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THE EASTERN DIMENSION OF THE UNITED EUROPE

**Political and economical aspects of the Eastern
politics of the European Union**

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THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION OF POLES IN VILNIUS AFTER THE ACCESSION OF LITHUANIA TO THE EU¹

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the many changes in political affiliations during the last ten centuries, today's Vilnius is inhabited by many different nations, such as: Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Belarusian, Jewish etc. In 2001, Vilnius had 544,206 inhabitants and was the most populous city in Lithuania, which could be caused by the metropolitan functions and the appeal of the capital city. In the administrative boundaries of Vilnius, the Polish population was 104,446 people, i.e. 18,7% of the overall population in the city (Tab. 1). Nowadays, Poles are the largest ethnic minority in Lithuania.

The largest Polish population centers are the neighborhoods of Naujoji Vilnia (11,212), Naujininkai (8612), Žirmūnai (6836), Šeškinė (6759), Fabijoniškės (6659) and Justiniškės (6330). The areas where Poles constitute a high percentage of the population are: Ponary (36.7% of the residents of the district), Naujoji Vilnia (34.2%), Rasos (27.9%), Naujininkai (25.7%), Grigiškės (25.1%) and Justiniškės (20.4%) (Leśniewska 2009).

¹ Article wrote as part of research sponsored by the National Science Centre granted based on decision nNo. DEC-2011/01/N/HS4/02144.

Table 1. Ethnic composition of Vilnius districts in 2001

Specification	Total	Lithua- nians	Poles	Russians	Bela- russians	Ukra- inians	Jews	Tatars	Lat- vians	Arme- nians	Others	Not indicated
Total	553,904	318,510	104,446	77,698	22,555	7,159	2,785	1,060	467	493	3,237	15,494
Antakalnis	396,97	28,103	5,057	3,880	860	390	206	51	22	33	224	871
Fabijoniškės	36,644	22,606	6,659	4,198	1,490	376	139	62	31	26	149	908
Grigiškės	11,617	5,086	2,920	1,848	1,071	147	16	108	8	9	60	344
Justiniškės	30,958	17,481	6,330	4,165	1,244	439	205	59	21	17	138	859
Karolinai	31,175	17,905	5,288	5,144	1,188	485	174	75	27	43	147	699
Lazdynai	32,164	19,730	4,892	4,671	1,106	429	254	55	29	43	163	792
Naujamiestis	27,892	17,238	3,090	4,663	934	478	304	27	36	38	242	842
Naujininkai	33,457	14,748	8,612	5,987	1,887	494	79	80	35	25	555	955
Naujoji Vilnia	32,775	9,676	11,212	6,494	2,945	494	54	72	26	24	161	1,617
Paneriai	8,909	3,861	3,273	1,057	332	100	14	25	10	0	35	202
Pašilaičiai	25,674	15,958	4,762	2,988	872	261	99	42	19	15	95	563
Pilaitė	15,996	10,756	2,701	1,378	486	109	37	19	15	22	40	433
Rasos	13,054	6,534	3,638	1,704	551	133	17	13	10	5	111	338
Senamiestis	21,022	12,826	3,379	2,830	710	274	133	25	7	26	159	653
Šeškinė	36,604	21,128	6,759	5,388	1,398	526	194	65	38	22	128	958
Šnipiškės	19,321	11,391	3,314	2,921	650	247	105	20	20	18	160	475
Verkiai	30,856	20,770	5,418	2,559	963	215	67	41	24	24	126	649
Vilkpėdė	24,749	14,054	4,847	3,547	1,061	351	123	43	19	21	131	552
Viršuliškės	16,250	9,353	3,205	2,367	621	215	55	31	7	15	67	314
Žirmūnai	47,410	28,047	6836	7,979	1,778	790	389	110	53	50	213	1,165
Žvėrynas	12,188	8,742	1469	1,210	238	107	54	26	7	5	78	252
Not indicated	5,492	2517	785	720	170	99	67	11	3	12	55	1,053

Source: National Population Census in 2001.

2. MAIN POLISH ORGANISATIONS IN VILNIUS

The biggest and most important Polish organisation, which has its headquarters in Vilnius is the Association of Poles in Lithuania (*Związek Polaków na Litwie* – ZPL), established in 1989. The main purpose for establishing this organisation was to take care of the Polish national revival in the region and defend the interests of the Polish minority (Trusewicz 2005). ZPL replaced the Social and Cultural Association of Poles in Lithuania (*Stowarzyszenie Społeczno-Kulturalne Polaków na Litwie* – SSKPL), created in 1988. The main objectives of the association were the promotion of Polish culture and propagation of Polish language in education (Masłowski 2005). In 2000–2005, the organisation grew to nearly 15,000 members. ZPL headquarters is located in the House of Polish Culture in Vilnius (Jackiewicz 2007).

