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THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIZATION CHANGES IN LITHUANIA

Introduction

Since 1940 till 1991 the three Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, were under the umbrella of the Soviet Union and its politics. Long years of the soviet domination influenced both the structure of Lithuanian society and priorities of state politics. The economy was centralized, and the party had the monopoly to take any actions. All important institutions shaping the system in the state were in Russian hands, including the government, the party and the police. The situation did not seem to change till 1985, when Mikhail Gorbaczov came to power. The policy of perestroika was slowly introduced on the territories of the Baltic States.¹ Algirdas Brazauskas who was appointed as the first secretary, on June 24, 1988 started a cooperation with structures of *Sajudis* movement to strengthen Lithuanian determination to be recognized as the independent state.²

The beginning of the 1990s brought a significant change in Lithuania, which introduced democracy with its all features as a political system : free elections, the real change of executive power, the respect for human and civil rights and the market economy. Thus, it was the time of building a civil society in all Baltic States. On the other hand, there were new problems that appeared to be crucial for further development of Lithuania. Firstly, the demographic decline in the society – the population has been shrinking and aging. Secondly, noticeable difficulties in integration of different ethnic groups, including controversial questions regarding national identity and history. Lithuania had to face numerous internal challenges and concentrate on future relations with powerful Russia. Vilnius, along with Riga and

¹ The death of the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, Petras Griskevicius (1987), caused a little improvement in launching fundamental reforms that were slowly visible. February 16, (1988) was officially announced as the Lithuania Independence Day. On June 3, 1988, at the Academy of Science in Vilnius intellectuals decided to set up a movement named *Sajudis*, focused on promoting Lithuania national issues, especially to replace the Russian language with the Lithuanian language as the state language in the country. At the same time, its policy was supportive to Gorbachev's politics.

² V. Stanley, S. William, *Lithuania*, [in:] *Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania country studies*, eds. W. R. Iwaskiw, Washington 1996, p. 179-194.

Tallinn, sent a signal of democracy and freedom to other European states with hope to be heard. The singing revolution with its highpoint, human chain and all participants singing patriotic and national songs occurred to be successful.³ It was a sign of unity and collective desire of freedom. Reconstruction of the society and the economy, as well as introduction of neo-liberal politics, were adopted just after the soviet system disintegration.

The current situation in Lithuania seems to be far from perfect. Twelve years after joining the European Union, the Lithuanian civil society is reported to develop slower, with visible stagnation.⁴ Hope and expectations connected with Lithuanian Europeanization met with bitter disappointment. Although the government introduced some changes influencing the situation of national minority groups, for example zero option for holding the citizenship of the state, public schools with languages of national minorities, lowering the threshold for national minority parties to the Lithuanian Parliament Seimas, the situation with national minorities has not significantly improved. Democracy and developed civil society with stable political system are crucial to further growth of Lithuania. The aim of the article is to analogize the concept of civil society in Lithuania, which appears unstable, and to answer the question regarding the process of adaptation of national minorities into the Lithuanian system. There is a number of factors influencing democratization changes in the state and creating new social and political environment for further development.

Population of Lithuania – national minorities

Lithuania does not seem to be a homogenous country, taking into consideration different nationalities living on its territory. According to 2011 census, Lithuania is inhabited by 154 different ethnic groups. Poles, Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Jews and Tatars are the main national minority groups living in the country. According to the Department of National Minorities and Lithuanians Living Abroad, the Polish minority is the largest minority group, currently they represent 6,7% of the society, which gives the amount of 234,900 people.⁵ It has to be underlined that members of the Polish minority inhabit mainly municipal districts of Vilnius and Salcininkaj. Such a big number of Polish minority on the territory of contemporary Lithuania is a result of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. For a very long time people living on the Lithuanian territory were in close relations with Polish traditions, culture and Polish language.

³ R. Kamuntavičius, *Development of Lithuanian State and Society*, Kaunas 2006, p. 176.

⁴ D. Kuolys, *Tautinės mažumos ir pilietinė visuomenė šiuolaikinėje Lietuvoje*, Vilnius 2005.

