

## POLITICS



### THE POLISH MINORITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

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*The ethnic makeup of the population significantly affects the domestic policy of any state, and its relations with neighbouring countries. Although interactions with ethnic minorities are not as urgent a problem in Lithuania as they are in the two other Baltic States, ethnicity-related conflicts continue to occur, particularly, as regards the relations between the Lithuanian state and the Polish minority, which is the largest in the country. The Polish minority – Lithuania – Poland relations are not the only factor that affects the situation of the Poles in Lithuania. The other important factors are Lithuania and Poland' EU membership, the relations between Lithuania and Russia, and the Russian minority in Lithuania. Our analysis shows that the EU membership of Lithuania and Poland did not provide an instant solution to the problem of the Polish minority but rather attenuated it. Although the EU factor played a significant role before the accession of Poland and Lithuania to the Union, its influence is very limited today. The effect of the Russian factor is different. Strained Polish-Russian relations do not affect the relations between the Polish and Russian minorities in Lithuania. On the contrary, both minorities collaborate on a wide range of issues.*

**Keywords:** ethnic minorities, Polish minority in Lithuania, Lithuania, Poland, European Union, Russia

#### Introduction

Policies of national governments towards ethnic diversity

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are considered the key to peace and democracy in Europe [1, p. 5–16]. European countries have worked out many mechanisms, which are used to manage ethnic minority problems. European governments react very differently to national security problems, domestic political competition, political representation, and economic redistribution. Moreover, the situation of ethnic minorities is an important gauge of the development of a liberal democratic system. This applies even more so to the states where nation-building has not been completed.

In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), most ethnic groups have close ties with their neighbouring 'countries of origin'. This may cause considerable tension between states and increase the risk of international conflicts. Although the constitutions of all 'new' EU member states, which have acceded the EU since 2004, protect the rights of ethnic (national) minorities, the situation of the latter differs significantly from country to country in CEE [2, p. 40].

All the above equally applies to the Baltics. Overall, the situation of ethnic minorities in Lithuania is regarded as more favourable than that in the neighbouring Latvia and Estonia. Despite the relatively low level of discrimination in the country, Lithuania's Polish and Russian minorities complain about discrimination from the Lithuanian government as regards a number of issues, including the insufficient financing of minority educational and cultural institutions, Lithuanisation of Polish names, and renaming streets in Polish communities. However, unlike those in Estonia and Latvia, national minorities in Lithuania were granted citizenship immediately after independence, and they have never faced an outright discriminatory passport policy.

In this article, we will examine the situation of the Polish minority in Lithuania. The historical development of CEE countries resulted in incongruence between ethnic nations and states. At the same time, for the peoples of these countries, congruence between ethnic groups and states is an ideal and evidence of the maturity and sovereignty of a nation-state. This approach is fraught with disappointment, tension, and conflicts. Rogers Brubaker has proposed to rely on several premises when studying the triangle of relations between the state pursuing nation-building, the ethnic minority living in this state, and the 'country of origin' of the minority. His approach identifies the completion of nation-building and the attainment of full-fledged statehood as priorities for a state pursuing nation-building. Ethnic minorities call for the state to recognise their special ethnic identity and grant them special cultural and political rights. In our research, this applies to the Polish minority in Lithuania. At the same time, minorities strive for recognition as full members of the ethnic nation of the 'state of origin'. Poland is not an exception [2]. Brubaker's model provides a suitable framework for our analysis since it suggests ex-



aming relations between the three most significant actors. However, a limitation of this model is that it relies on the assumption of a closed system (two states and a minority). In reality, this system is open to external influences. Therefore, we supplement Brubaker's model with two factors, which we consider essential. These are Lithuania's Russian minority and the country's geographic proximity to Russia. We maintain that the situation of an ethnic minority within a nation-state and the structure of its interests are affected by both the relations between the three principal actors and external factors (the EU and Russia, in our case). This makes relations and interconnections even more complex and less predictable.

The structure of this article is as follows. The first three sections focus on relations between the three main actors: between Lithuania and Poland, the Polish minority and the Lithuanian state, and between the minority and the 'country of origin' – Poland. The fourth section of the article analyses limitations and opportunities for the three actors relating to Lithuania and Poland's EU membership. The fifth section considers the role of the Russian factor (and the Russian minority) in Lithuania from the perspective of its effect on the situation of the Polish minority. In the conclusion, we summarise the findings.