To the main objectives of the Association of Poles in Lithuania are:

- the preservation of the national identity of Polish minority in Lithuania,
- ensuring the free development of Polish culture,
- ensuring decent living conditions of the population in Vilnius region,
- attempting to gather the Polish population in a single, historically shaped, unit of local government (Masłowski 2005).

In its nearly 25-year-old history, ZPL has greatly influenced not only the development of Polish culture, but also the spreading of Polish language, for example the Registrar's Office started conducting weddings in Polish. The association's activities are mainly focused on answering the current needs of Polish community in Lithuania. With ZPL, an amateur folk movement developed, many Polish clubs and associations opened, and Polish libraries were created. The Association of Poles in Lithuania main focus is the free participation of minorities in the political and economic life of the Republic of Lithuania (Bobryk 2006).

The creation of the Social and Cultural Association of Poles in Lithuania, then transformed into the Association of Poles in Lithuania, gave rise to all kinds of association initiatives of Polish population in other, more specialised organisations. In 1989, the Scientists' Association of Poles in Lithuania (*Stowarzyszenie Naukowców Polaków Litwy*, SNPL) (Masłowski 2005). Nowadays, the organisation has 62 members, including 8 professors. The association's operations consists mainly of organising conferences, lectures and discussions concerning the situation of national minorities in Lithuania². SNPL also conduct

² <http://snpl.lt/>.

research focused on the problems of Polish minority in Lithuania. The Association helps talented young people in preparing for education and research. In addition, it works with organisations supporting research activities³. SNPL only admits scientists, citizens of the Republic of Lithuania, who are active in science or art. Prospective members must submit a list of their publications, and their application is subjected to a confidential voting process (Masłowski 2005).

In 1994, the Lithuanian parliament adopted a law on social organisations which ordered them to precisely specify the character of their activities. This led to a situation, in which an organisation cannot serve both social and political functions, and its representatives do not have the right to take part in the elections. This forced ZPL to become a social organisation. However, a new political party emerged from ZPL, namely the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (*Akcja Wyborcza Polaków na Litwie* – AWPL) (Masłowski 2005, Trusewicz 2005, Bobryk 2006). Currently the party has more than 1100 members (Godek 2005).

The basic objectives of the party, as defined in the statute, include:

- consolidation of democracy in Lithuania,
- defense of human rights,
- ensuring social justice and economic prosperity,
- ensuring the cultural development of all the nations in Lithuania.

AWPL pursues these objectives through:

- participation in elections at all levels,
- defending their interests by legal and political means,
- cooperation with other parties,
- improving their program⁴.

AWPL's program is divided into nine areas, the priority being the reform of local government in order to gain more power, the economic development of the country, especially the Vilnius Region, and ensuring equal rights to all citizens regardless of their nationality. Since its formation, AWPL have repeatedly defended the interests of Polish minority in Lithuania. Gradually, AWPL also implements its election promises and has contributed to the development of the technical infrastructure and equipment of Polish schools (Godek 2005).

The most important promises concerning the national minorities in Lithuania are:

- the promotion of education of national minorities in schools,

³ Statut Stowarzyszenia Naukowców Polaków Litwy uchwalony 9 maja 2008 roku.

⁴ Statut Akcji Wyborczej Polaków na Litwie uchwalony na Zjeździe Założycielskim w Wilnie 28 sierpnia 1994 roku.

- the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages,
- changing the Citizenship Act – to ensure that the representatives of national minorities can possess dual citizenships,
- in the administrative units where national minorities represent more than 10%, the introduction of a minority language in offices⁵.

The most important Polish cultural organisation in Vilnius is the House of Polish Culture (*Dom Kultury Polskiej* – DKP), created in 2001 on the initiative of ZPL and the ‘Polish Community’ Association. The institution organises concerts, theatre performances, competitions, exhibitions of contemporary art, Polish film screenings and other educational and promotional events (Jackiewicz 2007). DKP works with many community organisations by letting them use their premises as offices (currently about 30). The priorities of the House of Polish Culture in Vilnius include the broadly defined cultural education by promoting Polish art and literature among the inhabitants of the city. DKP also supports all local arts movements⁶.

3. POLISH EDUCATION AND CHURCHES IN VILNIUS

Polish education in Lithuania has a very important position and played a significant role in preserving Polish national identity in the interwar period. After 1945, the USSR authorities did not even attempt to eliminate Polish schools. This was caused by the juxtaposition of two strong nationalisms – Polish and Lithuanian (Osipowicz 2001).