⁵ According to census in 2001 the total population of Lithuania was 3.043.400

Table 1. Composition of contemporary Lithuanian society (2011)

Ethnicity	Nr of population
Lithuanians	84.2%
Poles	6.7%
Russians	5.8%
Belorussians	1.2%
Ukrainians	0.5%
Others	1.6%

Source: *Population and social statistics, 15.03.2013*, <http://osp.stat.gov.lt/> [June 20, 2016].

Currently Russians are the second biggest ethnic group in Lithuania, but during USSR times they were the most numerous national minority inhabiting this territory. After gaining independence at the very beginning of the 1990s, the number of inhabitants of Russian origin has been significantly decreasing.⁶ Lithuania is a country with considerably lower number of Russians than its neighbours, Estonia and Latvia. The region of Vilnius is recognized as one of the most inhabited by Russians, with the Russian minority constituting 12% of its community. In Klaipeda, located quite close to the Russian border with Kaliningrad, 20% of the society is Russian.⁷ Taking into consideration all Russian speakers, their number has increased to 27% in Vilnius and 28% in Klaipeda. The third region with the significant number of Russians is the city of Visaginas located in the eastern part of the country. The total population of the city is 20.000 inhabitants with more than 50% of inhabitants being ethnic Russians, the population of all Russian language speakers is approximately 77%. Although the population of Russians and Russian speakers in the city is so high, there are no signs that would anticipate the occurrence of the "crimean model" in the future.⁸

Transformation of Lithuanian education

The number of national minorities living in the country strongly influences the issues connected with the education system. According to the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania, introduced on 1 July 2011, the national minorities should be

⁶ G. Potashenko, *Multinational Lithuania: History of Ethnic Minorities*. Kaunas 2008, p. 372-377.

⁷ *Statistics Lithuania. Lithuanian 2011 Population Census in Brief*, http://osp.stat.gov.lt [July 15, 2016].

⁸ V. Stašaityt, *Mitų griovimas Visagine: ar tai lietuviškasis Krymas?*, *DELFI.lt*, 23 May 2014.

provided the opportunity to foster their national, ethnical and linguistic identity, as well as to learn their native language, history and culture.⁹

Table 2. Number of schools teaching in minority languages

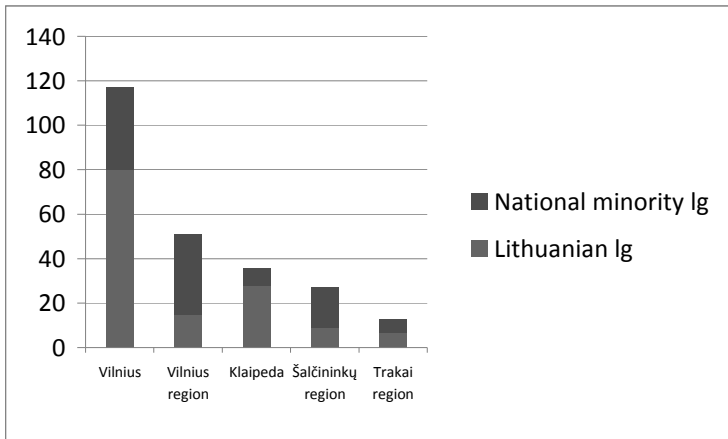
Language of instruction	Number of schools	Number of students
Polish	50	12.359
Russian	29	14.427
Belarusian	1	176

Source: *Overview of national education Lithuania*, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002299/229934E.pdf> [June 20, 2016].

