciklopedija [Universal Lithuanian encyclopedia]* 2017. Available from <https://www.vle.lt/Straipsnis/lietuvos-skulptura-118228> and <http://www.mmcen-tras.lt/kulturos-istorija/kulturos-istorija/daile/skulptura/paminklai-idejoms-zmonems-formoms-xx-a-78-desimtmetis/79476>. [accessed October 5, 2019]

5 The year in which the monument was erected is given in brackets.

6 At the beginning of the Soviet occupation in 1940–1953, the deportees to Siberia were the intelligentsia and upper-class landowners.

7 For more information and aesthetic analyses of monuments, refer to: Kęstutis Šapoka. *Kultūros barai [Bars of culture]* 9, 2009; Justina Kučinskaitė. *Vilniaus skulptūros viešojoje erdvėje sampratos pokyčiai po 1990-ųjų [Changes in the concept of Vilnius sculptures in public space after the 1990s]*, Master's Thesis, Vytautas Magnus University 2011; *State Cultural Heritage Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, Ministry of Culture Comfortable and Uncomfortable Heritage*, research seminar-discussion material: Giedrė Jankevičiūtė. *Soviet Heritage in the Face of Conflict of Values*, 38–42.

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