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Ethnicity as political cleavage: the political agenda of the Polish national minority in Lithuania

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This article examines the role of ethnicity in the formation of political cleavage and is based on the analysis of the political agenda of the Polish national minority in Lithuania after the re-establishment of the independent state in 1990. It analyzes the political performance of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (EAPL), an ethnic-based "niche" political party that tends to keep a monopoly over the representation of interests of the Polish minority in Lithuania and collects a vast majority of the votes of citizens of Polish origin. The article considers how specific in comparison to the titular nation the interests of the Polish national minority are, and how different in comparison to the political agendas of other political parties the political agenda of the EAPL is.

Keywords: Political representation of national minorities; Polish national minority in Lithuania; Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania

Introduction

The contemporary European discourse on the situation of non-titular national groups in European societies can be broadly divided into two camps. The most prominent discussion addresses migration from third countries to the European Union (EU) as well as migration within the EU (Koser and Lutz 1998; Geddes 2003; Black, Engbersen, Okólski, Panţîru 2010). Within this discourse, the central questions that are addressed are migration regimes, state responsibilities for providing assistance for migrants, regulation of labor force movement, and ways of integration. The other discourse covers issues of historical national minorities in Europe that are formed due to the movement of state borders as well as previous migration flows (Tägil 1995; Preece 1998; Stein 2000; Budrytė 2005; Muižnieks 2010; Vetik and Helemäe 2011). This discourse usually embraces such issues as the rights of national minorities, preservation of national culture, education of a young generation, representation in politics, and others. This article is devoted to the analysis of questions that belong to the latter group. The object of this inquiry is the Polish national minority in post-1990 Lithuania and its political interests represented by the political party Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (EAPL).

In contemporary Lithuania, Poles are the largest national minority of 164,778 people making up 5.6% of the total population in 2014 (Statistics Lithuania 2015). It is a border minority, which has come about from changes due to state borders over several centuries

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and from the assimilation and migration processes. Other national minorities in Lithuania have been formed through a pure process of migrations either during Soviet rule (the largest part of the Russian national minority) or previous historical migration to Lithuania (Tatars in the fourteenth to fifteenth and later centuries or Russian Old Believers since the sixteenth century).

In 1920–1939, when Vilnius was controlled by Poland, around 98,000 ethnic Poles migrated from Poland to Vilnius and its surroundings (Žepkaitė in Stravinskienė 2007, 39). In addition, 25,000 ethnic Poles moved to Lithuania from the end of 1939 to the beginning of 1940 (Žepkaitė in Stravinskienė 2007, 39). In the end of 1944 to beginning of 1945, in the eastern and southeastern part of Lithuania, the number of ethnic Poles was between 259,325 and 264,325 people (Stravinskienė 2007, 39). During the repatriation which was possible due to the agreements between the USSR and Poland, in the period of 1944–1947, 169,000 people left to Poland (10% of them were ethnic Lithuanians) (Stravinskienė 2007, 46). Due to deportations, the number of ethnic Poles diminished even more and reached 100,000 in 1947 (Stravinskienė 2005, 23). Later, due to the natural growth of the population (on average Polish families had 3.7 children) and immigration from other Soviet republics (mainly Belarus, Latvia, Ukraine, and Russia), the number of ethnic Poles started to increase. During the period of 1946–1948, 28,415 people immigrated from Belarus (Stravinskienė 2005, 24) and even more from Latvia, Russia, and Ukraine (Stravinskienė 2005, 24). According to the data from the Soviet census of 1959, there were 230,100 ethnic Poles living in Lithuania (Stravinskienė 2005, 24).

After the collapse of the Soviet regime and restoration of the independence of Lithuania in 1991, the ratio of national minorities in the total population has changed for the benefit of the titular Lithuanian group. The Russian minority, for decades the largest national minority in Soviet-occupied Lithuania, fell radically from 344,500 people or 9.4% of the total population in 1989 to 147,753 or 5.0% in 2014, mostly due to emigration after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Polish minority has also decreased, from 258,000 to 164,778 people, falling as a share of total population from 7% to 5.6% (see Table 1).