There are also two schools with instructions in the English language and one with the instructions in French. Apart from presented institutions, in Lithuania there are thirty-four schools with several languages. In national minority schools some subjects are taught in Lithuanian, which is the consequence of the Law of Education. Thus, it is important to protect the ethno-cultural education, but the level of Lithuanian language has to be kept, as it is expected by the Ministry of Education. Subjects of primary education incorporate only some parts in Lithuanian language, in further education and in higher grades Lithuanian language is used as a communication tool in a wider number of subjects, including history, geography, and other areas directly regarding Lithuania and the basics of citizenship. It seems to be clear that most schools that teach in national minority languages are located in those regions of the state, where the share of people who belong to national minority groups is the biggest. In some regions, the number of schools with national minority language of instruction is higher than the number of schools with Lithuanian language. Vilnius region and Švenčionys region illustrate such a situation. In Vilnius town, Trakai region and Klaipeda the number of national minority schools is quite high.

⁹ Law on education 2011 (art.30)

Diagram 1 Number of primary education institutions with Lithuanian language of instruction in the school year 2013/2014



Source: *Overview of national education Lithuania*, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002299/229934E.pdf> [June 20, 2016].

After regaining the independence, the education system in Lithuania changed significantly. The soviet rules, with central organization and ideological control, influenced Lithuanian education very strongly. The establishment of the new Ministry of Education and Science was the beginning of the important and significant change. In 2004 Lithuania joined the European Union and had to accept the education policy that falls under the principle of subsidiarity. Following this rule, the State government shall enjoy quite a high level of antinomy in the field of state education. Apart from formulating national education and science policy, monitoring the quality of education, drafting strategic plans and organizing the content of teaching, a certain degree of autonomy was given to municipalities, which can form regional education networks with national minority education.¹⁰

To sum up, Lithuania has a very long and bumpy way to come in rebuilding and reconstructing the education system, including the issue of national minorities. Democracy, humanism, national identity, culture, tradition and equality are the basic and main principles of education. Lithuania seems to be ready to strengthen those principles and shows a lot of goodwill to keep the level of state development in the area of education. Generally speaking, the education system is still not free from protests of national minorities who disagree with the new education law introduced in 2011. Teaching reforms regarding Lithuanian language in minority schools are regularly boycotted. Additionally, some Polish minority schools lost their status of secondary schools in

¹⁰ However autonomy of municipalities is also limited and the ruling role of the Ministry of Education and Science is leading. *Country report on Lithuania*, „European Policy Studies”, June 2013, p. 242-245.

September 2015. The authorities claimed the schools did not have enough students. It caused a very nervous situation in the area of education. What is more, it was the next time when many Polish minority schools went on strike to protest against planned actions. Lithuanian educational system is still changing. The large-scale emigration among young people and teenagers, who migrate with their parents to look for a better life, strongly influences the whole system.

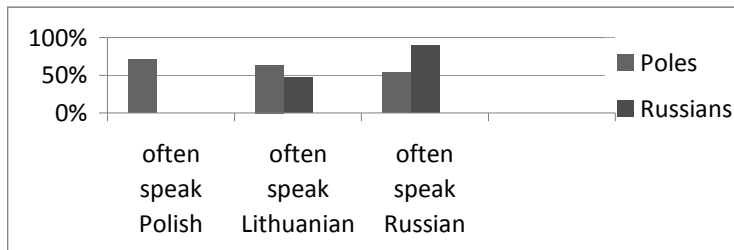
Transformation of the language policy

After a long history of being incorporated into the structures of the Soviet Union, Lithuanian language managed to regain the status of the state language on 18 November 1988. It was the beginning of the restoration of the constitutional rights of the language, and also a new opportunity to implement the legal documents which regulated the status of the state language and its use in various areas of Lithuanian activity. For a long time, the Lithuanian citizenship law was considered to be one of the most democratic and liberal legislations in the Eastern Europe. With more than 80% majority of Lithuanians living in the state, Lithuanian language became a tool of everyday communication. The status of both Russian and Polish languages, the two largest national minorities, was regulated by the *Law on Ethnic Minorities of the Republic of Lithuania*. Apart from the status of national minority languages, there are some doubts regarding the status of other languages, for example English.¹¹

One of the crucial problems regarding languages is the language of instruction in schools, which is closely related to further communication in the society. For most citizens it seems to be obvious that the major and leading language should be Lithuanian, whereas minority groups emphasize that their own mother language should be spoken in their everyday communication. It is often underlined by some members of the society that the stronger emphasis should be placed upon the English language to enable Lithuanians to be full members of Europe.