In the 1950s, there were 270 Polish schools in Lithuania. However, a second repatriation took place, as a result of which Polish intelligentsia (mainly teachers) left the Lithuanian SSR. It led to the elimination of many Polish schools (there were 92 in the 1980s, 47 of which were mixed Polish-Russian, Polish-Lithuanian or Polish, Russian and Lithuanian ones). Polish students had great difficulties in continuing education in technical colleges, where the entrance exams could be taken in Polish, but further education was conducted in Lithuanian or Russian. It should be noted that the decreasing number of Polish schools was also affected by the slow but progressive Lithuanisation of the Polish population (Bobryk 2006).

⁵ <http://www.awpl.lt/>.

⁶ <http://www.polskidom.lt/>.

After Lithuania regained its independence, the number of Polish schools increased to 130 in the school year 1992/93. Such a significant increase in the number of students in Polish schools was mainly caused by the the ability to continue learning Polish at the universities in Poland, as well as by the possibility of obtaining a grant from Polish government. Since 1993, however, the number of Polish students in Polish schools has been gradually decreasing. It is caused by the demographic decline and a significant effect of the Lithuanian authorities' policy, encouraging parents to send their children to Lithuanian schools because only education in Lithuanian schools can allow them to find their place in the society (Osipowicz 2001).

The biggest problem of Polish education in Vilnius is the funding coming from the Lithuanian Senate. Schools with Polish as the language of instruction receive less money than Lithuanian schools. This situation leads to faster and more complete assimilation of Polish population with Lithuanians. Polish young people are brought up in a foreign cultural environment, without cultivating Polish traditions and language (Trusewicz 2005).

Currently, Lithuania has 121 schools with Polish language, with 22 thousands students. In January 2012, the Lithuanian Ministry of Education approved the minority education foundation. According to the document, textbooks for the last two grades (11–12) in minority schools will not be translated from Lithuanian, because of the lack of funds⁷.

Since the early 1990s, the Social and Cultural Association of Poles in Lithuania have tried to open a Polish university in Vilnius. In 1991, Polish University in Vilnius was finally opened. In the first year, 150 students began their education in 4 faculties. The available majors were: German philology, English philology, history, pedagogy, economics and management, law and administration, physical education, biology, design and information technologies. The problem was that the university has not received official registration. In this situation, after many negotiations with the Lithuanian side in 1998, based on the law of public institutions, the university was registered under the name of Universitas Studiorum Polona Vilnensis, but did not receive permission to award degrees. After three years of study, students were sent to universities in Poland (Kurcz 2005, Bobryk 2006).

SNPL became the initiator of the creation of a branch of University of Białystok in Vilnius, in the academic year 2007/2008. The biggest obstacle in its creation was the collection of appropriate funding and documentation for Polish and Lithuanian institutions (Olędzki 2006). In May 2007, the University Re-

⁷ http://placieniszki.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=40.

search Centre for Quality of Studies has not given the permission for the creation of the branch because of the differences in the duration of under-graduate studies (3 years in Poland, 4 in Lithuania), University of Białystok's rank (the university is not considered prestigious in Poland), no rationale for conducting classes in Polish, and the expected insufficient quality of education due to the lack of staff permanently residing in Vilnius (Olędzki and Wołkonowski 2007). The creation of a branch of University of Białystok in Vilnius was supported many Polish organisations, including ZPL, AWPL or Schools Mothercountry. In June 2007, the Government of the Republic of Lithuania adopted a resolution authorising the creation of the branch. The students were able to choose between courses economy or information technologies (Grynja and Wołkonowski 2008).

In 1990, numerous small-scale educational organisations were replaced by the Association of Teachers of Polish Schools in Lithuania 'Schools Mothercountry' (Bobryk 2006).

The basic objectives of the Schools Mothercountry are:

- to create a system of Polish schools in Lithuania,
- to create the right conditions for teaching the youth in Polish schools,
- to raise the level of education,
- to organise extra classes for talented youth (Masłowski 2005).