The peculiarity of the Polish national minority in Lithuania is that it is not dispersed across the whole territory of the country but is concentrated in a compact area around the capital Vilnius in southeastern Lithuania. In some administrative districts it makes up a majority or a plurality of the population. The largest proportion of the Polish population is in Šalčininkai district (77.8% of the population in this district is Polish); Vilnius district (52.1%); Trakai district (30.1%); and Švenčionys district (26%) (Statistics Lithuania,

Table 1. The proportion of the Polish National minority in Lithuania, 1989–2014.

Year	% of total population	Amount
1989	7.0	258,000
2001	6.7	235,000
2007	6.3	212,100
2008	6.2	208,300
2009	6.1	205,500
2010	6.0	201,500
2011	6.6	212,800
2012	6.6	210,600
2014	5.6	164,778

Source: Statistics Lithuania (2015).

Population Census 2011). This demographic distribution plays a crucial role in the formation of the political agenda (e.g. issues of Polish language usage in the public sphere and separate schools with Polish language used for instruction), and has a crucial impact on the results of the local and national (parliamentary) elections.

The Polish national minority in Lithuania has been intensively studied during the last 25 years by Lithuanian and foreign scholars. Yet issues of political participation were rarely studied (Kowalski 2000; Krupavičius 2000; Žvaliauskas 2000; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2011; Savickaitė, Krupickaitė, and Tučas 2013; Kazėnas et al. 2014). A crucial issue in the analysis of the Polish national minority in Lithuania is a lack of cooperation between Polish and Lithuanian scholars. Polish authors rarely quote the sociological research and data collected by Lithuanian researchers since much of the data are available only in Lithuanian. On the other hand, there exists a general distrust due to the fact that the topic is heavily politicized. Many Polish authors that do not carry out their own sociological research in the field, tend to use certain cliché models, and usually come to the conclusion that the Polish national minority in Lithuania is discriminated against. Usually, such articles look at the problem of the Polish national minority in Lithuania either in the context of the situation of Polish minorities in "territories of the eastern neighbours of Poland, that is – in Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and the Kaliningrad district" (Eberhardt 2002, 191), or even in the framework of "geopolitical problems" (Kowalski 2008, 267–296) or in the context of inter-nation relations between Lithuania and Poland (Barwiński 2013), or in comparison with the situation of the Lithuanian minority in Poland (Barwiński and Leśniewska 2013, 2014). The majority of these texts are based on Polish sources exclusively and reproduce the same ideas that correspond to the mainstream Polish political attitudes on the subject: "the most important problem facing Polish-Lithuanian relations is the treatment of Poles in Lithuania, where the authorities continue to implement many provisions limiting rights significantly" (Barwiński and Leśniewska 2014, 32);

> in Lithuania which is relatively a small country with low population, the national minorities represent a high proportion and this situation causes a lot of tensions. In Poland which is [a] much bigger country with [a] large population, minorities are a small percentage of the population and the rights of minorities are quite extensive. (Barwiński and Leśniewska 2013, 46)

> in legal terms, the situation of the Lithuanian minority in Poland is now much better than that of the Polish minority in Lithuania. In Lithuania the biggest problem is lack of [an] Act on National Minorities which causes lots of conflicts between Lithuanian authorities and national minorities. All activities of [the] Lithuanian government which are connected with education, electoral system etc. are perceived as the acts of discriminations of minorities. The only excuse for Lithuanian authorities is [the] fact that minorities are a large and strong group in small Lithuania. (Barwiński and Leśniewska 2013, 59–60)

"the national minorities in Poland enjoy fuller rights and better conditions for activity than do Poles living in Lithuania" (Barwiński and Leśniewska 2014, 43);

> in the first decade of the 21st century, after Lithuanian independence "settled down" and Lithuania joined NATO and the EU, the mutual relations [between Poland and Lithuania] got worse. Lithuania started experiencing the old resentments and fears of the small country faced with a much bigger and populous neighbour, who dominated Lithuania politically for many centuries and now had the largest national minority .... When Polish authorities demanded respect for the rights of Poles in Lithuania, the Lithuanian government did not hesitate to raise the issue of discrimination of Lithuanians in Poland. (Barwiński 2013, 21)

The major problems of these texts are political bias, a lack of knowledge of the issue, inability to read primary Lithuanian sources, a lack of original and reliable field research, wrong application of a comparative method, and a selective use of data.

