

# The Portrait of the Protests of Vytautas Magnus University Students (1922–1939): Conflicts and Clashes

## Panorámica de las protestas estudiantiles en la Universidad Vytautas Magnus (1922-1939): Conflictos y enfrentamientos

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*Abstract:* The characteristic features of the students' activities of the only university in the inter-war Lithuania – Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas – dealt with in the article were the expression of student protests and discontent as a result of the twists and turns in the domestic and foreign politics of the country and the internal problems of the University. The forms and substance of the collective behaviour of the active and eager academic youth pointed to the presence of unresolved urgent matters both inside and outside the University. The students' political demonstrations of 1926 and 1938 were the direct response of young people to the political tensions in the country. It is noteworthy that the political opposition was also engaged in fuelling youth resistance by making use of student organisations, shielded by the autonomy of the University, as tools in their fight against the ruling majority. The political landscape was diverse with Catholic, nationalist and socialist segments there, thus the

*Resumen:* Los rasgos y características de la actividad y de la protesta estudiantil de la única universidad lituana en el período de entreguerras -la Universidad Vytautas Magnus de Kaunas – son estudiados en este artículo como expresión del descontento ante la situación interior y exterior del país y de los problemas internos de la propia Universidad. Las formas que adoptó el comportamiento colectivo de la juventud académica señalaron la presencia de asuntos urgentes sin resolver, tanto dentro como fuera de la Universidad. Es de destacar que la oposición política también estaba comprometida en el fomento de la resistencia a la juventud, haciendo uso de las organizaciones estudiantiles, protegidas por la autonomía universitaria, como herramientas de lucha contra la mayoría gobernante. El panorama político era muy diverso con segmentos católicos, nacionalistas y socialistas, entre otros. Los estudiantes más patrióticamente sensibles consideraban cualquier insinuación de Polonia o de Alemania -los países

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animosity ranging from usual routine friction between groups to serious conflicts crossing the University boundaries. The patriotically-minded students were particularly sensitive to the insinuations by Poland and Germany, the countries hostile to Lithuania, and considered them as insults to the national dignity and peaceful stance of Lithuania. Lithuania being a young national state reborn in 1918, the vices of its society (outbreaks of nationalism) engulfed the young generation, including students; the notorious case of "Jewish corpses" at the University represented the tendency described above. Several amended versions of the University Statute provoked students into expressing their discontent with the internal matters of the University, into protection of freedoms and active self-defence. The protests under consideration ranged from accidental to consistent, while substance-wise they ranged from political to internal-institutional.

*Keywords:* political demonstrations, the Seimas (the Lithuanian Parliament), the 1926 coup d'état, Vytautas Magnus University, the Senate, left-wing students, student corporations, autonomy, collective self-defence.

hostiles a Lituania- como insultos a la dignidad nacional y la postura pacífica de Lituania. Aun siendo un estado nacional joven –Lituania había renacido en 1918- ya arrastraba ciertos vicios –como los brotes nacionalistas- que afectaron a las nuevas generaciones, también a los estudiantes, siendo el caso más notorio en la universidad el llamado caso de los "cadáveres judíos". Las variadas modificaciones del Estatuto de la Universidad llevaron a los estudiantes a expresar su descontento tratando de proteger sus libertades. Las protestas que aquí estudiamos van desde las más accidentales con el argumento constante de su implicación en los asuntos internos de la política universitaria.

*Palabras clave:* manifestaciones políticas, Parlamento lituano, golpe de estado de 1926. Universidad Vytautas Magnus, Senado, estudiantes de izquierdas, corporaciones estudiantiles, autonomía, autodefensa colectiva.

### *Introductory Remarks*

Independent Lithuania, reborn in 1918, faced a number of great challenges. Beside organisational and financial shortages experienced by Lithuania, there were external factors posing threat to the country's independence.

The Paris Peace Conference, 1919, concluded with the severance of the Klaipėda Region (Memelland), which historically has Lithuanian roots, from the German Empire. The delays to give it over to Lithuania led to the Klaipėda Revolt and, as a consequence, the Region became a Lithuanian territory in 1923 to be retaken by Germany in 1939 after having experienced Germany-incited nazification in the 30s.

In 1920 Poland occupied the Vilnius Region that was part of Lithuania. After the Soviet Union had invaded Poland in 1939, the Vilnius Region was given back to Lithuania. There were no diplomatic ties between Lithuania and Poland from 1920 to 1938.