#### Lithuania and Poland: intergovernmental relations

Relations between Lithuania and Poland escape a clear-cut definition. On the one hand, they are allies, members of NATO and the EU, which suggest a high level of mutual political loyalty. On the other hand, there are historically embedded differences between these countries. These concern the problem of Vilnius and the Vilnius region and Lithuania's policy towards ethnic minorities [3, pp. 18–24].

Relations between these countries are affected by their historical background. Firstly, Lithuania and Poland once constituted one state – the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Commonwealth was established by the Union of Lublin in 1569. Lithuanians consider it a dark page in the history of their state since the Union granted greater rights and possibilities to the Polish nobility than to the Lithuanian aristocracy [4, pp. 63–67].

Secondly, an important historical landmark in relations between Lithuania and Poland was the inter-war period (1917–1940), especially its end. Lithuania faced a serious crisis after the beginning of World War II. In 1939–1940, the country had to receive over 27,000 refugees from Poland. Both Polish refugees and the Soviet-supported return of Vilnius in October 1939, which followed the occupation of Poland, had a profound effect on Lithuania's policy towards Polish migrants [5, pp. 461–462]. This made conflict-free relations between Lithuania and Poland or Lithuania pursuing an equitable policy towards the Polish minority very unlikely. A series of discriminatory measures against Poles living in Lithuania was introduced in 1940.

Approximately 83 thousand Poles were deprived of their civil rights. All the refugees who had not been able to register were imprisoned – many of them were Poles. Vilnius was consistently Lithuanised. Any measure aimed at reducing the political participation of refugees (and, later, all newcomers) or at cutting refugee support spending was welcome [5, p. 462, 465, 468, 474]. All this was happening against the background of the war raging in Europe and the allies condemning Lithuania's policy towards refugees.

Today, both countries are members of NATO and the EU. Ties between Poland and Lithuania are very close across many fields – military, economic, political, and others. Moreover, the two countries have developed bilateral ties within various institutions: advisory bodies, parliamentary exchanges, etc. These collaborations focus primarily on cross-border issues and culture. The bilateral efforts between Lithuania and Poland include the Advisory Committee of the Presidents of Poland and Lithuania, the Parliamentary Assembly of Poland and Lithuania (established in 1997), and the International Commission on Cross-Border Cooperation between Lithuania and Poland (1996) [3, p. 20]. Moreover, Poland and Lithuania collaborate on issues concerning relations with the Russian Federation. The ties between the two states owe their strength to the fact that their collaborations are supported by institutions of both executive and legislative power at both intergovernmental and local levels. However, close cooperation does not cancel problems in bilateral relations, the Vilnius issue being the most complicated one. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the two countries were laying their claims to Vilno (today's Vilnius and its environs [6]. In 1920, Poland managed to occupy temporarily these territories. This resulted in the severance of diplomatic ties between the states. Researchers have emphasised that the Vilno conflict and the ensuing occupation of the city by Polish troops were a result of tensions that had been accumulating for decades because of the inequitable distribution of rights, privileges, and representation between the two nations in the commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania [7, p. 21]. This conflict caused Lithuanians to develop a special attitude towards surrounding larger countries and to preserve jealously their identity and territory.

Nevertheless, after the demise of the Soviet Union, Lithuania and Poland managed to find common grounds for building good-neighbourly relations. In 1994, the two countries signed a treaty on good-neighbourly relations and cooperation. Articles 13, 14, and 15 of the document ensure equal rights to the Lithuanian and Polish minorities living in Poland and Lithuania respectively.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1994, *Lietuvos Respublikos ir Lenkijos Respublikos draugisku santykiu ir gero kaimyninio bendradarbiavimo sutartis* [Treaty between Lithuania and Poland on Friendly Relations and Good-Neighbourly Cooperation], available at <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.11154> (accessed 29 August 2018). (In Lith.)



## Lithuania and the Polish minority

An inseparable part of Lithuania's population, the Polish diaspora is the largest ethnic minority in the country. In 2009, Poles accounted for 6.1 % of the national population. Vilnius and the Vilnius region are home to the greatest proportion of the minority – approximately 200,000 people.<sup>2</sup> The dynamics of population change in Lithuania in 2011 – 2018 suggests that, despite a continuous decline in both the total population and national minorities in Lithuania, the percentage of the Polish population of the country remains at 6 %. In 2001, Lithuania's population was 3,483,972 people, 234,989 of them were Poles (6.7 % of the total population).<sup>3</sup> Ten years later, in 2011, the total population decreased to 3,043,429 people, whereas the number of Poles was 200,317 people (6.6 %).<sup>4</sup> In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the total number of Poles decreased by 14.8 %. By 2018, the total population of Lithuania reduced to 2,800,738 people<sup>5</sup> (the 2016–2018 statistics suggest the Lithuania population decreased from 2,870,351 to 2,800,738 people<sup>6</sup>). However, the number of Polish population remained significant in relevant terms – at approximately 6 %. The reduction in the number of Poles living in Lithuania, which was observed over the past fourteen years, is accounted for by the country's accession to the EU. The borders were opened for free movement, and records of exits were not tracked anymore. This means that the Polish population of Lithuania is a significant factor in the politics, economy, and social life of the state.

