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National Discourse in Lithuania and the Lithuanian Government's Policy Towards National Minorities

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Lithuania has not developed a coherent policy towards national minorities. Increasingly, charges of discrimination and calls for assimilation, or at least the strict integration of these groups into Lithuanian society, are being levelled. The issue of national minorities, their rights and the role they should play in Lithuania has been in the public debate more and more frequently in recent years. In relation to this situation, controversy has appeared about interpretations of the historical background.

National Minorities in Lithuania. In modern Lithuania, and mainly in its eastern and south-eastern areas and in larger cities, there live minority groups that together represent 17% of the population of the state. According to official data from 2010, about 6% of the population are ethnic Poles and 4.8% are ethnic Russians. In addition to these groups there are, among others, ethnic Belarusians, Ukrainians and Jews (from 0.1 to more than 1%).

Ethnic Poles have their own political representation, the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (EAPL), and ethnic Russians formed the Lithuanian Russian Union and the Russian Alliance, which in recent elections formed a coalition with EAPL. The Russian minority, however, is less active politically than the Poles. Even in Visaginas, where a mainly Russian-speaking population lives, Lithuanian parties rule in municipal government.

The Russians' smaller aspirations to participate in power and the lack of a wider and consistent political program are some of the reasons why the activity of the Russian minority probably does not cause more controversy. However, Russian support for Poles opposed to the implementation of an amendment to an education law is likely to worsen the current situation of education for national minorities (mainly due to the placement of stricter requirements on the number of students in classes). It should be noted that Russian popular culture is quite common in Lithuanian society as well as knowledge of Russian. The Russian language often is chosen by Lithuanian schoolchildren (80%) as the second foreign language after English.

National Discourse in Lithuania. Since 2008, the issue of national minorities in the public debate has occurred more frequently, mainly in the context of minority rights and Lithuania's implementation of international obligations in this regard. At the same time, a radicalization of the discourse has taken place. This is demonstrated by, among other things, extreme statements by some politicians from different political parties (from the ruling coalition of conservatives and Christian Democrats, from which the nationalists left in late June, to representatives of the left). Although most of the Lithuanian elite probably do not share the extreme opinions of their colleagues, in recent times they rarely express disapproval of them. Extreme attitudes also dominate the media.

Lithuanian authorities deny allegations of violations of national minority rights. On the contrary, they claim that discrimination against minorities has no place and that these groups are in a privileged position. More or less officially, the Poles—and rarely, the Russians—face accusations of having a lack of a civic attitude. At the same time, obligations based on Lithuanian citizenship are emphasized and the need to obey laws of the state. This constitutes a common argument by the majority of political parties for the need to strengthen the level of integration of national minorities with other Lithuanians.

The symptoms of the discourse's radicalization became visible not only during the nationalists' Independence Day demonstration on 11 March. Also significant is the activation of extreme organizations (e.g., Vilmija). Moreover, the difficult economic situation of the country where unemployment is still high (17%) and increased levels of emigration (in 2010, 80,000 people emigrated) create favourable conditions for the radicalization of discourse. The issue of national identity also came out during the debate about granting citizenship for Lithuanians living abroad.

In the debate conducted by politicians, radical statements often are used as an instrument to stir up anti-minority sentiment and have a populist appeal, while at the same time the substantive elements are displaced. Currently, discussion on policy towards minorities mostly comes down to Lithuania-Poland relations. Problems involving ethnic Russians are discussed but to a much lesser extent and is negligible for other nationalities. At the same time, there is a debate among intellectuals and experts who analyze the relationship between Poland and Lithuania, mainly through the prism of history, about the present situation of national minorities. In this case, some of them voice their objections to the Lithuanian authorities because of actions against national minorities and relations with Poland. Moreover, the Lithuanian Human Rights Monitoring Institute indicates some oversights in implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Also, a recent report prepared by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre in Vilnius criticizes some elements of Lithuanian policy towards Poland.

The Attitude of Government to the Problems of National Minorities. Lithuanian authorities' policy towards minorities is based on a strategy for integration by 2015. The policy mentioned that there is a lower social status for minorities in the country, among them higher unemployment and poor knowledge of the Lithuanian language. Due to the lack of detailed statistics or extensive research taking into account the situation of each ethnic minority, it is difficult to assess their current situation. Meanwhile, in January 2010, funding for implementation of the policy was reduced by 30%. The Office for National Minorities and Emigration was dissolved. The Ministry of Culture took over minority issues in 2010, when an appropriate department was set up. On 1 January 2010, the Law on National Minorities, which was in force since 1989, expired. Now it is difficult to predict when legislative work on new regulations will come to an end. Another unfavourable decision against minorities was in the previously mentioned amendment to the Law on Education. In addition, in April 2010, the Lithuanian parliament rejected liberalizing the rules for the spelling of names, and the European Union Court of Justice confirmed in May 2011 the powers of the state to handle the internal regulation of this issue. However, the increasing number of marriages to foreigners could cause this position to change.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Poland. The activities of the Lithuanian authorities, as justified by the budget situation, demographic changes or the need for minority integration, can cause, especially in the long term, the deterioration of the positions of minority groups. Lithuania guarantees the basic rights of ethnic minorities, although its policies towards them seems to be strictly integrative. This is mainly because of an attitude by Lithuanian authorities that negates many demands by national minorities. It also is affected by stereotypes and prejudices against minorities that are dominant in the media and which often appear among opinion leaders and in communities participating in the public debate. Despite the current political context and the forthcoming parliamentary elections, which will be held in autumn 2012, it is difficult to expect that in the near future Lithuania will radically change its stance on these problematic issues. However, the need to resolve them is increasingly underlined in the public debate. An example of this is a large group of deputies who offered to refer the Law on Education to the Constitutional Court.

Regardless of the continuing pressure on Lithuania, Poland should primarily support the organizational activities of ethnic Poles in Lithuania, especially in early education efforts as well as in continuing education programs for teachers. In this way, Poland can improve the position of the Polish minority in Lithuania. It is equally important to take action in the field of public diplomacy to the Lithuanian public. An important component of Polish activities should be a stronger dialogue about the history of Polish-Lithuanian relations and the establishment in Vilnius of a Polish Historical Institute to counter the different interpretations of history that are the major sources of prejudice against the minorities living in Lithuania.