Against this backdrop, plans for creating a modern state set new objectives to society, the development of its educational powers among them. The

network of primary schools changed considerably within a relatively short time (by 1926 it had doubled), which created the preconditions for compulsory primary education. At the same time new high schools and vocational training institutions were opened. Establishment of a higher educational institution was a natural step in the chain of actions by the government. The Higher Courses established in Kaunas in 1920 gave rise to the University of Lithuania in Kaunas which started its activities<sup>1</sup> two years later, on 16 February 1922, and was given the name of Vytautas Magnus University in 1930.

There were 481 persons studying at the University in the spring semester, in 1922. The largest number of students it had was in 1932 when a total of 4553 people studied there, however later the number of students gradually went down. Lithuanians accounted for 56.5%, the Jews made up 41.8% and the students of other nationalities amounted to 1.7% of all the student body in 1922; in 1932 the statistics by ethnicity was as follows: Lithuanians 67.4%, Jews 26.2%, Poles 2.5%, Germans 1.5%, Russians 1.6%, and students of other nationalities 0.8%.

In terms of student organisations, the University students were free to choose from several student societies the membership if which varied markedly, the number of student societies differed from year to year, too. Four organisations were set up in 1922, ten new in 1923, five in 1924, nine in 1925, nine in 1926, twelve in 1927, fourteen in 1928, twelve in 1929, sixteen in 1930, and twelve in 1931, which means to say that the total number of student organisations established at the University in the period of ten years was 103, with only 23 closed down due to different reasons<sup>2</sup>. The period from 1922 to 1940 seems to have witnessed the activities of as many as 148 organisations<sup>3</sup> which differed in their objectives, structure, influence, and forms of expression. They may also be categorised as ideological, academic, regional, professional, and ethnic (for instance, there were 22 Jewish student organisations).<sup>4</sup> The University management was strictly supervising the

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<sup>1</sup> Iš Ministrų kabineto posėdžių protokolo dėl Lietuvos Universiteto atidarymo (From the minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers on the opening of the University of Lithuania), in: Lietuvos archyvai (Lithuanian Archives) (Vilnius, 1992) Volume 4, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Žentelis St., Studentai pirmąjį dešimtmetį (statistika ir trumpos žinios) (Students in the first decade (statistics and brief news). In: monthly *Lietuvos studentas*, 1932 No. 3, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Lietuvos Universitetas 1579–1803–1922 (The University of Lithuania 1579–1803–1922) (ed. Pranas Čepėnas), Chicago, 1972, p. 605.

<sup>4</sup> Liekis Šarūnas, Žydų studentų organizacijos Kauno Universitete 1922–1940 m. (Jewish student organisations in Kaunas University in 1922–1940). In: Mokslinės konferencijos „Lietuvos žydų švietimas ir kultūra iki katastrofos“ medžiaga (Materials of scientific conference “Education and Culture of Lithuanian Jews before the Catastrophe”), Vilnius, 1991, p. 69.

student organisations, which was particularly true about the organisations that used to violate the University Statute. "In 1929, 54 student organisations were taken to the University Disciplinary Court; the Court judgement was to close them down because they disregarded their charters. The Senate particularly hated misdemeanours of a nationalist nature."<sup>5</sup>

The article aims at analysing non-standard forms of the students' collective behaviour as ways of self-expression and protests depending on the circumstances<sup>6</sup> (might be referred to as "soft" expression and "hard" expression).

### *I. Students' political demonstrations in Kaunas in 1926 and 1938: were students politically-minded?*

The academic youth were a significant factor in social and political processes in the inter-war Lithuania. Because of their youthful maximalist mentality, intellectual potential and well-structured organisations the students are believed to have been an attractive force for politicians who wanted to make use of them in their political battles. At the moments of political tensions, the political parties often used students for discrediting their opponents or for criticising the government in power. The autonomy enjoyed by the University was a very convenient environment for the political parties in opposition to engage organisationally and ideologically efficient student structures (corporations and societies)<sup>7</sup>.

The academic year of 1926–1927 saw a sudden dramatic change in the public life of Lithuania when the period of parliamentary democracy ended and the authoritarian regime was installed. Following the general election in 1926, the balance of power was very different in the Seimas of 1926–1927. The Christian Democrat majority was in power from 1920 to 1926. The 1926 election was won by the political coalition of the Lithuanian Popular Peasants' Union, the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party and the parties representing the ethnic minorities of Lithuania, therefore the po-

<sup>5</sup> Vytauto Didžiojo Universitetas. Antrųjų penkerių veikimo metų (1927.II.16 – 1932.IX.1) apyskaita (Vytautas Magnus University. Report on the second quinquennium of activities (16/02/1927–1/09/1932)), Kaunas, 1933, p. 154.