Associated with a range of problems, this factor has a negative effect on relations between Lithuania and Poland. As early as 1995, the

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<sup>2</sup> In 2011, Vilnius was home to 88,000 Poles (16.5% of the total population), and Poles accounted for the 60% of the total population of the Vilnius region. 2009, Lietuvos gyventojai 2009 metais. 2009 m. gyventoju sarasymo duomenys [2009 census in Lithuania], Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, available at <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/gyventojai1> (accessed 1 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>3</sup> 2001, Lietuvos gyventojai 2001 metais. 2001 m. gyventoju sarasymo duomenys [2001 census in Lithuania], Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, available at <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/gyventojai1> (accessed 1 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>4</sup> 2011, Lietuvos gyventojai 2011 metais. 2011 m. gyventoju sarasymo duomenys [2011 census in Lithuania], Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, available at [http://statistics.bookdesign.lt/esu\\_04.htm?lang=lt](http://statistics.bookdesign.lt/esu_04.htm?lang=lt) (accessed 1 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>5</sup> 2018, Lietuvos gyventojai 2018 metais. 2018 m. gyventoju sarasymo duomenys [2018 census in Lithuania], Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, available at <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/gyventojai1> (accessed 1 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>6</sup> 2016, Lietuvos gyventojai 2016 metais. 2016 m. gyventoju sarasymo duomenys [2016 census in Lithuania], Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, available at <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/gyventojai1> (accessed 1 August 2018). (In Lith.)

EU adopted the Balladur Plan, which obligated candidate countries to approach a solution to national minority problems by concluding bilateral agreements with their neighbours [8]. In 1994, Poland and Lithuania, which would accede to the EU simultaneously in 2004, signed a bilateral agreement. The document ensured the possibilities of obtaining an education in Polish in Polish-populated areas of Lithuania and installing bilateral street signs in these regions, as well as the preservation of the original Polish spelling of names in official Lithuania documents [9]. However, the problem has not been solved. Lithuania pursues a tough policy towards national minorities, especially the Polish one. It is becoming increasingly more difficult for minorities to get an education in their native languages. The Lithuanian government has introduced a number of restrictions relating to national minorities. In 2011, the number of schools having a right to teach in the languages of national minorities decreased. This happened soon after the adoption of the new law on education. The law increased the number of hours of the Lithuanian language. Among other things, history and geography had to be taught in Lithuanian even at minorities' schools.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the policy followed by the Lithuanian authorities is at odds with the 1994 bilateral agreement and the Constitution of Lithuania. Article 27 of the latter guarantees the right of minorities for the preservation of their native languages, as well as for obtaining an education in these languages.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the Lithuanian state is very liberal when it comes to ethnic organisations and political alliances. In this country, it is permitted to establish political parties based on the ethnic principle. The largest of these political groups are the Lithuanian Union of Russians, the Russian Alliance, and the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania. These parties have formed a bloc to promote the interests of ethnic minorities more effectively.

The Electoral Action of Poles traditionally receives the percentage of the vote that roughly corresponds to the proportion of the Polish population in the country (5–7%). In the 2016 Seimas election, the Electoral Action of Poles won three seats (5.84% of votes) together with the Christian Families Alliance.<sup>9</sup> The party's greatest success was achieved in the regional and municipal elections in Vilnius and the Vilnius region: 31

<sup>7</sup> 2011, *Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo įstatymo pakeitimo įstatymas* [Changing Law on Lithuania's Education Law], available at <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.395105> (accessed 29 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>8</sup> *Lietuvos Respublikos Konstitucija* [The Constitution of Lithuania], available at: [http://www3.lrs.lt/home/Konstitucija/Konstitucija.htm#II\\_SKIRSNIS\\_ŽMOGUS\\_IR\\_VALSTYBĖ](http://www3.lrs.lt/home/Konstitucija/Konstitucija.htm#II_SKIRSNIS_ŽMOGUS_IR_VALSTYBĖ) (accessed 29 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>9</sup> 2016, *2016 m. Seimo rinkimu rezultatai* [Lithuanian parliament election-2016 results], available at: <http://www.vrk.lt/2016-seimo/rezultatai?srcUrl=/rinkimai/102/1/1304/rezultatai/lt/rezultataiSuvestine1.html> (accessed 29 August 2018). (In Lith.)