Generally speaking, members of the Polish minority mostly indicate that they are able to communicate in three languages: Polish, Lithuanian and Russian. They communicate mainly in Polish, which constitutes about 71% of everyday communication, while about 64% use Lithuanian language, and quite a large group speaks Russian when it is necessary. Russian minority members more often speak Russian than Lithuanian, Polish language generally is not used by this group, the only exception being mixed Polish-Russian marriages, but in this situation the language of communication is also mixed.

¹¹ *Law on the state language of the Republic of Lithuania 1995*, <http://www3.lrs.lt> [May 29, 2016].

Diagram 2. Use of languages among Polish and Russian minorities

Source: L. Kalėdienė, Evaluation of language policy in Lithuania, *ESUKA – JEFUL* 2011, p. 69-85.

Majority of Poles living in Lithuania declare that they understand both Lithuanian and Russian. Russians living in the cities claim that they use Lithuanian for reading and writing more often than Russian. Most of them also make a self-assessment of their language skills. More than 50% see themselves as fluent Lithuanian speakers without any accent, 38% claim they speak well but with some accent. The Russians inhabiting the suburbs, small towns and villages, see their Lithuanian language skills as poor, and they feel uncomfortable speaking that language. Members of all national minority groups claim that the good knowledge of Lithuanian language is a key factor when applying for a job. English is seen to be tool of business communication and gives the access to the European family.¹²

Building and strengthening of the civil society

Comparing the Western European states and the development of their civil societies with the civil society in Lithuania, the latter seems to be underdeveloped. Lithuania had to cope with a number of difficulties to create proper conditions for taking further democratic actions. Since 1991, the rulers have been trying to create a favourable atmosphere and environment by implementing both legislative and economic measures. However, civil participation in social and religious domains is getting more apparent. Thus, it is the political activity, which is thought to be really significant and important. On one hand, it influences the functioning of the democracy, on the other hand, it illustrates the tendency of the increasing political participation.¹³ Financial or economical measures included some changes in taxes. Non-government organizations are obligated to pay a 5% income tax, while the others pay the regular rate of 29%. What is more, the tax reform introduced in 2003 enabled the citizens to donate up to 2% of their annual income tax to any non-profit organization. Apart from financial

¹² State language policy guidelines for the period of 2009–2013, www.vlkk.lt/lit/ [May20, 2016].

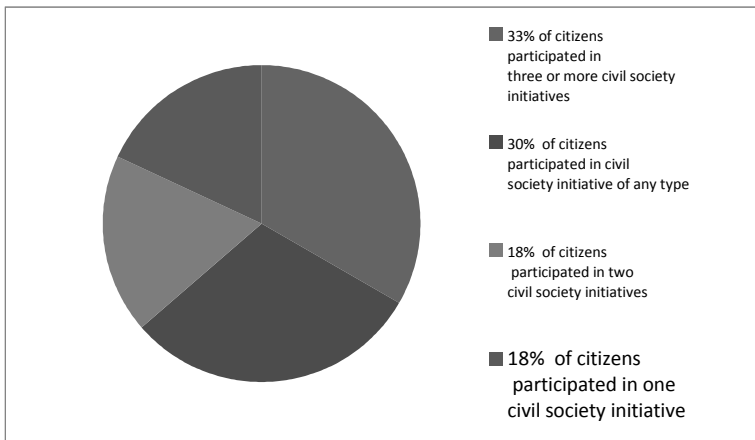
¹³ N. Götz, J. Hackmann, *Civil society in the Baltic Sea region*, Hampshire 2003, p. 90.

measures, there was a number of improvements in the area of legislative measures. Firstly, the issues regarding the Constitution adopted, with certain rights, such as as the right to private property and the right to organize political parties and associations in the society.¹⁴ Secondly, the new Civil Code of 18 July 2000 was enacted, where all those rights are elaborated. Finally, civil society can create and have an impact on the policy-making process, which is laid down within the law.¹⁵ Thanks to actions taken, the democratic system and civil society could thrive.