<sup>6</sup> The author of this article considers student protests to be non-typical student activities, because peaceful everyday worries prevailed.

<sup>7</sup> Svarauskas. A., Krikščioniškoji demokratija nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje (1918–1940). Politinė galia ir jos ribos (Christian democracy in independent Lithuania (1918–1940). Political power and its limits), Vilnius, 2014, p. 237.



litical and institutional change was natural. The newcomers were inexperienced and had to address quite a few challenges, which was not an easy task for them. They were not able to deliver, and public discontent was growing. First, the new structure of political powers became its own hostage due to the policy of public life liberalisation (capital punishment was abolished, right to assembly and freedom of speech were exercised freely, amnesty for political prisoners was announced)<sup>8</sup>, due to an unbalanced attitude to the military reform<sup>9</sup>, due to the changes introduced into the tactics of the policy of state-run education. The structures of the Polish segment in Lithuania most probably made the greatest use of the developments in public education; the network of Polish primary schools grew in Lithuania from 24 on 1 January 1926 to 91 on 1 January 1927<sup>10</sup>. Second, even though the opposition parties lost the monopoly of political power, they had gained political and state administration experience by that time, therefore they managed to manipulate the inexperienced political newcomers and incite discontent among the general public, especially among the patriotically-minded members of society; as a result, opposition politicians sometimes had more positive media coverage, were very visibly outspoken and were even given much prominence<sup>11</sup>.

It was in this context that the students of the University approached the Senate of the University with a request to allow them to hold a meeting and a demonstration on 21 November 1926 during which they wanted to reach the War Museum and to pay tribute to the soldiers, who were killed in the fight for freedom, in the garden in front of the Museum. The same request was submitted to the police. The permission was granted for the meeting only, supposedly, in order to avoid possible clashes. The meeting was held in the centre for culture the “House of the Nation” on 21 November

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<sup>8</sup> Jurevičiūtė Aušra, Politinės studentų demonstracijos Kaune (Students' political demonstrations in Kaunas). In: Kauno istorijos metraštis (Kaunas History Chronicles), Volume 3, 2000, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Kasparavičius Algimantas, 1926-ųjų gruodžio 17-osios prielaidų eskizai (Sketches of pre-conditions of 17 December 1926). In: magazine *Naujasis židinys – Aidai*, 1994, No. 11, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> For more see: Mačionis Zenonas, Čepinskis Jonas, Profesorius Vincas Čepinskis (Professor Vincas Čepinskis), Vilnius, 1992, p. 85-87; Būtėnas J., Mackevičius M., Mykolas Sleževičius. Advokatas ir politikas (Mykolas Sleževičius. Lawyer and politician), Vilnius, 1995, p. 173; Kaubrys S., Lietuvos mokykla 1918–1939 m.: galios gimtis (Lithuanian school in 1918–1939: birth of power), Vilnius, 2000, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Raštikis Stasys, Kovose dėl Lietuvos. Kario atsiminimai (Fight for Lithuania. Soldier's memoirs). Part 1, Vilnius, 1990, p. 202.

1926<sup>12</sup>. “About 1000 people” participated in the meeting, and “there were many students there, too”<sup>13</sup>. The number of participants in the meeting and the demonstration, reported in different sources, varies from 1500 to 3000<sup>14</sup> (the latter might be exaggerated – the author’s comment). Concerns about the scale of the Polish primary school campaign and about strengthening of anti-government elements in the country were expressed at the meeting. The participants adopted a petition voicing a protest against polonisation and bolshevisation of Lithuania and a petition against the government’s ban on organising a demonstration in the square in front of the War Museum.

Despite the spirit of solidarity prevailing at the meeting, there seem to have been people there, who were more moderate and saw the situation from a different angle (regarding the Government and development of the meeting into a demonstration). Even though diverging opinions were expressed, a three-hour long meeting spontaneously turned into a demonstration, the development and consequences of which were assessed very differently by secret services, security structures (the police) and the political opposition press.

The consequences were gruesome. First, the police was allowed to use force against the demonstrators. Several people, students among them, were wounded; 13 people were arrested (eleven students and two officials). Second, the question was raised whether using force against the students was an appropriate response, even though the actions of the demonstrators could have provoked it. Third, the media gave diametrically opposite assessments of the event; some supported the protesters while others justified the actions by the police.