and 41 seats respectively were won by members of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania. This is quite logical since Vilnius and the Vilnius region are home to more than half of Lithuania's Poles.<sup>10</sup>

The good neighbourly relations developed by Lithuania and Poland at the level of institutional collaborations do not attenuate the harsh rhetoric of Lithuanian politicians against politically active members of the Polish diaspora.

For example, in 2014, the future Prime Minister of Lithuania, Algirdas Butkevičius, deprecated the claims of the leader of the Electoral Action of Poles, Valdemar Tomaševski, who, not without a reason, accused the Lithuanian government of pursuing a discriminatory policy towards the Polish diaspora living in the country. Butkevičius both rejected the allegation of the leader of Lithuanian Poles and accused him of lacking politics culture. The President of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, denounced Tomaševski for trying to discredit Lithuania in the international arena.<sup>11</sup> In one of his interviews, Tomaševski said that, although he always tried to participate in the dialogue with other politicians, all his attempts to do so with President Grybauskaitė were futile since she 'dismisses any alternative opinion and has to be the only one in the right'.<sup>12</sup> The same year, the Electoral Action of Poles was excluded from the ruling coalition [10]. Earlier, they had been forbidden from presenting a bill on national minorities to the Seimas. Commenting on this, the leader of the Electoral Action of Poles faction, Rita Tamašunienė, said that the coalition partners of the party had revealed their true face.<sup>13</sup>

The points raised by Tomaševski in 2014 were no news. In 2010, the US Department of State published a report on human rights practices across the world. The document stated that Lithuania's govern-

<sup>10</sup> 2015, 2015 m. Lietuvos Respublikos savivaldybių tarybų rinkimų rezultatai [Lithuanian local parliaments election-2015 results], available at: [http://www.vrk.lt/statiniai/puslapiai/2015\\_savivaldybiu\\_tarybu\\_rinkimai/output\\_lt/rinkimu\\_diena/stat1.html](http://www.vrk.lt/statiniai/puslapiai/2015_savivaldybiu_tarybu_rinkimai/output_lt/rinkimu_diena/stat1.html) (accessed 29 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>11</sup> 2014, PM Butkevičius evaluates Tomasevski's EP statements as 'lack of political culture', *Lietuvos nacionalinis radijas ir televizija* [Lithuania's national radio and television], available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/29/33922/pm-butkevicius-evaluates-tomasevski-s-ep-statements-as-lack-of-political-culture> (accessed 4 November 2018).

<sup>12</sup> 2014, V. Tomasevski is chasing D. Grybauskaitė after Strasbourg: she will be ashamed if I tell what she has commented on, *DELFI Zinios* [DELFI News], available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/europietis/d-grybauskaitė-po-strasbura-vaikesis-v-tomasevskis-jai-bus-geda-jei-pasakysiu-ka-ji-komentavo.d?id=63750742> (accessed 4 November 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>13</sup> 2014, Meanness and Cynicism in Lithuania: Baltic States in Polish Mass Media, *REGNUM*, available at: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1817157.html> (accessed 4 November 2018). (In Russ.)

mental responses to ethnic discrimination were ineffective and that insufficient attention was given to the problem. In 2009, there was not a single representative of ethnic minorities in the Seimas or the Government. Although Lithuania adopted a national anti-discriminatory programme for 2009–2011, the situation did not change dramatically. In 2009, the new programme did not receive funding, and 39 cases of hate crime were investigated, which was half the 2010 number. According to the report, compensations paid to victims of discrimination were either insufficient or not provided at all.<sup>14</sup>

All this seems to be a logical consequence of the events of the 1990s. On October 6, 1990, Lithuania's Poles attempted to establish a Polish national region as part of the country. This sparked a strong reaction from Lithuanians, and Poles were accused by the Prosecution Service of an illegal attempt to establish an autonomy. Later, the conflict was resolved, and Polish Lithuanians were granted the right to use their language in minority-dominated areas. However, in the documents, their names had to be spelt using Lithuanian orthography. The latter only aggravated the conflict, so did the constant promises of Lithuanian president to solve the problem. None of these promises was ever fulfilled [11].