For many years, and even now, some institutions have not been positive about the increase of the public involvement in the strengthening of the civil society. Although contemporary Lithuania has been a member of the European Union since 2004, the country still lacks some actions and indicatives in order to develop in a better way. Nevertheless, there are some initiatives of the civil society, in which the citizens are more eager to take part than in others.

The fact is that Lithuanian society is not willing to participate in social sphere, even if they have the legal possibilities for it. As it is shown in the diagram, 30% of the population of Lithuania is not active in any civil society action.¹⁶

Diagram 3. Involvement in civil society initiatives in the years 2009–2012



Source: *The Eastern European Studies Centre*, <http://www.eesc.lt/> [July 18, 2016].

According to the presented data, one third of the citizens participates in three or more civil society initiatives, which is quite a good score. 30% declared that they took

¹⁴ Government of Lithuania, Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, <http://www3.lrs.lt/home/Konstitucija/Constitution.ht>, (20.06.2016)

¹⁵ N. Götz, J. Hackmann, *Civil society in the Baltic Sea region*, Hampshire 2003, p. 95.

¹⁶ Such a situation is rally similar to Belarus where civil society is in much poorer condition than in Lithuania. Eastern Europe Studies Centre, *Over the hedge: Attitudes on civil society in Lithuania and Belarus, 2009*, <http://www.eesc.lt/>, [June 21, 2016].

part in actions of any type. Equally 18% of citizens participated in one or two initiatives. In comparison with Latvia, it seems to be clear that the Lithuanian society is an active participant of civil society initiatives. 54% of Latvians declare that they are not involved in any actions.

The reasons why Lithuanians pursue such activities are varied. There is a number of factors that influence people's involvement. Firstly, wider participation in the social life directly influences their relations with the family and friends. Secondly, getting contacts that can be useful in everyday life and at work. It is also the moral satisfaction and sense of fulfillment that encourage to further participation in such activities. People with higher education are more willing to be active than people less educated and poorer. The first group is more aware of the social benefits from their involvement.¹⁷ Additionally, young citizens, especially those who are the holders of higher education diplomas who live in major Lithuanian cities, are getting more active in the area of civic activities. Citizens from rural areas have a limited access to any civic organizations or even do not know about them.

Political participation

Since the 1990s the elections in Lithuania are thought to be free and fair, the public opinion is also confident about the electoral system being secure, however, the voter turnout appears to be low. The reasons for such behavior might be unpopularity of political institutions, political parties and Seimas – Lithuanian Parliament. What is more, citizens do not feel they have any influence on politics and politicians. Today's citizens of Lithuania who grew up in Soviet times, especially during the domination of the Soviet Union, do not want to participate in the elections. Most non-voters are residents of rural villages who experienced long-term unemployment as a consequence of economic and political transition.. They mostly regard themselves as victims of the change of the political system. As a consequence, they mostly support populist parties. Among young voters, it is clearly seen that they do not tend to participate in elections regularly, and they are mostly supporters of liberal parties¹⁸.

¹⁷ *The development of civil society in Latvia: An analysis, The development of civil society in Latvia 2002/2003*, Riga 2004, p. 6-8.

¹⁸ J. Vaiciuniene, S. Nefas, *Lithuania: Brave enough to implement daring democratic reforms?*, Oxford 2010, p. 620-624.

Table 3. Turnout of presidential elections

Year	1993	1997	2002	2004	2009	2014
First round	78.07	71.45	53.92	48.40	51.76	52.23
Second round	–	73.66	52.65	52.46	–	47.37

Source: *The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania*, <http://www.vrk.lt/> [July 19, 2016].

Table 4 Turnout of parliamentary elections

Year	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
Voting	52.92	52.83	46.01	48.58	52.90

Source: *The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania*, <http://www.vrk.lt/> [July 19, 2016].

