

# MULTICULTURALISM VERSUS NATIONALISM AND THE ROLE OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE PUBLIC LIFE OF LITHUANIA

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## Abstract:

*Lithuania became a European Union member in 2004 and it is intensively preparing nowadays to take over the EU's presidency in the second half of 2013. As today EU's agenda is oriented with priority to tackle the economic crisis, the survival of EURO zone and euro-scepticism, Lithuania's foreign policy is focused, among others, on further development of the area of freedom and security, promoting further enlargement and development of relations with Eastern countries. In this respect, Lithuania is keen to share its integration experience with candidate and potentially candidate countries and to make the further enlargement of the E. U. in the Western Balkans countries a successful story similar to the 2004 enlargement campaign, with Croatia joining the EU on 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2013 during Lithuanian presidency and planning to have an impact on the finalization of negotiations with other candidate countries. Since joining the EU, Lithuania has experienced difficulties arising from its role as a destination, source and transit country for legal and irregular international migration. As Lithuania is one of the Member States that have external borders with non-candidate countries (Byelorussia and Russia - Kaliningrad oblast), it is as well concerned about security issues, migration and integration of minorities in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Minorities account for 16% of the population of Lithuania, out of which Poles-6.1 %, Russians and Byelorussians-6% and Ukrainians-0.6 %. Other minorities such as Jews, Germans, Tartars, Latvians,*

*Roma, Armenians etc. account together for 0.7 % of the total population. Lithuanians generally have a positive relationship with their national minorities and the integration of former may be regarded as somewhat advanced, but discrimination cannot be excluded, especially on the labour market. The juridical situation of these minorities and the issues concerning them is the focus of this article.*

**Rezumat:**

*Lituania a devenit membră a Uniunii Europene în 2004 și se pregătește intens să preia președinția acesteia în a doua jumătate a anului 2013. Cum agenda U.E. este orientată actualmente cu prioritate către depășirea crizei economice, supraviețuirea Euro și euro-scepticism, politica Lituaniei se concentrează, între altele, asupra dezvoltării ariei libertății și securității, promovând continuarea lărgirii U.E. și dezvoltarea relațiilor cu țările estice. Din acest punct de vedere, Lituania este dornică să împărtășească experiența integrării sale cu țări candidate și potențial candidate și să facă dintr-o nouă lărgire a U.E. în Balcanii de Vest prin aderarea Croației la U.E. la 1 iulie 2013 o poveste de succes similară celei a extinderii din 2004. Totodată, aceasta plănuiește să aibă un impact pozitiv asupra negocierilor cu alte state candidate. De la aderarea sa la U.E. Lituania a întâmpinat dificultăți generate de rolul său de țară de destinație, sursă și tranzit a migrației internaționale legale și ilegale. Fiind una dintre țările membre care au frontiere exterioare cu state care nu sunt candidate (Belarus, Rusia – oblastul Kaliningrad), aceasta tratează cu atenție problemele de securitate, migrație și integrarea minorităților în cadrul Politicii de Vecinătate Europene. Minoritățile constituie un procent de 16% din populația Lituaniei, din care polonezi – 6,1%, ruși și belaruși – 6%, ucraineni – 0,6%. Alte minorități precum evreii, germanii, tătarii, letonii, roma, armenii etc. constituie 0,7% din numărul total al populației. Lituanienii au în general o relație pozitivă față de minoritățile lor naționale și integrarea acestora poate fi privită drept relativ avansată, dar discriminarea nu este exclusă, în special pe piața muncii. Situația juridică și problemele cu care se confruntă aceste minorități din Lituania în prezent constituie tema acestui articol.*

**Keywords:** Lithuania, minorities, citizenship, education, nationalism, multiculturalism

**Introduction**

This article will investigate perceptions of several national minorities regarding the Lithuanian policy for the integration of national minorities and their to-date concerns and initiatives, their role in the public life and influence over the internal policy of Lithuania.

For the collection of data, the authors of this article have chosen to perform interviews with representative leaders of the national minorities' associations legally registered in Lithuania for the purpose to capture the most recent and fresh aspects of their activities, initiatives and concerns and to provide the readers with a virtual image of the perceptions of national minorities towards the Lithuanian politics and society where they run their daily lives. A number of nine representatives of minorities' associations have had the kindness to respond to our initiative and for that we are truly grateful. The list of persons interviewed and their position within the national minorities' associations is attached in the annex.