This article aims to contribute to the scientific inquiry of political participation of the Polish national minority and tries to consider how different, in comparison to the titular nation, the interests of the Polish national minority are, and how specific the political agenda of the EAPL is. Methodologically, this article rests on three approaches: (1) secondary analysis of statistical and sociological data; (2) content analysis of documents and texts; and (3) a synthesis of previous studies of Lithuanian and foreign authors. A combination of these approaches allows for a broader look at the researched phenomenon. A secondary analysis of statistical and sociological data-sets provides an opportunity to use the high-quality data and see longitudinal tendencies. The content analysis adds a contextualized interpretation of documents and texts, while the synthesis of previous studies allows for placement of specific research into a context of previous studies.

In this article, the following statistical data-sets were used: Statistics Lithuania, the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, and the Ministry of Education and Science and Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Lithuania. In addition, sociological data from the research company "Spinter tyrimai" as well as sociological data collected by various Lithuanian and foreign sociologists were analyzed. Using content analysis, the following documents and texts were investigated: the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania; law projects registered in the parliament; decisions of the Vilnius Municipality Council; the program of the political party EAPL; the press releases of the Chairman of the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference; interviews in mass media; texts placed on the official site of the EAPL; and others.

"EAPL" as an ethnic-based political party

Political parties are interested in widening their support base and, in theory, should try to enroll members of minority groups. Yet, in some cases national minorities choose not to integrate into nationwide political parties. Instead, they form separate political parties (either mono-ethnic or mixed) or lists of minority candidates. Such "isolationist" strategies are used in order to represent the specific interests of national minorities. This can happen when mainstream political parties isolate themselves from the needs of national minorities and do not let in members of minorities or keep them outside the positions of decision-making. In Lithuania, there are no quotas for national minorities in the parliament, yet there exist some voluntary agreements within political parties to have a certain proportion of national minority candidates within their lists. For example, during the parliamentary elections of 2012, there was no candidate from national minorities among the top 10 candidates on the Social Democratic Party list, and the highest position for a national minority was the 35 out of 141 candidates. The highest position provided for such a candidate on the list of the center-right Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats was the 21st out of 141 (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania 2015a). This is the flip side to the multi-ethnic state – mainstream political parties do not let in members of minority groups while national minorities do not always want to integrate into the existing political parties dominated by the titular nation, and choose to form their own political parties and represent their interests that differ from those of the titular nation.

According to Robert Dahl, the formation of separate ethnic-based political parties may result in cultural conflict. If it is a fragile democratizing country, electoral systems should be designed in such a way that "no candidates could be elected with the support of only a single cultural group; they would need to gain votes from several major groups" (Dahl 2000, 154). Even if Lithuania is not considered to be a democratizing country any

longer, the threat of political isolation among different ethnic groups, described by Dahl, remains.

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the rise of new political parties that cover only a restricted number of specific political issues is common in established democracies. Bonnie Meguid, who has studied this phenomenon, introduced the term "niche party" to describe political parties that do "not prioritise economic demands," "often do not coincide with existing lines of political division" and "appeal to groups of voters that may cross-cut traditional partisan alignments," and "further differentiate themselves by limiting their issue appeals" and "eschew the comprehensive policy platforms common to their mainstream party peers, instead adopting positions only on a restricted set of issues" (2005, 347–348). These characteristics perfectly describe the position of the EAPL in Lithuania. It is an ethnic-based "niche" political party.

The EAPL was established in 1994 after the adoption of a new law that only allowed political parties to take part in municipal elections in Lithuania (The Law of the Municipal Councils of the Republic of Lithuania 1994). The Association of Poles in Lithuania, a major organization representing the interests of the Polish national minority in Lithuania, was not registered as a political party. Therefore a new political party was formed and registered at the Ministry of Justice as "Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija" on 21 October 1994 (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Lithuania 2015). The first party leader was Jan Senkevič (Jan Sienkiewicz), and since 1999 the party has been led by Valdemar Tomaševski (Waldemar Tomaszewski), a member of the European Parliament who was reelected in 2014. In 2015 the EAPL had 1607 members (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Lithuania 2015).