Despite Lithuania's and Poland's membership in the same international alliances, a common historical background, and the uniting factor of the Russian 'threat', the governing institutions of Lithuania supplement their policy of national cohesion with practices that are discriminatory against other ethnic groups. This has a negative effect on both relations with minorities and the minority's attitudes to state institutions. As a result, the 'countries of origin' are given an opportunity to exert influence on minorities. In particular, this is done by Polish NGOs.

Moreover, Lithuania's policy towards ethnic minorities points to an interesting feature of this state, namely, to the fact that different aspects of liberal democracy develop unevenly in the process of nation-building. The state promotes the institutional aspect of democracy (in our case, a competitive political party system) and yet hinders the liberal aspect by imposing a restriction on diversity (ethnic diversity).

### **Poland's and Lithuania's Polish minority: channels of influence**

There are over twenty active Polish non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Lithuania.<sup>15</sup> NGOs are a principal channel of Polish

<sup>14</sup> Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2010 // *Bureau of Democracy, Human Right and Labor, U.S. Department of State*. C. 13-21, available at: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/eur/154435.htm> (accessed 2 November 2018).

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.3sektorius.lt/trecias-sektorius/nvo-duomenu-baze/>



influence on the diaspora in Lithuania. In ‘catering’ to the Polish minority, these NGOs do not cooperate with the Polish state and isolate themselves from it.

As early as 1998, the Republic of Lithuania and the Republic of Poland signed an agreement on cooperation in culture, education, and science. Both parties planned to develop collaborations by involving NGOs in cooperation in these fields. They pay attention to the problems of national minorities in both countries.<sup>16</sup> According to the agreement, NGOs had to act in partnership with the state, on whose territory they operated. However, this did not happen. Most NGOs either did not cooperate with the government of Lithuania or kept this cooperation to a formal minimum.

NGOs operating in Lithuania (not only Polish ones) are funded by the following sources:<sup>17</sup>

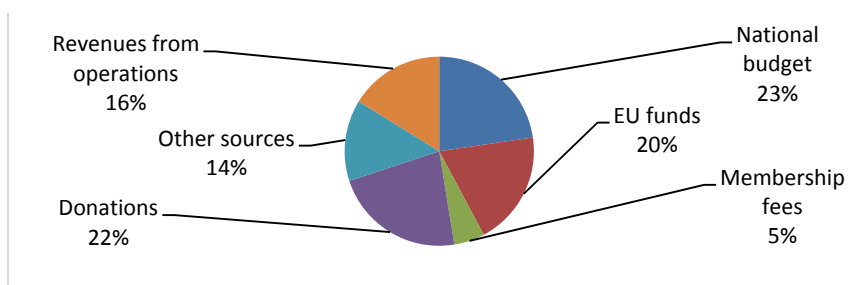


Fig. NGO fudging

At least 10 % of NGOs are supported, in part or in full, by foreign funds. As of 2005, approximately half of NGOs operating in Lithuania never submitted financial statements or reports.

Many NGOs do not cooperate with Lithuania’s national institutions. These are charities, NGOs working at a district or international level, organisations located in borderland cities (Vilnius, Marijampolė, Alytus), and organisations fully financed from abroad. One organisation often falls into more than one category (which is often the case with Polish NGOs).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> 1998, *Lietuvos ir Lenkijos sutartis del bendradarbiavimo kulturos, svietimo ir mokslo srityje* [Lithuania-Poland Treaty on Cooperation in Cultural, Education and Scientific Spheres], available at: <http://www.kpd.lt/lietuvos-respublikos-vyriausybes-ir-lenkijos-respublikos-vyriausybes-sutartis-del-bendradarbiavimo-kulturos-svietimo-ir-mokslo-srityje/> (accessed 29 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>17</sup> Lithuania’s NGOs data base, available at: <http://www.3sektorius.lt/trecias-sektorius/nvo-duomenu-baze/> (accessed 10 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>18</sup> Lithuania’s NGOs website, available at: <http://www.3sektorius.lt> (accessed 10 August 2018). (In Lith.); 2005, *Lithuanian NGOs analysis, Nevyriasybiniu organizaciju informacijos ir paramos centras* [NGOs information organization], pp. 31, available at: [http://www.3sektorius.lt/docs/Treciojo\\_sektorius\\_instituciju\\_situacija\\_Lietuvoje1\\_2013-01-17\\_15\\_28\\_40.pdf](http://www.3sektorius.lt/docs/Treciojo_sektorius_instituciju_situacija_Lietuvoje1_2013-01-17_15_28_40.pdf) (accessed 9 August 2018). (In Lith.)