Most of the associations we have been talking to have been created in the early 1990s after Lithuania has regained its independence from the Soviet Union, but minorities have a longer history on Lithuanian territory. Members of such associations have already been living in Lithuania for several centuries or decades, being symbolically called "traditional minorities". Some minorities have come to Lithuania especially during communist period for work, but also for marrying Lithuanians, a large community being symbolically entitled "love emigrants". Around 11 associations run their activity and have their office within the House of National Minorities<sup>1</sup>, an institution financed by the Lithuanian Government. Each association enjoys a furnished space and free access to communications (telephone, fax, and internet). Other larger associations have built their own spaces with public or private support (e.g. House of Polish Community).

### **Law on citizenship**

In 1989, Lithuania has adopted a law on citizenship, where it introduced the so-called zero-option – granting citizenship to all individuals on its state territory, irrespective of their national identity<sup>2</sup>. The great majority of residents, including more than 90% of persons of non-Lithuanian ethnic origin, obtained Lithuanian citizenship in this way. A second law, modified in 1997, was adopted in 1991 enabling access to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tbn.lt/lt/?id=8>

<sup>2</sup> Clark D. Terry "Nationalism in Post – Soviet Lithuania. New Approaches for the Nation of Innocent Sufferers", in *After Independence Making and Protecting the Nation in Postcolonial & Postcommunist States*, ed. Lowell W. Barrington, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006, 162.

citizenship for those persons who still did not have it if certain requirements were fulfilled, namely residence in the country for 10 years, a source of income and promotion of a language and Constitution test.

This definitively represented not only an individual advantage but also a societal one, as no discrimination was deployed among different minorities, and national minorities' ethnics enjoyed similar rights as Lithuanian ethnics. In the same time, nevertheless, double citizenship was not allowed, provision in force up to date. This was one of the topics discussed with our interlocutors and the large majority of those interviewed have argued that Lithuania should consider modifying these provisions and allow double citizenship in order to permit the members of the national minorities to apply for the citizenship of their home countries and enjoy the rights offered by their governments. The representatives of minorities' associations have mentioned several cases of members who have faced difficulties because they opted out of the zero-option citizenship and chose to keep their country of origin's citizenship. A relevant example is that of a farmer of Moldovan origin, living in Lithuania for more than 25 years, who has tried to obtain direct payments financed by the Government and the EU, but was not able to enjoy this right as he did not have the citizenship of a Member State of the EU, according to requirements.

Members of national minorities experience unnecessary procedures and bureaucracy while travelling to home country especially to destinations that are not Member States of the EU and where visa is still required to cross the borders (such as Russia, Byelorussia). No facilities have been mentioned regarding visa awards for Lithuanian citizens belonging to national minorities, even if the purpose of their travel is visiting relatives. Abnormal situations might be found in the families of national minorities where different generations have different citizenships, which might create a feeling of frustration and inability to change current conditions.

Some people have faced problems for the recognition by the Lithuanian authorities of their working stages in their originating countries as there is no legal bilateral document regulating this aspect (e.g. Lithuania - Moldova or Lithuania - Byelorussia). This legal barrier affects the right to pension and to other social rights.

In his report from 2003<sup>3</sup>, Mr. Alvaro Gil-Robles, the Commissioner for Human Rights, following a visit to Lithuania during 23<sup>rd</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2003, noticed that the dual citizenship provisions contained in the Lithuanian laws might be a basis for discrimination of ethnic minorities. According to article 18.2.2 of the Law on Citizenship valid at that time, the rule that Lithuanian citizenship is lost when an individual acquires the citizenship of another state, did not apply to persons of Lithuanian origin. Minorities have escalated this issue as they considered that it established two categories of persons among Lithuanian citizens, to whom different standards applied depending on their ethnic origin. Following the ruling of the Constitutional Court of Lithuania from 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2006, these provisions have been declared in conflict with the Constitution and therefore modified<sup>4</sup>. In December 2010, a new law on citizenship was adopted (Law No XI-1196 from 2<sup>nd</sup> of December, 2010<sup>5</sup>), which maintained the principle of single citizenship and acquiring the Lithuanian citizenship by ways of exception for individuals already holding the citizenship of another state.

Having the Lithuanian citizenship is highly appreciated by minorities and they share the fear of losing this right gained after decades of living and working in Lithuania, if they would ever decide to return to their home countries and re-obtain their native country's citizenship. The law on citizenship mentions in article 24 that citizenship of the Republic of Lithuania shall be lost on acquiring citizenship of another state, except for those citizens who, according to the law, may be citizens of both the Republic of Lithuania and another state at the same time. These situations refer to the civil status of individuals who obtained also another country's citizenship by birth, adoption or marriage or to the political situation of individuals and their descendents who were exiled or fled from Lithuania before March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1990 and obtained a citizenship of the new country of residence.