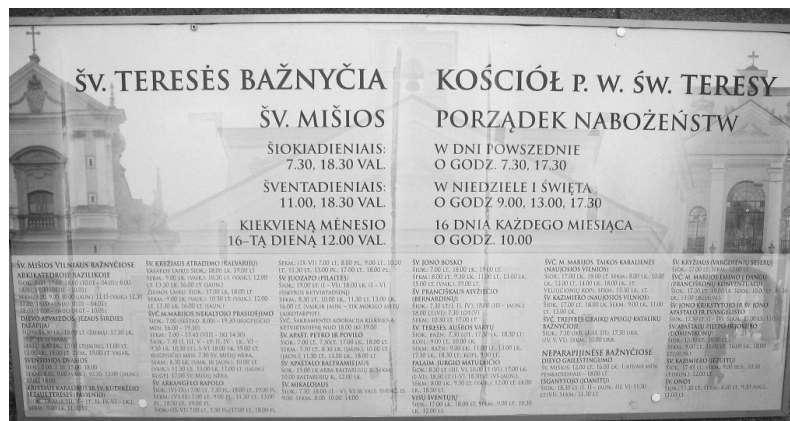


Fig. 1. Information board in Polish and Lithuanian in Saint Theresa church in Vilnius
Source: K. Leśniewska (2009)

The Schools Mothercountry takes care of 19 schools in Vilnius and 121 schools in the whole country. The organisation has over 1500 members in 146 locations and is headquartered in the House of Polish Culture in Vilnius (Zirkowicz 2003). At the beginning, the institution sent young people to Polish universities, organised trips for Polish children and donated teaching equipment

to Polish schools. Then the Schools Mothercountry started to organise various courses to improve the professional qualifications of Polish teachers. Now the association organises numerous contests about Polish history, culture, language and literature. In 1996, the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science issued a regulation that prohibits printing textbooks in Polish. After the Association protested, it quickly withdrew its decision (Bobryk 2006, Jackiewicz 2007).

Apart from education, the Polish Church in Vilnius plays a very important role. In 2003, there were 17 churches in Vilnius alone, in which the liturgy was in Polish (Leśniewska 2009).

Since the independence of Lithuania, the parishes where Poles dominated began various forms of pastoral activity. They started creating church choirs and theatres, collecting donations to charity etc. With time, the Religious Songs and Poetry Festival and the Religious Knowledge Contest became a fixture in the annual schedule. This attitude of the Church caused a significant increase of interest in religious life, and Polish priests began to seek new ways of working with the believers. They began organising pilgrimages, both domestic and foreign (Bobryk 2006).

4. POLISH MASS MEDIA IN VILNIUS

Polish mass media also have an established position in Lithuania. Polish press has been published continuously since 1953. A communist party was published, initially under the name *Czerwony Sztandar* (*Red Banner*). Its main task was to promote the resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania (Jackiewicz 2007).

The Soviet authorities considered that it was up to the press in Polish to make the population more susceptible to communist propaganda. Thanks to the press, Vilnius has grown to become the largest Polish center to the east of Bug River. Polish journalists managed to smuggle the information about Poles in Ukraine, Belarus and Latvia. In 1990, the newspaper changed into a socio-political daily, its name was changed to *Kurier Wileński* (*The Vilnius Herald*), but it retained the post-war numbers⁸.

Today it is a modern newspaper, publishing articles on various subjects. It focuses on issues relating to the Vilnius Region but also published information from the country and the world. *Kurier Wileński* sells 3 thousand copies (Jackiewicz 2007). This low number is associated with financial problems of the

⁸ <http://www.kurierwilenski.lt/>.

newspaper, which has been trying unsuccessfully for several years to appeal to both Polish and Lithuanian readers. In addition, the editors work on gaining new readers by fine-tuning the quality of published information⁹.

Another Polish medium was established in 1992. It was a 24-hour Polish radio station called 'Radio Znad Wilii' ('Radio on Neris River'). Its programming discusses current topics in the world, but primarily focuses on the problems of Polish population in Vilnius and Lithuania. The station also organises a number of events including Polish Culture Days in Vilnius, Polish Song Contests, as well as numerous concerts, events and exhibitions. The station has a significant impact on the shaping of consciousness, even by forcing listeners to think in Polish (Jackiewicz 2007).

Other Polish papers published in Vilnius are: *Magazyn Wileński* (*Vilnius Magazine*) – independent socio-political, cultural and literary monthly published since 1990, *Tygodnik Wileńszczyzny* (*Vilnius Region Weekly*) – ZPL's weekly paper, *Znad Wilii* (*On the Neris*) – quarterly magazine on Polish culture, and *Spotkania* (*Encounters*) – a Catholic daily (Leśniewska 2009).

5. PROBLEMS OF POLES IN LITHUANIA

Nowadays, many historical facts are interpreted in completely different ways by Poles and Lithuanians. For Poles, the union of Poland and Lithuania was a great historic event, but Lithuanians perceive it as an occupation. In Lithuania, people still remember and cannot accept the rebellion of general Żeligowski, whose operation caused the annexation of Vilnius Region to Poland in the interwar period (Kurcz 2005, Leśniewska and Barwiński 2011).