A number of 'journals and magazines for Poles' is published in Lithuania:

1. *Ausra/Auszra* (since 1960)<sup>19</sup>;
2. *Ausrele* (since 1998);
3. *Suvalkietis* (since 1992");
4. *Saltinis* (1906 – 1915, since 2005);
5. *Demesio* (since March 11, 1990, the day of restoration of independence).

Published in Polish and Lithuanian, these journals and magazines cover events that are of importance to all Poles and perform an educational function. Not all of them have online versions. The journals are brought together by common topics. In the absence of outright conflicts between Lithuania and Poland, these periodicals focus on cultural events.<sup>20</sup> Overall, they try to avoid hot international topics and focus mainly on local affairs.

This means that Polish NGOs in Lithuania operate quite successfully without collaborating with the Lithuanian authorities. They use a wide range of means to establish a dialogue with the diaspora and to support it. Polish NGOs hold various events, provide social support for Lithuanian Poles, and back educational initiatives via the Polish-language media. They contribute to a stronger cohesion of the Polish diaspora in Lithuania, which translates into a stable and rather successful (if the proportion of Poles in the Lithuanian population is taken into account) performance of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania in national, regional, and municipal elections. Polish NGOs working in Lithuania have a direct influence on election results by preserving the Polish identity of the diaspora and helping Lithuania's ethnic Poles to defend their political interests at all levels.

### The EU factor and the problem of the Polish minority in Lithuania

An important characteristic of transformation processes, which have been taking place in CEE over the past decades, is an unprecedented role of external actors – first of all, the European Union [12, p. 39–50, 43]. The countries of the region got a chance to accede to the EU after the execution of the European Union Association Agreement. A country's eligibility for accession was defined by the

<sup>19</sup> *Ausra* Journal website, available at: <http://e-ausra.pl> (accessed 8 August 2018). (In Lith.)

<sup>20</sup> January 2018, *Ausra* Journal, no. 1 (746), available at: <http://e-ausra.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Ausra1.pdf> (accessed 8 August 2018). (In Lith.); August 2018, *Ausra* Journal, no. 15-16 (760-761), available at: <http://e-ausra.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Ausra15.pdf> (accessed 8 August 2018). (In Lith.)



so-called Copenhagen criteria of 1992. A candidate country had to adopt the Community acquis (*aquis communautaire*) and apply the standards of an open democratic society and a rule-of-law state. These standards included respect for human rights and the protection of national minorities.

The European Union has different types of influence when it comes to solving the problems of national minorities. Firstly, there is compulsory influence exerted through the Union's conditionality policy. This influence is actor-driven and aimed at the policy-making level. Secondly, the EU has an enabling influence through political and financial mechanisms that strengthen the social actors who support desired changes in candidate countries. Thirdly, the EU has a connective influence by using a variety of mechanisms of increasing interconnections between countries and societies, bringing them closer together in border regions. This type of influence is oriented towards societies in a much stronger way than towards political or social actors. Finally, the EU has a constructive influence designed to foster deep changes in identification [2, p. 39–50, 43].

Guido Schwellnus, Lilla Balazs, and Liudmila Mikalayeva argue that the compulsory influence of the EU is crucial *before* a country's accession to the EU at the stage when a candidate country tries to regulate its past conflicts and adopt laws on the protection of national minority rights. However, *after* accession, the strongest effect on conflict resolution is exerted by internal factors – primarily, the structure of political institutions [12]. For example, Poland supported Lithuania's EU and NATO membership, and Lithuania adopted a law on national minorities. Accession to the EU was sufficiently important to both countries since they set aside bilateral conflicts. This way, the situation of Lithuania's Polish minority became a latent problem.

After Poland's and Lithuania's accession to the EU, the problem of the Polish minority has been approached constructively. According to Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Magdalena Góra, the EU offers to its communities and citizens new arenas for expressing concerns and new frames of reference for the search for possible solutions, such as the European Parliament and European Commission [2, p. 47–48].

