The tradition of religious tolerance was deeply rooted in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the medieval times. It was connected with the incorporation of vast Ruthenian territories by Lithuania and the necessity of maintaining a stable political and social situation there by Lithuanian rulers. Therefore, from the Polish-Lithuanian union of Krewo (1385) the areas of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were inhabited by Catholics, the definitely dominant Orthodox, the Tatars – Muslims, Karaites and Jews who inhabited the lands of Lithuania in a greater number from the end of the 15th century. Although Catholicism was a formally dominant denomination, the limitations concerning the Orthodox, for example in accessing the major offices in the state, were often practically non-existent in the public life. These limitations were moreover repealed by the privilege granted in 1563 by Sigismund Augustus. Thus the Reformation developed on the tradition of religious tolerance, somewhat delayed, compared also to Poland. The turning point in its development became the taking over of the power in Lithuania by Sigismund Augustus in 1544, and later the conversion to Protestantism (announced publicly circa 1553) of the Vilnius voyvode Mikołaj “the Black” Radziwiłł, the closest associate of the last of the Jagiellonian monarchs on the Polish-Lithuanian throne. Radziwiłł’s example was followed by the majority of both Catholic and Orthodox Lithuanian magnates, as well as a considerable part of the gentry. Partly due to the protection of a powerful family of the Radziwiłłs (the Birża line), the Reformation in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was wider ranging than in Poland and turned out to be more stable, which was particularly visible in the peak moment of the Counter-Reformation victory. Lithuanian Protestants decidedly advocated for religious tolerance in the public life as well as at least moderate religious freedom towards their subjects. Various activities in the public sphere served this purpose. In Lithuania the Warsaw confederation (1573), granting freedom of denomination to the gentry and townsmen, made part of the Lithuanian law, constituted by III Lithuanian Statute, accepted in 1588.

It is no wonder then that the development of the Reformation is today associated, both by Lithuanians and Poles, with the period of full religious tolerance in the entire Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. But Lithuanian Protestants are also perceived as those who created a modern education system and efficiently functioning church structures. The latter concerns mostly Calvinists, as Calvinism was a Protestant denomination dominant in Lithuania. The Reformation in Lithuania contributed to some extent to the Polonisation of the gentry and townsmen in Lithuania – though definitely did not play the decisive role in this process – since the majority of Protestant literature in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was printed in Polish, starting from the famous Brest Bible (1563). On the other hand, however, it was in the period of the growth of Protestantism that Lithuanian brochures, still scanty in the 16th – 17th centuries, started to appear. Initially, they were books written for the purposes of the Evangelicals (including the first Lithuanian brochure published in 1547), mainly from the territories of Samogitia, where the Lithuanian language was still alive. Thanks to it the Reformation contributed to the development of the Lithuanian language and its preservation for the future generations. These achievements of the Lithuanian Protestants can be discerned...
both in Lithuania and Poland. The Polish and Lithuanian perception of the Reformation remains distinct in its assessment of the political actions undertaken by some Protestants, particularly the last representatives of the Birza branch of the Radziwills, Janusz and Boguslaw. In Lithuania they are perceived as Lithuanian patriots, whereas in Poland, following older historiography, and mostly “The Deluge” by Henryk Sienkiewicz, they are treated even as traitors of the king and the Commonwealth, mainly in the context of their signing the agreement with the Swedish in Kiejdany (1655). However, this radical opinion about the two Lithuanian magnates is beginning to change in recent years due to the balanced views of present-day Polish historians. Undoubtedly, both in Poland and Lithuania contemporary memory about the achievements of Protestants in the old Commonwealth seems to be lasting and relatively strong. Therefore it may constitute one of the common elements of the two nations’ identity.