Table 5 Turnout of local government elections

Year	1997	2000	2002	2007	2011	2015
Voting	39.93	49.63	49.23	36.50	44.08	38

Source: *The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania*, <http://www.vrk.lt/> [July 19, 2016].

Democracy is an important part of political life for Lithuanians, However, they do not consider Lithuania to be a well-developed and stable democracy. They mostly claim that the system is not developed enough. 84% of citizens think that politicians and businessmen benefit a lot from the system. 28% of Lithuanians is happy with the system and its functioning, but 82% of them declare, that they do not feel they have any influence on the state system and politics. The low level of trust in political institutions and poor interest in the politics, especially the low level of election participation, are considered to be the main reasons for underdevelopment of the democracy.¹⁹ It has to be stated that the level of democracy has been constantly improving, and participation in the elections is a major factor. So far, Lithuanians have voted in the European Union Parliament elections three times, in 2004, 2009 and 2014. The turnout

¹⁹ *Country report on Lithuania*, Amsterdam 2013, p. 74-77.

is quite low but each elections show that it is getting better, as in 2014 the turnout was 47.35%.

Conclusion

Lithuania is a young democracy, and it is still learning how to build a stable and efficient system. Apart from many problems that have arisen since the beginning of the 1990s, the state institutions work more efficiently. Ethnic division in the society seems to be the main factor inhibiting strengthening of the civil society. The fact is that Lithuanians have already achieved a lot, building and strengthening their independence and stability. Modernization, openness to new challenges and further democratization are the main aims for the next years. Apart from political issues, education system, society cooperation and introducing new possibilities for young people by providing trainings and the development of new attitudes to business. The goal is to empower members of the society even more, and build modern, European state with the strong feeling of national and ethnic identity. The new state strategy planned to be implemented by 2030, states key areas: society, governance and economy. Those values can be achieved with openness, creativity and responsibility. Lithuanian society is expected to be more active, creative, trusting and ready to take risks.²⁰ The future will show whether Lithuania will have managed to build smart society with fully democratic institutions.

Summary

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIZATION CHANGES IN LITHUANIA

After a long history of Soviet domination, Lithuania had to face many arising problems regarding the establishment of new democratic structures and institutions, issues with ethnic minorities, rebuilding and strengthening civil society, as well as creating relationships with neighbouring states, especially Russia. The aim of the article is to present the spectrum of democratization changes in the independent Lithuania with the focus on the social context. The structure of Lithuanian society, the factors influencing the education, the language policy and the level of development of the civil society, are the main areas creating and influencing changes in the modern Lithuanian society.

Key words: Democratization of Lithuania, civil society in Lithuania, education in Lithuania, national minorities in Lithuania, population of the contemporary Lithuania

²⁰ *Lithuanian's Progress Strategy 2030. Lithuania 2030*, <https://lr.v.lt/uploads/main/documents/files/.../lithuania2030.pdf> [July 19, 2016].

Streszczenie

KONTEKST SPOŁECZNY ZMIAN DEKORATYZACYJNYCH NA LITWIE

Po okresie długoletniej dominacji sowieckiej Litwa musiała stawić czoło nowym problemom związanym przede wszystkim z odbudową struktur instytucji krajowych, kwestiami dotyczącymi mniejszości narodowych, odbudową i umacnianiem struktur społeczeństwa obywatelskiego oraz tworzenia relacji z państwami sąsiednimi, a szczególnie Rosją. Celem artykułu jest pokazaniem spektrum zmian w demokratyzującym się społeczeństwie litewskim, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem aspektu społecznego. Struktura społeczeństwa litewskiego, czynniki kształtujące edukację, ukierunkowana polityka językowa i poziom rozwoju społeczeństwa obywatelskiego są głównymi obszarami, w których tworzone są zmiany wpływające na kształt całej Litwy.

Słowa kluczowe: Proces demokratyzacji Litwy, społeczeństwo obywatelskie na Litwie, edukacja na Litwie, mniejszości narodowe na Litwie, populacja współczesnej Litwy

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