In March 2011, a lawyer from Gdansk, Tomasz Snarski, submitted a petition to the European Union. In his petition, Snarski raised the problem of the legal discrimination of the Polish minority manifested among other things in the inability to use first and last names in Polish, and the lack of official street and town signs in the native language. In 2012, the European Parliament held a public hearing at which members of the Polish and Lithuanian governments were present. The European Commission prepared two reports on the problem. The European Parliament sent letters to the Lithuanian authori-

ties twice, asking for their comments on the situation.<sup>21</sup> The Lithuanian authorities, in their turn, repeatedly ensured the European Parliament that all the necessary measures had been taken. In 2017, Snarski filed a second petition – this time, against the discrimination of Lithuanian Poles as regards their language rights and the right to education in their native language. As he put it: ‘until a Pole from Lithuania is not able to open his or her passport and see the name in his/her mother tongue, we cannot tell that we are caring about fundamental rights in the EU. This situation should not arise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’.<sup>22</sup> The future of the petition depends on support from members of the European Parliament and their subsequent decision. So far, it has been expectedly supported by EP members of Polish origin.

Alongside the European Parliament and the EU Commission, an important channel of influence is bringing the matter to the European Court of Justice. A court action seeking the recognition of the right of Lithuanian Poles to spell their names using Polish orthography in identity documents was filed (the *Runevič-Vardyn* case). However, in 2011, the court ruled that the Lithuanian spelling of Polish names did not contradict the EU laws [13, 14].

The EU cannot expedite a solution to this problem because of the weak European identity of Lithuanian Poles. Numerous surveys show that European identity is not considered important by respondents from Lithuania’s Polish diaspora, the only exception being Poles with higher education. For all the respondents, European identity ranks much lower than their regional and national identities [15, p. 11]. Therefore, it is probable that Lithuanian Poles who are dissatisfied with the *status quo* will be inclined to solve problems by appealing to either the Lithuanian or Polish authorities rather than to the EU institutions.

The problem of Lithuanian Poles was not solved automatically when the two countries acceded to the EU. The EU allows communities suffering from oppression or discrimination to raise awareness of their problems [2, p. 47–48]. Moreover, the EU as a normative force [16, p. 45–60], uses its conditionality policy and its attractiveness for non-member states (a chance of accession has turned into a powerful political tool) to prevent conflicts between majorities and minorities in new member states from deteriorating. In other words,

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<sup>21</sup> 2015, European Parliament about discrimination of Polish people in Lithuania, EFHR Media, available at: <http://media.efhr.eu/2015/05/04/european-parliament-about-discrimination-of-polish-people-in-lithuania-2/> (accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>22</sup> 2017, Situation of polish minorities in Lithuania is a discrimination of EU citizens, EFHR Media, available at: <http://media.efhr.eu/2017/05/09/situation-polish-minorities-lithuania-discrimination-eu-citizens/> (accessed 30 August 2018).

by making conflicts more transparent, the EU manages to keep them at bay (although it is not always the case). At the same time, the very nature of the EU as a political system, in particular, its restrictions on using any forms of coercion, limits the influence that the EU could have on resolving minority problems in member states.

### **The ‘Russian factor’, Lithuanian Russians and Poles: an unexpected alliance**

Lithuanian Russians are the second largest minority in Lithuania, comprising 5.8 % of the total population. The other ethnic groups are much less numerous. However, Lithuania’s Russian minority is much smaller than those in Latvia and Estonia are. After the demise of the USSR, the Lithuanian authorities adopted a much more favourable attitude towards the ethnic group than their counterparts from the other two Baltic States did [17]. Surveys show that most Lithuanian Russians (80 %) attach importance to their ethnic identity [18, p. 9]. Ethnic Russians live primarily in cities – Visaginas, Klaipeda, and Vilnius. The minority consists of two major groups. The first one comprises descendants of Old Believers who moved from the Russian Empire to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to escape persecution. The second group brings together descendants of Russians who moved to the Lithuanian SSR from other regions of the Soviet Union after World War II [19, pp. 4–5].

One could expect tensions between Poland and Russia to affect relations between the Polish and Russian minorities in Lithuania. However, this is not the case. The two ethnic groups collaborate on a wide range of issues. Experts call it a ‘strange friendship’ [20]. Surveys demonstrate that non-Lithuanians (including Poles) prefer the Russian media to the Lithuanian media. At the same time, 61 % of the country’s national minorities watch Russian television at least once a day. The same survey reveals a remarkable picture: national minorities show greater support for Russia’s policy than the Lithuanian majority does. Only 16 % of minority respondents blame Russia for the conflict in Ukraine, as compared to 55 % among the Lithuanian majority [21]. These results are confirmed by other polls. For example, a survey held in 2017 shows that 64 % of Lithuanian Poles sympathise with President Putin and 40.5 % view the incorporation of Crimea as legitimate.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the Russian and Polish national minorities rally together against linguistic and educational discrimination by the

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<sup>23</sup> 2011, Russians join Poles for minority protest in Lithuania, Radio Poland, available at: <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/55673,Russians-join-Poles-for-minority-protest-in-Lithuania> (accessed 30 August 2018).