Double citizenship should not be only the privilege of personalities and exceptional cases. Therefore, minorities highly advocate the change of

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<sup>3</sup><https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=113461&Site=CommDH&BackColorInternet=DBDCF2&BackColorIntranet=FDC864&BackColorLogged=FDC864>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.lrkt.lt/dokumentai/2006/r061113.htm>

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[http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc\\_e?p\\_id=395555&p\\_query=Law%20on%20Citizenship&p\\_tr2=2](http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc_e?p_id=395555&p_query=Law%20on%20Citizenship&p_tr2=2)

Lithuanian law and allowing double citizenship without any discrimination.

### **Law of ethnic minorities**

Another topic of interest concerning a legal act of the Republic of Lithuania refers to the law of ethnic minorities. Currently, in Lithuania there is no specific legal act in force regarding ethnic minorities. The legal acts regulating the protection of minorities' rights in Lithuania are articles 37 and 45 from the Constitution, the law on education, the law on official state language, the law on associations, the Law on Charity and Sponsorship, the law on political parties and organisations etc. The law no. I-1007<sup>6</sup> regarding the national minorities, dating back from 1991 expired on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010. The law needed to be renewed as it was adopted during soviet times and its provisions were outdated. But since 2010 there is a legislative vacuum in this field. The representatives of national minorities argue that this is due to a lack of political will, once because there was a possibility to extend the expiration deadline for this law, which was not made by the Parliament and second, because the adoption of this law was not a political priority and has been postponed every year since. With elections in late autumn this year in Lithuania, the representatives of national minorities fear that the discussions on this law and its adoption will be further postponed to the next legislature. There is a risk that this law might fall under electoral pressures and political claims of some interested parties of national minorities and constitute "currency exchange" in the governing and power games or even base for inter-ethnic conflicts. Meanwhile, voices have been raised against the very adoption of this law, considering that the minorities do not need a special law as their rights are set forth in the Constitution and other state laws, such as the law on education.

The unanimous opinion of our interlocutors is that such law has to be adopted as soon as possible. Their arguments mention the existence of similar laws in other countries, the obligation to respect international conventions signed by Lithuania and the need to enjoy a special legal status when facing the so-called risk of assimilation within the Lithuanian society, but also the dissolution of ethnic identity within the so much promoted

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc\\_l?p\\_id=21840](http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc_l?p_id=21840)

European identity. The need to develop and promote their culture and language and to enjoy the right of education in native language require specific provisions for state financing and legal guarantees.

According to official data from 2009<sup>7</sup>, the national minorities constitute roughly 16% of the total population in Lithuania and include mainly Poles (6.1%), Russians (4.9%), Belarusians (1.1%) and Ukrainians (0.6%). Members of minorities have the same rights and obligations as Lithuanians, as mentioned in the Constitution. A new Law on National Minorities should introduce provisions starting with the definition of “national (ethnic) minority”, this being of a special interest since they shall allow the possibility to set forth the subjective choice of a person to belong to a particular ethnic group. Some opinions have been shared that ethnicity should be connected to historical links with the state or geographical location. Other opinions mentioned that small minorities should benefit of a preferential treatment consisting of financing and fiscal facilities.

A working group has been constituted in the Ministry of Culture and members of some national minorities are part of it. This topic is also discussed in the Assembly of the Representatives of National Minorities, which is a consultative body to the Ministry of Culture but some interlocutors feel that they are not fully included in the process since they do not have clear information about the content and stage of the draft law. Mainly the small communities feel excluded from this process and consider that most advantages will be obtained through negotiations by the larger ethnic communities. In the summer of 2011, Stanislav Vidtmann has been nominated vice-minister of culture and became president of the working group. In a conference that took place in Vilnius on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012<sup>8</sup> the vice-minister argued that the status of Assembly of National Minorities has to be clarified in the new law and that the draft law will enter legislative debates by the end of 2012.

Several proposals have been collected from our interlocutors that might be included in this law. One of the acute needs of national minorities' associations is financing. Therefore, this topic should be obligatory included in the law, considering the main provision of art. 45 of the Constitution, which states that “Ethnic communities shall be provided support by the State”, considering both material and financial support.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.urm.lt/index.php?1818621644>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mruni.eu/en/naujienos/detail.php?el=117896>

Some members of national minorities consider that this should not be only a facility but an obligation of the State to its citizens of different ethnic backgrounds.

Most associations are registered as non-profit organizations and they mainly support their activities through sponsorships and voluntary and occasional contributions of their members. Generally, associations of national minorities do not claim any contribution, and even if they do, it is insignificant (e.g. 1 litas per year). Only one association is registered as profit-making organization and in this respect it has been collaborating with other business organizations in order to receive financing for its activity (e.g. The Union of Poles).