On 25 November 1926, the Senate of the University denounced the police actions saying they insulted the students. On 26 November, the meeting organised by the Students’ Representation adopted petitions denouncing the actions of the police; criticising the policy carried out by the Minister of Education Vincas Čepinskis; protesting against disinformation disseminated by the press (especially by the semi-official press), the Minister of the Inte-

<sup>12</sup> Švoba J., *Seiminė ir prezidentinė Lietuva* (Seimas and Presidential Lithuania), Vilnius, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Žinių santrauka apie studentų mitingą 1926 m. lapkričio 21 d. Liaudies namuose ir demonstraciją (Summary of the news about the students’ meeting of 21 November 1926 in the House of the Nation and the demonstration). In: Lithuanian Central State Archive (further referred to as LCVA (Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas), Fund 378, Inv. 5, File 1023, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> See daily *Lietuvis* of 25 November 1926; verbatim records of 3<sup>rd</sup> Seimas, Sitting No. 46 in 1926, p. 3; daily *Rytas* of 22 November 1926.

rior Vladas Požėla and the News Agency *ELTA*. The left-wing delegates tried to provoke disappointment, unsuccessfully, and were made to leave the hall. As for the Senate of the University, it did not approve of the majority of the provisions; neither did it express its full disapproval of the contents of the political petitions.

The political opposition used these events to criticise the Government. The representatives of the Christian-Democratic block and the Nationalist Union submitted interpellation against the Prime Minister to the Seimas urging to punish the perpetrators. On 26 November 1926, the Seimas considered the matter. Most probably there was no parliamentary debate held, just categorical statements on behalf of the “right” and the “guilty” were heard, thus no final decision was taken.

One can only guess now that police brutality was not anticipated, that they had another scenario in mind, they wanted to prevent left-wing organisations from clashing with the demonstrators. Anyway the preventive actions by the police were initially aimed at keeping peace and avoiding further unrest, however they turned into violent dispersal of the demonstration. Consequently the police were asked to explain themselves, and they placed the blame on the students, who disregarded the ban to organise the demonstration.

The demonstration, at least indirectly, may have preconditioned the resignation of the Interior Minister Vladas Požėla and the Education Minister Vincas Čepinskis. The coup d'état that took place soon afterwards, on 27 December 1926, overshadowed the student demonstration as everyone's attention was on the change of the regime.

The second political demonstration of December 1938 had other roots. There was a sense of a deepening political crisis across the country after the Government had accepted the ultimatum delivered by hostile Poland in March 1938, which demanded the establishment of diplomatic relations, and when nazification was intensifying in the Klaipėda Region. The Government failed to create the ideology needed under the circumstances and to meet its population's expectations.

A student meeting was held on 10 December 1938. The students had asked for permission to hold it but were denied it. When they learned about it, it was too late to postpone the meeting. 1500 students gathered and adopted a petition. Its provisions testified to the solidarity with the students from other higher education institutions and set forth radical proposals, or rather requirements. They demanded that the Government and the President resign, and that the government of national unity be formed, with Prof. Augus-



tinias Voldemaras as Prime Minister. The uncontrollable demonstration that started after the meeting (about 400 demonstrators) turned violent. Suppressive measures were taken (firemen were called in) and the demonstrators were dispersed, 13 students were arrested. Mr Enčėris, a participant in the demonstration, later said that it had not been easy for the police to cope with the students – the latter had broken windows, e.g. of the confectionary store owned by Mr Perkauskas, who was Polish; somebody had overturned a police car and set fire to it; one policeman had been beaten into unconsciousness.<sup>15</sup> Additional measures to keep order and ensure safety were installed in Kaunas and its suburbs for the period of six months.

The sequence of events after the dispersal of the demonstration showed some internal frictions among the students as well as some external solidarity. For example, on 16 December 1938, delegates from several student corporations brought a joint petition to Mykolas Römeris, Rector of the University, where each corporation denied involvement and gave explanations about the “misunderstanding” that took place on 10 December claiming that the anti-Government petition was conceived and drafted by a group of individual students and did not represent the corporations. That was not true; the students were driven by a feeling of rebellion. The students of the Pedagogical Institute and the Trade Institute in Klaipėda organised another meeting there on the same day where they adopted a petition demanding a new government. Another proof of the broad organisational nature of the 10 December meeting is that the date (10 December) was apparently not suitable for holding the meeting in Klaipėda as the municipal election was to be held there on 11 December and the Presidential oath had to be taken there on 12 December<sup>16</sup>. With such important events forthcoming, student unrests were undesirable. The opposition forces of the country had their own goals and encouraged the students to hold anti-Government meetings with an aim “to overthrow the present Government”<sup>17</sup>. There may have been a number of

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<sup>15</sup> Valstybės saugumo policijos Kauno apygardos 1938 m. gruodžio mėn. apžvalga (Review of December 1938 by the State Security Police, Kaunas County). In: LCVA, Fund 378, Inv. 5, File 3381, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Jurevičiūtė Aušra, *Politinės studentų demonstracijos Kaune* (Students' political demonstrations in Kaunas), p. 138; Svarauskas Artūras, *Studentai ateitininkai ir politika 1926–1940 metais* (*Ateitininkai* students and politics in 1926–1940). In: *Studies of Church History, Volume 3* (Religija ir visuomenė nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje – Religion and society in independent Lithuania), 2010, p. 157.