It is important to note that the title of the party in the Lithuanian language "Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija" (as it is registered in the Ministry of Justice and as it is used in official political communications) and in the Polish language "Akcja Wyborcza Polaków na Litwie" (as the political party presents itself and as it is used in political communications in Polish) do not correspond. "Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija" translates into English as "The Lithuanian Poles' Electoral Action" while "Akcja Wyborcza Polaków na Litwie" translates as "The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania." Evidently, these two versions of the title carry a different meaning. The Lithuanian one speaks about "Lithuanian Poles," leading to a perception of this minority as an integral part of Lithuanian society, while the Polish version speaks of "Poles in Lithuania" stressing a distinctiveness of this group separating two entities: "Poles" and "Lithuania." This contradiction corresponds to a major difference between the point of view of the state and the point of view of the EAPL's party elite. The message that is coded in the Polish version of the title shows a negative attitude toward integration into Lithuanian society. It is important to note that sociological research on that subject confirms that tendencies of isolation prevail against the tendencies of integration among the Polish national minority in Lithuania (Savukynas 2000; Biveinis and Kasperavičius 2012; Kazėnas et al. 2014).

Since both English versions of the title are used interchangeably, and the political party presents itself as "the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania," and, the same version is more common in English literature, it was decided to use the latter form in this article though it is not a literal translation of the official title of the party as it registered by the Ministry of Justice.

An important characteristic of the EAPL is that for a long time it has maintained a monopoly over the political agenda of the Polish national minority. Even though there were some attempts to counterbalance the EAPL by creating a rival political party with the political party Lithuanian Poles' People Party registered in 2002, it never received much support and in 2010 its title was changed to the Republican Lygue (Ministry of Justice

of the Republic of Lithuania 2015), which rejected the status of a regional and ethnic-based party.

The EAPL holds seats both in the national parliament (eight seats out of 141 in the Seimas 2012–2016) as well as in the European Parliament (one seat out of 11 Lithuanian seats after the elections of 2014). From the autumn of 2012 until the autumn of 2014, the EAPL belonged to a center-left governing coalition in Lithuania.

The EAPL has steadily improved its electoral performance, collecting 2.98% of the votes in 1996, 1.95% in 2000, 3.79% in 2004, 4.79% in 2008, and 5.83% or 79,840 votes in 2012 in the parliamentary elections with the help of the Russian Alliance, another ethnic political group (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania 2015c) (see Table 2).

An important factor for the electoral success of the EAPL was the sharpening of tensions over minorities' education and the usage of the Polish language in official documents and street names in administrative districts were Poles make up a majority of the population. In the party's own words, it has won "many battles in defense of the interests of the Polish minority in Lithuania ... [while employing] big protest actions in defense of Polish education, language, and land" (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania n.d., 1).

The core constituency of the EAPL is in the Šalčininkai and Vilnius districts where the Polish minority is a dominant population group. According to electoral data, the EAPL tends to collect almost the same percentage of votes as the share of Poles in Lithuania. For example, in the last local elections in 2015, the EAPL ran its campaign together with the Russian Alliance and collected 60.8% of votes in Vilnius district (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania 2015b), where ethnic Poles make up 52.1% and ethnic Russians make up 8% of the total population (Statistics Lithuania, Population Census 2011). Similarly, in Šalčininkai district, the coalition of the EAPL and the Russian Alliance collected 76.2% of all votes (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania 2015b). In Šalčininkai district, Poles make up 77.8% and Russians make up 5.4% of the total population (Statistics Lithuania, Population Census 2011b).

The peculiarities of the political agenda

The roots of political mobilization of the Polish national minority in Lithuania lie in 1988–1990 when some of the Polish national minority leaders used the favorable conditions of democracy and proclaimed the idea of Polish autonomy in the Vilnius region within the Lithuanian state (Biveinis and Kasperavičius 2007; Sirutavičius 2009). This attempt

Table 2. Electoral success of the EAPL during the last five parliamentary elections.

	Votes in a multi-member constituency (PR system)	
Parliamentary elections	Votes	Percent
1996	40,941	2.98
2000	28,641	1.95
2004	45,302	3.79
2008	59,237	4.79
2012	79,840	5.83

Source: The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania 2015c.

showed the strength of mobilization of will, but also was seen by the titular group as a lack of loyalty to the reestablished independent state of Lithuania. Thus, during the period of regime change in Lithuania, the main ethno-political issue was not the large number of Soviet Russian immigrants (as in the cases of Latvia and Estonia where the titular nation made only 52% and 61.5% respectively, while in Lithuania it was 79.6%) (Linz and Stepan 1996, 403), but the Kremlin-inspired attempt to encourage the Polish national minority to create a Polish autonomous area in the Vilnius region. This attempt failed, and the present day political agenda of the Polish national minority represented by the EAPL does not include claims for autonomous status.