As a proposal for the new law, and considered as a state support measure, is the introduction of the right for association of national minorities to perform commercial activities that would not be under taxation or could be under a derogatory taxation provision, for example while trading nationally specific products at fairs, events or in their own shops. This facility would contribute to the promotion of minorities' culture and traditions and gather financial resources that would be further invested in cultural activities. Small numbered communities should benefit from a preferential financial and fiscal support as they have even more difficulties in gathering financing and they have a visible competitive disadvantage compared to larger minorities' communities, who enjoy better logistic, expertise and support conditions. Other support such as state financing for permanent positions for dance, music, language or art teachers within the Houses of National Communities is also appreciated as a modern support of the state for its minorities.

### **Education in the native language**

Another topic of interest is that of the right to education in the native language. This right is set forth largely in the law of education and it is fully granted. According to official statistical data, in the school year 2010 – 2011<sup>9</sup>, there were 122 schools where children from ethnic minorities could acquire primary, basic and secondary education in their mother tongue. Some of the schools are single-language schools, the rest are mixed schools and have Lithuanian-Russian or Russian-Polish classes. In order to impose

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<sup>9</sup> [www.urm.lt](http://www.urm.lt)



the use of Lithuanian as state language by the national minorities, apart from the compulsory examination in the Lithuanian language after graduation of secondary school, according to the new Law on Education, from September 2011 in minority schools Lithuanian language will be used to teach Lithuanian language, Lithuanian history and geography, the nature science (primary school subject) and civic education (an introduction to political science). Some minorities have complained about this requirement mentioning that the Lithuanian language is difficult and their children have lower scores at these objects compared to Lithuanian ethnics. We would like to mention here that even if the Lithuanian language is a difficult one, a large majority of the members of the national minorities speak the state language, only a small minority still using nowadays the Russian language as daily communication tool.

For smaller communities, the topic related to education in the national language refers to Sunday schools, but nowadays some communities experience a process of ageing of their membership and no renewal with younger generations, therefore the language is used and maintained basically through meetings of members, relationship with embassy and contacts with nationals visiting Lithuania or visits to homeland. For the Sunday schools, the interlocutors have supported the idea that the State should obligatory finance such schools if a certain number of pupils is available, and not based on the analysis of opportunity of such educational projects at the free discretion of the state. The main argument is that of the risk of assimilation of these minorities and the dissolution of the sense of belonging to a certain ethnic background starting with the second generation.

### **Institutional representation of national minorities**

Another topic of interest for our interlocutors was related to the relationship with the national authorities and the representation of minorities' interests at governmental level. The institution responsible for the relationship with national minorities is the Ministry of Culture<sup>10</sup>, through its Department for National Minorities, under the coordination of one of the vice-ministers. Functions related to ethnic minority policy formation and implementation have been granted to the Ministry of

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.lrkm.lt/go.php/lit/Tautines\\_mazumos/413/6/192](http://www.lrkm.lt/go.php/lit/Tautines_mazumos/413/6/192)

Culture since 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2010, being transferred from the Department of National Minorities which was functioning under the Prime-Minister's Office. This institutional change was perceived by most national minorities as a signal of lowering of governmental attention towards the specific problems faced by minorities, considering that the previous department was more representative and professional than the new one. According to some opinions, the institutional re-organization diminished institution's importance and its influence and decision power. Additionally, the previous department has had a strong mediating power and position among minorities and in this respect it was highly appreciated. On the other hand, re-organization was necessary as the previous department cumulated functions related to the relationship and financing of associations of Lithuanians from abroad, which according to some opinions, was redirecting much of the attention and support from the national minorities living in Lithuania to the Lithuanians living abroad. Various opinions have suggested the establishment of an institute of national minorities with attributions in financing the activities of national minorities' associations, which would have additional responsibilities in preventing discrimination on ethnic grounds.

### **Visibility of minorities' culture and traditions**

Apart from this institutional support, national minorities have benefited from broadcasting support within the national television. Larger minorities, such as Russian, Byelorussians, Ukrainians and Polish have separate TV programs, while smaller minorities have promoted their culture and traditions within a TV show called "Labas" ("Hello") which used to be aired every Sunday morning since 1998. It was the only TV show broadcasted in the state language about smaller minorities from the Baltic States. The show used to be hosted by Lucia Andrievschi - Bartkiene, one of the authors hereof and president of the Romanian Cultural Association "Dacia". As editor and presenter of this show, Lucia tried to display a positive image of all national minorities and especially of Romanian and Moldovan ones, so that Lithuanians would learn more about traditions, culture and language of inhabiting minorities. Unfortunately, the economic crisis seems to have affected the broadcasting of this show as since 2009 it has been excluded from financing and its broadcasting has been stopped. Memos in favour of the continuation of this TV programme have been

addressed to the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas), to the Commission for Human Rights, the Prime Minister and the President but by now, even if support was promised, no corrective measures were taken, as it was dependent on financial resources to be received from the state institutions.