<sup>17</sup> Rudis Gediminas, *Jungtinis antismetoninės opozicijos sąjūdis 1938–1939 metais* (Joint anti-Smetona movement of the opposition in 1938–1939). In: *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis* (Lithuanian History Chronicles), Year 1996, 1997.



reasons why, despite the students' active involvement in the general unrest of the time, the reports by the special security services on the events did not assume the possibility of the students' independent thinking, determination and civil awareness.

The specificity of the problems in Klaipėda and Vilnius – the difference laid both in substance and form – was reflected in responses and actions by the students in Kaunas.

After the leaders of the German nationalist movement were tried and got death or prison sentences in the Klaipėda Region in March 1935, a wave of outrage swept over Germany. On 31 March, the students of Vytautas Magnus University responded by holding a meeting that gathered 3000 students. After the meeting the students placed a wreath on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and moved on towards *Laisvės* Avenue, the main street in Kaunas, where they were stopped by the police and several students were arrested. The following day, the students prepared a memorandum to the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior demanding the release of the detainees. Their demand was met, and the detainees were released. The students gathered again without the Rector's permission on 2 April 1935 to adopt a petition demanding dismissal of the police leadership, which turned into a demonstration and a violent conflict. Then the Vice-Rector of the University Blažiejus Česnys managed to persuade the students not to organise another demonstration referring to mounting tension between Lithuania and Germany over the outcome of the court case in Klaipėda.<sup>18</sup>

The atmosphere of strained intergovernmental relations between Lithuania and Poland encouraged different interpretations of the events and actions, with both parties claiming they were right.<sup>19</sup> The persecution of Lithuanianism in the Vilnius Region was an especially sensitive matter. For example, after searches in the offices of the Lithuanian organisations in Vilnius had been carried out and, as a result, several of them had been closed down on 23-25 November 1936, the students of Vytautas Magnus University vigorously responded to those steps by the official authorities of Poland. On 8 December 1936, a meeting was held where the Polish actions were denounced. The meeting of about 600 participants took 16 decisions: "to stage a one-day hunger strike and to send money for starving students in Vilnius to buy food

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<sup>18</sup> Daily *Lietuvos žinios* of 3 April 1935.

<sup>19</sup> Buchowski K., *Litvomanai ir polonizuotojai. Mitai, abipusės nuostatos ir stereotipai lenkų ir lietuvių santykiuose pirmoje XX amžiaus pusėje* (Litvomanians and polonisers. Myths, two approaches and stereotypes in relations between Poles and Lithuanians), Vilnius, 2012, p. 493-494.

on”, “to stop making payments to Polish schools and other establishments” in Lithuania, “to throw away Polish newspapers from the reading-room of the University”, “to parcel out Polish-owned estates and make Polish landowners move to Poland”, just to name a few. The range of proposals was especially wide<sup>20</sup>. After the meeting, the students wanted to go and see the Minister of Foreign Affairs and meet with the administration of the President, but the Vice-Rector of the University kept them from doing so by warning them of possible provocations. About 200 students, however, did not obey and tried to reach *Laisvės* Avenue where they were dispersed by the police.

## *II. Left-wing movement at the University. Students against students?*

There were not many students who propagated Marxist-communist ideas at the University. The Socialist Student Society, established on 21 September 1922, serves as a good example of a left-wing movement, with its membership of about 100 in 1923.<sup>21</sup> Pro-social democratic students united into society *Žaizdras* in 1925. They used to organise meetings, to join illegal campaigns launched by the Lithuanian Communist Party, to commemorate the 1st of May – the International Workers’ Day at the University.