Instead, the EAPL concentrates on the preservation of the national identity and protection of rights of the Polish national minority (Political program of the EAPL 2015). Yet in addition to the ethnocentric ideas, its political agenda includes some other issues closely related to the preservation of a conservative Catholic value system and a conservative way of life (Political program of the EAPL 2015). A major political interest of the Polish national minority is to write names of citizens of Polish origin using Polish language grammar rules and letters such as "W," "Ć," "Ł," "Ń," "Ó," "Ś," "Ź," and "Ż" that exist in the Polish language but not in Lithuanian. Currently, Polish names are transliterated into the Lithuanian language according to the strict rules of the Law of the State Language (The Law of the State Language 1995) and are written according to their sound using Lithuanian letters such as "Č," "Š," and "Ž" that do not exist in the Polish language. Therefore, the Polish name "Katarzyna" is transliterated as "Katažina" in Lithuanian. Other demands include: to preserve schools with Polish language of instruction for Polish children; to use Polish language in state institutions in the areas where Poles make up a majority of the population as well as the abolishment of abortions and introducing compulsory religious education in schools.

The basis for this political agenda lies within the specificity of the Polish national minority: its compact concentration in the relatively underdeveloped southeastern part of Lithuania around the capital of Vilnius, its autochthonic character (Kasatkina and Leončikas 2003), strong Catholicism which could be best illustrated by the decision of the Vilnius district municipality Council that is dominated by the EAPL to intronisate Jesus Christ in Vilnius district (Decision of the Vilnius District Municipality Council 2009), a more rural demographic composition of the population, a lower share of the population with university degrees in comparison to the rest of the society due to the emigration of the intelligentsia to Poland after World War II (Stravinskienė 2010), and a non-integrative strategy (Savukynas 2000). The majority of the issues within the political agenda of the Polish national minority in Lithuania come out of these specific traits and involve issues related to the preservation of national identity where education in the mother tongue and the possibility to use Polish language in public life play an essential role, as well as the preservation of a conservative Catholic value system, including the abolition of abortions and preference for a traditional family (Political program of the EAPL 2015).

Lithuania is a predominantly Catholic country and 77.9% of the total population is Catholic. The highest proportion of Catholics is among ethnic Poles with 88.6% while among ethnic Lithuanians the proportion is 82.9% (Statistics Lithuania, Population Census 2011).

Belonging to the Catholic Church is a core element of self-identification for Poles in Lithuania therefore religion strongly influences the political agenda of the EAPL. An example of this influence is the fact that on 12 March 2013 the leader of the EAPL in the parliament registered a bill on the protection of life in the prenatal phase (*Gyvybės prenatalinėje fazėje apsaugos įstatymo projektas* 2013). While Lithuania is a predominantly

Catholic country, sociological research shows that such ideas do not have much support: in 2010 only 9.2% of the population was totally against abortion ("Spinter tyrimai" 2010).

Conservative Catholic views of the Polish national minority match the political mobilization needs of the EAPL. During the latest strike in schools with Polish language instruction that took place on 2 September 2015, many students spent their entire school time at a Catholic service in Vilnius' Gates of Dawn chapel that was also attended by the leaders of the EAPL ("Protestuojantys moksleiviai ir palyda užplūdo Aušros vartus" 2015). According to data from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania (2013a), all 32 Polish schools of Vilnius district and all 18 Polish schools of Šalčininkai district participated in the strike while in other administrative districts the participation was lower. Major demands of the EAPL-led strike were to stop the restructuring of Polish schools and to not use a standard Lithuanian language testing at the graduation exam.