While describing relationship with the embassies, representatives of national communities have mentioned that the quality itself and frequency of this relationship depends on subjective factors concerning the personality and involvement of the ambassador and his/her staff. Some interlocutors have mentioned that consistency of such relationship is given by external policy and priorities of the homeland government, as for example the nomination of a diplomatic nuncio as ambassador of Poland in Lithuania, who belongs to the highest level of diplomatic ranks, fact that shows the importance of bilateral relationship Poland - Lithuania. Over the last years, embassies have also been under the pressure of the economic crisis as some representations have not nominated to date neither ambassadors nor cultural attaches and personnel has been decreased to few employees.

It has been noticed that preparedness to accede the EU or the accession itself to the EU has had a positive impact on bilateral diplomatic relationships, as for example the case of Romania, when such relationships have been marked by a boom with effects on country's visibility but also on its nationals, followed afterwards by a decline.

## **Conclusion**

The members of the national minorities consider that Lithuania provides favourable conditions for multiculturalism and that the Lithuanian society is obviously more open to accommodate other ethnics than the other two Baltic States. Characterised as rather reserved towards new people, Lithuanians tend to open themselves the more positive information they get about different cultures. According to other opinions, the Lithuanian society is a nationalist one but this nationalism has to be understood considering historic conditions. The Lithuanian nationalism can be characterised as a positive one, non-discriminating towards other ethnics but rather self-protective especially with respect to the national language, which over the historic occupations has been the most oppressed. Therefore, this might have led to the tensed relationship with the Polish minority regarding the use of Polish language as teaching language in

schools and for spelling names in identity documents as well as of street names. The smaller a nation it is, the higher the fear to lose in time its identity based on the use of the national language.

Nationalist attitudes are rather hidden and latent. Extremism in Lithuania is not widely spread as only one party and its former political leader have praised nationalist propaganda such as “Lietuva lietuviams!” (“Lithuania for Lithuanians!”), who militated for imposing such difficult conditions for Russian, Polish and Byelorussian minorities, that they would be forced to leave the country afterwards. According to the 2008 United Nations Report<sup>11</sup> of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance on Lithuania, areas of concern were identified regarding historical minorities like people of Russian descent and some vulnerable groups, notably Romas and non-European new migrants. Profound discrimination was noticed being faced by the Roma community, particularly in the fields of employment, education and housing while non-European minorities have also faced growing problems in terms of racist violence as well as hate speech. The report highlights that the most important challenge for Lithuania but also shared by the other Baltic States is the balance between the continuity of a nation with profound historical roots and the dynamic of a new multicultural identity inherited from its recent history. Another pressing challenge is to prepare its society for the arrival of new waves of non-European migrants bearing different traditions, cultures and religions, considering that Lithuania is one of the EU countries having external borders with non-EU countries. The best response to these challenges is to be found in the state policy and political will for the promotion of minorities’ rights, fight against racist attitudes and legal incrimination of racial crimes.

## ANNEX

### List of interviewed persons

No.	Name, surname, position	Association
1.	Lucija Andrievschi – Bartkiene - president	Romanian Cultural Association “Dacia”

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<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G08/105/24/PDF/G0810524.pdf?OpenElement>

2.	Georgios Macukatov – president	Greek Association in Lithuania “Pontos”
3.	Martynas Ervinas Peteraitis – president	Vilnius Germans’ Association
4.	Gunta Rone – president	Vilnius Latvians’ Association
5.	Kuisin-oi Zujene - president	Uzbek Association “Pachtakor”
6.	Roman Voinickij – president	Bielorusian Club “Siabryna”
7.	Edward Trusewicz – secretary	Union of Poles in Lithuania
8.	Olga Gorskova - Member of Vilnius City Council, Member of Council Board, Chairman of National communities and Municipal Development Committee	Russian Alliance
9.	Marija Rubaževicienė	Cultural Association of Hungarians "Stephan Bathory"

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[www.mruni.eu](http://www.mruni.eu) - Mykolas Romeris University

[www.tnb.lt](http://www.tnb.lt) - House of National Minorities, Vilnius, Lithuania

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