The activities of the students belonging to the left-wing organisations caused friction inside the University student community. On 27 October 1925, for example, the Socialist Student Society adopted a protest petition against the execution by shooting of the communist soldier Jubiler Nachim and the brutality of the security and municipal police. The students attached the petition on a wall in the University lobby. During the lecture organised by the Society on 8 November, an argument broke out between the pro- and anti-socialist students, then the heated disagreement led to a fist fight. The group of anti-communist students accused the socialist students of supporting the Bolsheviks, of disturbing peace and public order. On the following day, 9 November, the socialist students staged a protest and took measures against the anti-socialists, who acted violently the day before, and published

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<sup>20</sup> Valdininko Stasio Jakučio 1936 m. gruodžio 9 d. pranešimas Valstybės saugumo policijos Kauno apygardos viršininkui (Report of 9 December 1936 by official Stasys Jakutis to the Head of State Security Police, Kaunas County), LCVA, Fund 378, Inv. 3, File 4541, p. 60-61.

<sup>21</sup> Mančinskas Česlovas, Revoliucinis studentų judėjimas ir jo ryšiai su darbo žmonių kova buržuazinėje Lietuvoje (Revolutionary student movement and its links with workers’ fight in bourgeois Lithuania). In: Lietuvos istorijos metraštis (Lithuanian History Chronicles), Year 1979, 1981, p. 26.

a list of nine such persons. The above petition accused two organisations: *Ateitininkai* and *Neo-Lithuania*<sup>22</sup> (*Ateitininkai* was an organisation of Catholic youth; there were twelve corporations, 596 members, under its umbrella at Vytautas Magnus University in 1932. The aim of the Lithuanian nationalist student corporation *Neo-Lithuania* was to develop national identity and promote national pride among young people on the example of the heroic past of the Lithuanian nation. Both organisations were strong opponents of socialist ideas.) The Senate of the University assessed the disagreements between the two politicised groups of students on 12 November, temporarily excluded several socialist students from the University for putting up the text of the socialist students' petition at the University on 27 October and decided to dissolve the Socialist Student Society. Two *Ateitininkai* students were also expelled, and one student was officially reprimanded for initiating the fight at the meeting held on 8 November.

Both groups of students were dissatisfied with the decisions of the Senate. On 14 November 1925, about 1000-1500 students drafted and adopted two petitions calling for justice. One petition asked the Senate not to lay the blame on three *Ateitininkai* members but to punish the real perpetrators – the Socialist Student Society by closing it down. The second petition condemned the campaign carried out by the left-wing press against the students.<sup>23</sup> In their turn, the indignant socialist students showed their dissatisfaction with the restrictions to their activities and later refused to take part in the first meeting of the Students' Representation.

The analysis of the available sources does not clearly suggest that the socialist students acted on their own initiative, whether they were genuinely scornful, or whether they were affected by other forces that wanted to provoke an incident and create conditions for a revolutionary situation – both options are possible.<sup>24</sup>

After the Senate suspended the activities of the Socialist Student Society in 1925, a dozen of its members registered a new organisation – the Socialist Student Society *Aušrininkai*. It aspired to give basic knowledge of scientific socialism, of socialist trends and parties and to disseminate socialist ideas. The autonomy of the University was a guarantee of safety and more freedom of action for the Society. That is why it managed to continue with its

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<sup>22</sup> Studentų socialistų protestas „Mušeikoms boikotas“ (Students' socialist protest "Boycott bruisers"), LCVA, Fund 631, Inv. 13, File 218, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Daily *Rytas* of 17 November 1925.

<sup>24</sup> Skrupskelis K., Incidentas Universitete: 1925 m. lapkritis, Kaunas (Incident at the University: November 1925, Kaunas), magazine *Naujasis židinys – Aidai*, 2009, No. 12, p. 463.



social and political activities and to hold lectures on radical political issues even after the coup d'état of 1926.

There was an attempt to assassinate Prime Minister Augustinas Vol-demaras in the town square in Kaunas on 6 May 1929. The assassination attempt was carried out by the members of the Socialist Student Society *Aušrininkai*: Martynas Gudelis, Andrius Bulota and Aleksandras Vosylius. Only Aleksandras Vosylius was detained, prosecuted and executed.<sup>25</sup> The Society itself was also repressed – some members were arrested, while some left the country. The State Security Police believed that the Society was influenced by maximalist socialist revolutionaries (from exclusively illegal radical political unions). When the members of *Aušrininkai* were charged with the alliance with socialist radicals, the flats of its individual members were searched, several students were arrested.<sup>26</sup> The acts like this weakened the Society until it became passive, however their interest in radical activities was not totally lost (e.g. they were suspected of involvement in the peasants' strike in the southern part of Lithuania (in Suvalkija) in 1936–1936 and, as for international matters, they held lectures on the civil war in Spain, on creeping fascism in Europe in 1936–1937). They did not reregister the Society in 1937; therefore it was closed down on the order of the University Rector of 16 February 1938.<sup>27</sup>