Another radically conservative political idea of the EAPL is compulsory religious education in schools. A bill on compulsory education was registered 4 March 2013 in the parliament (The Law Project on the Change of the Education Law Article 31 Parts 1, 2, and 3 2013). Yet it contradicts the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania which states in article 43 that "there shall not be a State religion in Lithuania;" article 26 that "no one may compel another person or be compelled to choose or profess any religion or belief;" and article 40 that "state and municipal establishments of teaching and education shall be secular" (Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania). Yet the leader of the EAPL argued in mass media that there was no contradiction since the constitution did not refer to religious education and that their proposal was about education and not coercion (Delfi.it 2013). Importantly, the Catholic Church in Lithuania does not support the idea of the EAPL on compulsory religious education. The day after the bill on changes in the education law was registered in the parliament, the chairman of the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference issued a press release saying "we express disapproval and negative opinion of such proposals. These urgings of the politicians are not and were not coordinated with the leadership of the Catholic Church" ("Press Release of the Chairman of the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference" 5 May 2013).

The issue of education in the mother tongue

Education in the mother tongue is another key issue for the EAPL and also its electorate. Its importance is strengthened by the fact that many of the candidates placed on the EAPL electoral list in 2012 were teachers: four out of eight members of the parliamentary faction of the EAPL hold degrees in education, including the faction's head Rita Tamošūnienė (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania 2015a).

Education in the mother tongue is considered to be central for the preservation of Polish identity and, therefore, is a cornerstone of the contemporary political agenda of the EAPL. As many as 77.1% of ethnic Poles considered Polish language to be their native language, 10.1% stated that their native language was Russian, 8.8% that their native language was Lithuanian, 0.2% Belarusian, 2.5% said that they had two native languages, while 1.3% could not say what their native language was (Statistics Lithuania, Population Census 2011b). According to research by Ramonienė, national minorities in Lithuania tend to speak Lithuanian when outside of their home and their local environment, while languages of national minorities are used in private as well as in mono-ethnic work environments and private conversations in work places (Ramonienė 2010). Hypothetically this also applies to the EAPL members, but additional research may be needed to verify this.

The fact that only 77.1% of ethnic Poles speak Polish as a native language could be explained by Russification during Soviet times, assimilation, intermarriage, or personal identification with the ethnic group regardless of the mother tongue. Individual identity is a complex issue and "may not correspond to ethnic origin and ethnic belonging" (Kasatkina 2000, 51) and, as in the case of the Polish national minority in Lithuania, national identity could not correspond to the mother tongue. A person could perceive him or herself as Polish, but not speak Polish as their mother tongue. An important linguistic characteristic of the members of the Polish national minority in rural areas of Vilnius region is that in everyday life many of them do not use standard Polish but rather a "Tuteishi" dialect ("Language of the Locals"), also called "Po Prostu" in Polish ("Simple Language") (Korzeniewska 1997; Hogan-Brun, Ramonienė, and Grumadienė 2005).

Furthermore, according to research carried out by sociologists of the Lithuanian Social Research Center, the Polish minority's strongest attachment is to Lithuania as a birthplace and homeland, while affiliation with Poland is more cultural (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2011). Other sociological research shows that ethnicity is the second most important component of personal identity for Poles: the first one is a person's profession (Petrušauskaitė and Pilinkaitė Sotirovič 2012, 30).

In Lithuania, education in the mother tongue is guaranteed by existing laws. According to data from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania (2013a) of the Republic of Lithuania, in 2013 91% of pupils in Lithuania studied in the Lithuanian language, 4% in Polish, and 5% in Russian.

In total, in 2013, there were 158 institutions of education and science using the Polish language of instruction in Lithuania, including 50 kindergartens, 12 primary schools (four in Vilnius); 25 basic schools; 32 secondary schools, 13 gymnasiums (four in Vilnius), one progymnasium, and five professional education schools. Lithuania is a rare case in Europe since it is possible to get an education starting with kindergarten and finishing with high school, all in the Polish language (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania 2013b). In addition, it is possible to study in the Polish language at the university level since there is a branch of the University of Bialystok in Vilnius.

Yet the situation of education in the Polish language does not satisfy the Polish minority. The tension between state policies and the Polish national minority grew after the Ministry of Education and Science introduced a new law on education in 2011 ("Reformulation of the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania" 2011). There had already been mistrust (manifesting itself as public demonstrations) in the state policies of education due to plans to close some schools using the Polish language for instruction or merging schools due to a decrease in the number of pupils resulting from poor demographics and high emigration (many Lithuanian language schools have been consolidated for this reason already). The statistical data show that during the period of 2000–2010, the number of schools with Lithuanian language of instruction has diminished by 47%, Russian by 49%, and Polish by 26% (Vaicekauskienė 2011, 10).