Lithuanian authorities.<sup>24</sup> Some Lithuanian and Polish experts maintain that the central problem of Lithuanian Poles is neither spelling nor the demands of teachers from Polish schools but the Russification of the country's Polish minority [20].

Here, two questions arise. How did it happen and what can be done? Some Polish experts blame the Lithuanian and Polish authorities for the 'isolation' of the Polish minority from the 'country of origin' and for the gravitation of the ethnic group towards the Russian minority and Russia. According to Daniel Boćkowski, 'the existing Lithuanian politics towards minorities is not a road to nowhere, but a road to complete disaster. Because if people really do not identify themselves with Lithuania, it is not because they suddenly got offended, but because the policy concerning the use of language, culture, the economic policy, property issues ..., resulted in the feeling of rejection' [21]. By neglecting the legitimate demands of minorities and avoiding a clear policy towards them, the Lithuanian authorities encourage cooperation between minorities seeking to solve common problems.

On the other hand, concerned with problems and tensions in Poland, Warsaw views the problems of Polish minorities as a secondary one. Poland lacks an effective Eastern policy, and this is a big strategic mistake. At the same time, Polish experts admit that Russia defends its minorities more effectively, and the country's propaganda works better too. Both the Polish and Russian minorities are rejected by the Lithuanian majority. As a result, conflicts escalate [21].

To improve the situation, it is necessary for Warsaw to revise completely its policy towards Lithuanian Poles. With the Lithuanian authorities lacking an active stance, Warsaw is 'the only viable force'.<sup>25</sup> The Polish-Lithuanian bilateral relations are another important factor since conflicts in one field have a tendency to spread to others. The more serious the Polish-Lithuanian conflict, the fewer chances there are that the problem of Lithuanian Poles will have a solution in the near future. At the same time, Warsaw's massive support for the Polish minority in Lithuania may spark a reaction from Vilnius.

Lithuania's attitude to the problem is much more reserved. Most Lithuanian politicians do not consider the Polish and the Russian minorities as catalysts of political tensions and believe that the minority situation in the country is much better than in other post-Soviet states. According to a member of the Seimas, Arvydas Anušauskas, the Polish and the Russian minorities have different agendas: the Russians are closely integrated into Lithuanian society, and their primary concern is economic well-being, whereas the Poles are 'isolating' themselves from the rest, and the issues they raise may transform into open political

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



demands [22]. A Lithuanian political scientist, Vytautas Dumbliauskas, maintains that the mindset of Russians in Lithuania differs from that of Russians in Russia in being more Western. Lithuanian Russians see the benefits of living in the European Union, namely, freedom of movement and career opportunities. Therefore, their primary focus is on economic rather than political issues [22].

### Conclusion

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Lithuania and Poland managed to find common ground for developing good-neighbourly relations. However, this does not mean that all problems have been solved. One of them is the situation of Lithuania's Polish minority – an important factor in the politics, economy, and social life of the state. In striving to complete the process of nation-building and to attain full statehood, the Lithuanian government employs measures that discriminate ethnic groups. In doing so, it ignores the fact that Lithuania and Poland are members of the same international alliances.

The treatment of the ethnic minority problem by the Lithuanian state reveals an important feature of the emergence and evolution of the country's political system. This is the uneven development of various aspects of liberal democracy. The state promotes the institutional aspect of democracy (in our case, a competitive political party system) and yet hinders the liberal aspect by imposing a restriction on diversity (ethnic diversity, in our case). At the same time, the Lithuanian state and Polish agents of civil society (who serve as a primary link between the minority and the 'country of origin') function independently of each other.

Lithuania's and Poland's EU membership did not solve the problem of the Polish minority by default. However, the EU factor mitigates the problem by making relations more transparent and creating new channels for minorities to express themselves at the supranational level. The EU factor played a very important role before the two countries' accession to the Union. Today, its influence is limited. The Russian factor operates differently. Tensions between Poland and Russia do not affect relations between the Polish and Russian minorities in Lithuania. On the contrary, the two ethnic groups collaborate on a wide range of issues. Overall, external rather than internal factors will have the major influence on the situation of Lithuanian Poles.

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