Another pro-communist student society that was a troublemaker at the beginning of the 1930s was called *Aurora* (founded in 1930). It was known for disseminating communist propaganda among the students. The distribution of communist leaflets at the University on 13 April 1932 received immediate responses from both the nationalistically-minded students and the University management. The case was known and discussed widely. On 9 May 1932, the University Disciplinary Court closed *Aurora* down “for its undisciplined behaviour and violating the rules of the University”; the Chairman and Secretary of the Society were expelled from the University.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Černevičiūtė S., Kaubrys S. *Kartuvių kilpa, kulka ir dujų kamera: mirties baismė Lietuvoje 1918–1940* (Rope, Bullet and Gas Chamber: Capital Punishment in Lithuania in 1918–1940), Vilnius, 2014, p. 137–138.

<sup>26</sup> Kauno kriminalinės policijos VI rajono viršininko Matulio 1933 m. kovo 22 d. nutarimas (Decision by Matulis, Head of the 6th District of the Kaunas Criminal Police, of 22 March 1933, LCVA, Fund 378, Inv. 10, File 7, p. 2).

<sup>27</sup> Vytauto Didžiojo Universiteto prorektorius A. Purėno 1938 m. kovo 3 d. pranešimas (Statement by Antanas Purėnas, Vice-Rector of Vytautas Magnus University, of 3 March 1938), LCVA, Fund 631, Inv. 2, File 7, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Vilniaus universiteto istorija 1803–1940 (History of Vilnius University 1803–1940), Vilnius, 1977, p. 255.



The amateur theatre society *Stedra*, active from 1931 to 1934 and a harbour for the students who held communist views suffered the same fate.<sup>29</sup> Subsequent individual acts by left-wing students (e.g. participation in a rally held on 1 May 1934 and in a general workers' strike in Kaunas) most probably were of a marginal nature.

Vytautas Magnus University had an active history student society *Scientia* in 1936–1940. Reports by the undercover Criminal Police officers tell that the society was a refuge for student members of the Communist Party or open pro-communist students, that they pursued the goal of “camouflaging their communist propaganda with studies in history science”. The leader of the organisation Juozas Jurginis was sentenced to three months in prison on the Decision by Kaunas Commandant of 23 June 1937 for “inciting hatred among the population”. This must be the example of the case of a “lonely protestor” particularly because the paradox is that, with him having left the organisation, the history student society *Scientia* was not banned. The conclusion can be drawn that they did not cross permissible limits.<sup>30</sup> One might also make an assumption that allowing the left-wing students' organisations (or delays to close them down) may also be underpinned by the aspiration of the University management to keep an eye on them.

### *III. Students' collective self-defence: from the case of “Jewish corpses” to the fight against the restriction of the University autonomy*

Expression and defence of their interests by the students acquired various forms and were loaded with dynamic contents, which depended on general and specific circumstances of the period under investigation. The vibrant multi-ethnic environment of the University reflected those circumstances and responded to them promptly.

The University was heterogeneous in a number of aspects, in terms of ethnicity too. There was some hostility in the relations between Lithuanians and the Jews which differed in the degree of intensity<sup>31</sup> from year to year. Unfortunately, it entered the University lecture rooms. The case of “Jewish corpses” revealed what had been brewing for some time. On 9 December

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 255-256.

<sup>30</sup> Tamošaitis M., *Didysis apakimas. Lietuvių rašytojų kairėjimas 4-jame XX a. dešimtmetyje* (Going Blind. Lithuanian Writers' Turn to the Left in the 1930s), Vilnius, 2010, p. 101-103.

<sup>31</sup> *Lietuvos žydai. Istorinė studija* (Lithuanian Jews. Historical Study). Compiled by: Vladas Sirutavičius, Darius Staliūnas, Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė), Vilnius, 2012, p. 405.

1926, a group of students of the Faculty of Medicine decided to demand that corpses from the Jewish hospital should also be supplied to their Faculty to meet the needs of their medical studies. Because of the clashes that broke out between the two ethnic student groups, the management of the Faculty of Medicine was forced to close the Institute of Anatomy until a spring semester started. The conflicting groups (Lithuanians and the Jews) seem to have come to a joint agreement on how to solve the argument at the meeting convened for that purpose on 2 February 1927. However the problem of "Jewish corpses" persisted and was raised again in the memorandum produced by the students of the Faculty of Medicine and submitted to the Minister of Education in 1934.<sup>32</sup> Individual minor incidents of the anti-Semitic nature used to happen from time to time (e.g. an brawl between two students of the Faculty of Law: Noreika, who was a Lithuanian, and Indichštein, who was Jewish, after the latter refused to speak Lithuanian on the premises of the University), but it should be noted that the management of the University never tolerated the outbreaks of such moods.