The Polish community living in the Vilnius Region is not homogeneous. M. Jagiełło divided them into the community of Poles in Vilnius and the group surrounding the town called the 'Polish ring'. Poles living in the city are open to integration and learning Lithuanian is treated as the acknowledgement of the independence of Lithuania. Poles from the 'Polish ring' are characterised by the opposite attitude, with hostility towards the Lithuanians. One saying states that 'optimists learn English, pessimists learn German, realists learn Russian, and fools learn Lithuanian' (Jagiełło 2000, Miśta-Grzesiak 2010).

Poles have been recognised as an ethnic minority in Lithuania since 2004, when Lithuania became a member of the European Union. This fact meant that Lithuania had to ratify numerous international laws to protect ethnic minorities.

⁹ <http://www.wspolnota-polska.org.pl/>.

This should improve the situation of ethnic minorities in the western part of the Vilnius Region. Currently the biggest problems of Polish minority in Vilnius Region are: the spelling of Polish names that still have to be spelled in Lithuanian without Polish diacritics, the recovery of land which is almost impossible because of Lithuanian bureaucracy, the naming of streets and places in Polish, and the education in Polish schools (Leśniewska 2009).

In 2011, a new Education Act was adopted in Lithuania, which made the situation of Polish minority even worse. The new law increases the number of Lithuanian classes in Polish schools. Thus, the Lithuanian side broke the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which includes a stipulation that new legislation may not worsen the situation of minorities. In the beginning of September 2011, there were massive protests of Poles in Vilnius. Other difficulties for young Poles include the new matriculation exam (also in Lithuanian) and more obligatory Lithuanian literature. The new law adopted in March 2011 requires students graduating from ethnic minorities' schools where Polish or Russian are used to study Lithuanian history and geography in Lithuanian and to pass a uniform final state Lithuanian language exam, starting in 2013. Until now, ethnic minorities in Lithuania could study almost any subject in their mother tongue. Poles living in Lithuania believe that the law is discriminatory, against equal rights and that it is a beginning of the end of Polish schools in Lithuania¹⁰. The only excuse for Lithuanian authorities is the fact that Poles are a large and strong group in small Lithuania (about 235 thousands out of 3 millions). For example, the Lithuanian minority in Poland have the right to use bilingual names, speak Lithuanian in public offices, run Lithuanian schools and have their names spelled in Lithuanian on their ID Cards. But the Lithuanian minority is not as large in Poland (about 5.8 thousand people out of 38 millions) (Rykała 2008, Barwiński 2009, Leśniewska and Barwiński 2011).

A considerable controversy between the Poles and Lithuanians occurred after the adoption by Polish Government of the Polish Charter Act in September 2007. The Polish Charter is a document confirming 'belonging to the Polish nation' but not granting Polish citizenship (Fig. 2).

The rights of the holder of the Polish Charter include:

- an exemption from the obligation to have a work permit,
- an ability study, achieve a PhD and participate in the other forms of education,
- an ability to use health care services,

¹⁰ <http://www.tvn24.pl/0,1716025,0,1,tusk-jedzie-na-litwe-po-protestach-polakow,wiadomosc.html> – 09.09.2011.

- discounts for using public transport,
- free admission to national museums (Leśniewska 2009).



Fig. 2. A sample Polish Charter

Source: <http://www.msz.gov.pl/>

The Lithuanian law allows dual citizenship, but only for ethnic Lithuanians. This means that the representatives of Polish minority are discriminated against and were excluded from this privilege (Trusewicz 2005). In 2008, two representatives of AWPL – Michał Mackiewicz and Waldemar Tomaszewski were elected to the Lithuanian parliament. Both of them are holders of the Polish Charter. The Lithuanian side recognise the documents and the legal obligations towards another state, which prevents them from exercising their parliamentary functions in Lithuania.

Another problem of Polish minority is their inability to spell their names in Polish. The introduction of Polish spelling of names in Lithuania and vice versa, with their respective diacritics, is provided for by the Polish-Lithuanian Treaty of 1994, whose stipulations are still not followed (Leśniewska 2009).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the analysis of the situation of the Polish community in Vilnius. When discussing this issue, it should be noted that its position in the Lithuanian society is quite strong. However, looking forward, we can suppose that a constant struggle for the rights of minorities could lead to the increase in nationalist sentiments among the Poles in Vilnius.

The situation of Polish minority in Lithuania has a huge influence on the relations between both countries. Unfortunately, this influence is currently negative.

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