The collision of interests of the state on the one hand, and the Polish national minority represented by the political party EAPL on the other hand, arose due to different interpretations of laws and their implementation. What the state considers as an improvement by providing more hours of studies in the Lithuanian language at schools with Polish language instruction, the Polish national minority take as a loss and a violation of the right to study in their mother tongue.

The state claims that the idea of the new law is to introduce higher standards and equal rights. According to data from 2008, 68% of people belonging to minority groups knew the Lithuanian language, up from 65% in 2006 (Report of the Department of National

Minorities and Émigrés 2008). It was believed that changes to the law would help children belonging to minority groups learn the Lithuanian language and therefore provide better chances for further education as well as opportunities in the labor market. A new law increased the share of lessons in the (official) Lithuanian language by 20%, in comparison to 15% before. It was decided that in addition to the study of the Lithuanian language as a foreign language, lessons on Lithuanian history, geography, and citizenship would be conducted in Lithuanian too. While the number of native language lessons has remained unchanged, the number of Lithuanian language lessons grew from three to five per week (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania 2011).

Even if the international practice is to have 15–60% of lessons in the mother tongue of national minorities, and in neighboring Poland this ratio is 80% (the same proportion as it is with the new law of education in Lithuania), these changes met strong opposition from the Polish national minority. Not surprisingly, after the 2012 elections when the EAPL became a member of the ruling coalition, the new law on education was revised and there were agreements to extend the transitional period of implementation of the law as well, such as simplification of the graduation exams for the children of national minorities. Even though the final agreement has not been reached, it still counts as a small victory for the EAPL.

Conclusion

The object of this inquiry was the Polish national minority in post-1990 Lithuania and its political interests represented by the EAPL. This party is an example of an ethnic-based "niche" political party that tends to monopolize the representation of interests of the Polish minority in Lithuania by collecting a vast majority of the votes of citizens of Polish origin.

The core constituency of the EAPL is in the Šalčininkai and Vilnius districts where the Polish minority is a dominant population group and where the EAPL tends to collect almost the same percentage of votes as the share of Poles in these districts. The EAPL's political agenda reflects the specificity of the Polish national minority: a compact and historically rooted domicile and identity, strong Catholicism, a more rural demographic composition, and a lower share of the population with university degrees in comparison to the rest of the society. In a political landscape dominated by national Lithuanian political parties, the EAPL has managed to gradually increase its share of votes by articulating, consolidating, representing, and reinforcing key concerns and pursuits of Polish communities – the preservation of national identity rooted in education in the mother tongue, the use of the Polish language and names in public life, as well as a predominantly conservative Catholic value system and its public policy expressions over abortions and traditional families. The EAPL has also managed to build electoral coalitions with groups representing specific interests of the Russian national minority which is, relative to the Poles, more dispersed, urbanized, better educated, and is Orthodox Christian or secular.

An important factor in the electoral successes of the EAPL (first at the municipal and recently at the national level) was the sharpening of tensions over minorities' education and the usage of the Polish language, which is the mother tongue to more than 77% of Poles, in Lithuania in official documents and street names in administrative districts were Poles make up a majority. It has also scored political points by mobilizing Polish communities around value issues such as abortions and compulsory religious education in schools.

The collision of interests of the Lithuanian-majority state and of the Polish national minority represented by the EAPL over education in the mother tongue versus education in the

language of the titular/majority nation reflects a broad global debate between the methods of nation building: melting pot integration (assimilation) versus cohabitation in isolated ethnic/national enclaves versus citizenship-based multicultural/multinational integration. These discourses draw heavily on past experiences and "role models" of national building in the region, which in the cases of both Lithuania and Poland have gravitated toward the creation of ethnically/nationally pure nation-states. One could argue that Lithuania has experienced progress in multicultural integration: in 2008 68% of people belonging to minority groups knew the Lithuanian language, up from 65% in 2006 (Report of the Department of National Minorities and Émigrés 2008). At the same time, the high level of political mobilization of the Polish national minority over the issues of identity and status, and the EAPL's near monopoly over the Polish minority votes, demonstrate the limits of multicultural integration at this moment.

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