There were times when failure to solve the students' general problems was frustrating. They used to gather together, and sometimes their exchange of ideas acquired a spontaneous nature. For instance, the students gathered to commemorate the Day of Independence of Lithuania and the 7th anniversary of the University on 15 February 1929. Such everyday issues as cinema and theatre tickets and services were raised at the meeting. The students decided to ask for discounts and reduced service prices. The meeting (about 1000 students) continued in the streets of the city; the students wanted to express their dissatisfaction with and protest against their financial situation. The end was very "traditional" – the students were being prevented from regrouping into a demonstration. They did not obey, a policeman was taken hostage, and 33 students were arrested. The management of the University acted as mediators between the students and the police, argued that the students should be punished by the University Disciplinary Court and stressed that the demonstration was not of a political nature.

Being a young university, Vytautas Magnus University had to develop its own set of rules. The students had to comply with the provisions of the Statutes, which was also a reason for temporary tensions and dissatisfaction.

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<sup>32</sup> Mačiulis D., „Žydų lavonų klausimas“ Lietuvos Universitete 1926–1927 metais (Case of "Jewish corpses" at the University of Lithuania in 1926–1927). In: Lietuvos istorijos metraštis (Lithuanian History Chronicles), Year 2000, Volume 2, 2004, p. 163.

The consideration and approval of three University Statutes (1922, 1930 and 1937) by the Government obviously implied a tendency towards narrowing the autonomy of the University. It seems that the wordings of the 1922 and 1930 Statutes were more or less acceptable to both the University management and the student body; they adjusted to the requirements even though some dissatisfaction was lingering in the air at the beginning. The story of amending the 1930 Statute is a bit different. When, on 27 September 1935, the Government informed the University of amending Article 20 of the 1930 Statute so that the Minister of Education should be granted the right to appoint senior fellows from the candidates preselected by the President, the students organised a meeting on 15 October 1935. A permission to hold the meeting was not given, but it was held anyway. During the meeting, suggestions of staging a three-day strike to protest against President Smetona's policy vis-à-vis the University were heard. The meeting did not turn into a general student strike as some students fully rejected the idea and others might have not been inspired by the goals of the strike. Most likely the same happened in 1937 when the last Statute of the University was approved – it was mainly socialist student organisations that identified the problem of restrictions on the University's autonomy in the text of the Statute.

### *Conclusions*

Student unrests at Vytautas Magnus University in 1922 to 1939 were indicative of young people's attitudes to both "inside University" and "outside University" problems and situations. Their responses differed in the degree of organisational concentration, in the objectives set and the results achieved. The students' political demonstrations in 1926 and 1938 must be highlighted because they crossed the boundaries of usual "unrest". The two are attributed to the student unrests that can be qualified as "hard" expression because they got broad coverage in the media, and diverging opinions were voiced beyond the University. After the coup d'état of 17 December 1926, the political opposition was almost fully prevented and formally banned in 1936 onwards. Members of the banned political parties (Lithuanian Popular Peasants' Union, Social Democratic Party, Christian Democrat Party), their young generation, who were not happy with the domination and monopoly of the Lithuanian Nationalist Union that started in 1927, managed to incite the students to actions, which frequently was to the latter's detriment. In such cases, however, the students' partial independence in taking deci-

sions should be noted. The protests of the left-wing student organisations may have been more managed and controlled, the more so that the political regime in the country was not favourable to spreading the leftist ideology among the population. The case of “Jewish corpses” shows the impact of the outbreak of nationalism among young people in Lithuania on the University students’ actions. We might suggest that inadequate regulation of the internal procedures of the Institute of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, as well as gaps in the University Statutes and draft Statutes could have also caused the students’ dissatisfaction.

Internal disagreements between groups of the University students can be referred to as “soft” expression of the students’ feelings. The analysis of the substance of the student unrests points to solidarity within student groups, most often determined by an ideological engagement. Events organised by the students were often illegal – their campaigns crossed the limits of the permissions granted to them in a number of cases. Having started as meetings, the students’ gatherings sometimes turned into demonstrations. That is why the demonstrations were usually suppressed. It is only natural to conclude that the two parties, the “victims” and the “suppressors”, had different interpretations of the substance of the protests. The students’ unrests embodied two important processes going on in the student community: shaping of the image of the University students and a spontaneous character of their self-expression.

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