

LANGUAGE RIGHTS IN LITHUANIA (2012)

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1. The importance of language in nation-building in that country:

Language is the most important means of communication; it is inseparable part of every ethnic community and its culture, as well as it is the best form of self-consciousness and self-expression. Language unites the civic society, helps to ensure integrity and indivisibility of the nation, allows protecting the identity of nation which is considered to be the creator of the state, and guarantees the normal working of the state government, administrative, local authorities, various institutions, companies, and organizations.

Discipline of comparative linguistic research that has formed in the 19th century has been an incentive to research the origins of Lithuanian nation. It has remained an extensive and complex discipline providing studies on the Indo-Europeans and the Balts ever since.² Geographically, Lithuania is one of the oldest Indo-European nations that have been continuously settled in the same region.³ First written historical records of the old Lithuanian religion date back to the period from the 1st century of our era up to the 19th century.⁴ Lithuanian language is one of the oldest Indo-European languages, that has maintained some of its elements that are older than Sanskrit, Greek and Latin languages up to modern times. Scientists on a global level have elaborated on the ethnicity, richness and beauty of that Lithuanian language, which remains an important resource of knowledge to those who study Indo-European languages, do historical research, it continues to be lectured in the universities world-wide.⁵ Linguistic research of Lithuanian and other Baltic languages has remained an important field of research while studying history of certain ethnic regions, especially the Baltics.

Lithuanian language remains one of the few modern – day languages maintain most of its oldest archaic elements. The question of why the Lithuanian language is the oldest of all living Indo-European languages remains open. Among the hypothesis raised to answer this questions few are worth to mention:

1) Psychological hypothesis – ever since the mother-tongue of the Indo-European language (circa 3000 years before Christ) Lithuanians (or, to be more exact – ancestors of Lithuanians) were very conservative, old fashioned and stubborn. They did not want any changes. Therefore the Lithuanian language has remained unchanged;

2) Mixing up languages hypothesis – during the period of 5000 years the Lithuanian language has not mixed with any other *ide* or *non-ide* language.

3) Central hypothesis – if one takes a close look at the historic maps of the Balt nations, it will be very obvious that the Lithuanians (or their ancestors) have remained at the center of the Balt nations during the last few thousand years. The Balt nations that have settled around the Lithuanian nation

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² R. Volkaitė – Kulikauskienė et al (1987); Vilnius, „Mokslas“, p.3;

³ Vanda Daugirditė – Sruogienė (1990); Lietuvos Istorija [History of Lithuania]; Vilnius, „Vyturys“; p.18;

⁴ Marija Gimbutiene (1994); Senovinė simbolika lietuvių liaudies mene [Ancient symbolism in the folk art of Lithuania]; Vilnius, „Mintis“; p.9;

⁵ Vanda Daugirditė – Sruogienė (1990); Lietuvos Istorija [History of Lithuania]; Vilnius, „Vyturys“; p.19;

were occupied, destroyed, denationalized by the neighbouring countries, however, the Lithuanians have been scarcely affected by the turmoils;

4) Geographical hypothesis – the Lithuanians have historically settled in the “midsts of the forests”, near the rivers and lakes, where they managed by fishing and hunting. For a long period these settlers have remained at a distance and disconnected from the central locations, access roads, and have mainly communicated by ways of rivers and lakes.⁶

The Lithuanian language, no doubt, is the most important identifying trait of the nation and the most valuable asset of the nation. Lithuanians have long historical experience for defending their national language. During various historical developments and episodes, the Lithuanians have been notorious for nurturing the Lithuanian language which up to this day remains one of the most important elements of Lithuanian identity. The notorious “singing revolution” of the rebirth period of Lithuania in the end of the 20th century has shown how important the native language is to the Lithuanian nation.

It is important to mention just a few aspects of history of Lithuania that bring out the importance of the Lithuanian language:

- Lithuania experienced strong russification policy for 40 years (1864-1904). It was forbidden to use Latin letters, because Russian tsarist authorities forced to use Kirilica. Lithuanians resisted using Kirilica and secretly printed Lithuanian books in Latin alphabet.

- Later, during Soviet occupation, Lithuanian language had also experienced a lot of pressure: official documents had to be written in Russian language, all official signs (such as names of institutions or names of streets), had to be written in two languages – Lithuanian and Russian. All students had an obligation to study Russian language in schools from the first year. During that period lessons of Lithuanian and lessons of Russian language were at the same level of importance.

The main condition of the existence of the Lithuanian nation and the main reason why Lithuania kept its independence was Lithuanian language which was saved during the periods of the execution of the Russification policy. Native language helped people to experience Lithuanian identity.

2. The formal recognition of the various languages and their status in Lithuania / an overview of current debates

After Lithuania had recovered independence in 1990, the status of the Lithuanian language was very important for the nation. That is why Lithuanian language has a constitutional status in Lithuania: Article 14 of the Constitution of Lithuanian Republic states that „Lithuanian shall be the State language“[...].

Lithuanian language is the only official language in the Republic of Lithuania: it is required to use only Lithuanian language in the public life of the state. The official language guarantees the equality of the citizens of Lithuania in communication with the officials of the state administration and municipalities. The official language ensures an integration process of the society, creates the equal conditions for individuals to get and share the information. The constitutional status of Lithuanian language obliges to use Lithuanian language in a public life, however, during the informal events, unofficial meetings or in the events of the religious communities, every Lithuanian citizen or resident can use the language which is most comfortable for him/her. The civil servants must know Lithuanian language by the categories approved by the government. This requirement applies to all persons holding the administrative positions, irrespective of their mother-tongue, nor nationality. Thus, we have not only Constitutional provision, but also State Language Law, Law on Education, and various regulations, which embed different aspects of using official Language in the Country.

⁶ Antanas Klimas (2001); *Kalbos puošmenos ir paribos [Ornaments and peripheries of the Lithuanian language]*; Vilnius, p.5-6;

According to Article 11 of the State Language Law “the state guarantees the right for citizens of the Republic of Lithuania to acquire general, vocational, further and higher education in the state language. Terms of the acquisition of general education in the state language shall be guaranteed throughout the territory of the Republic of Lithuania.” [...]

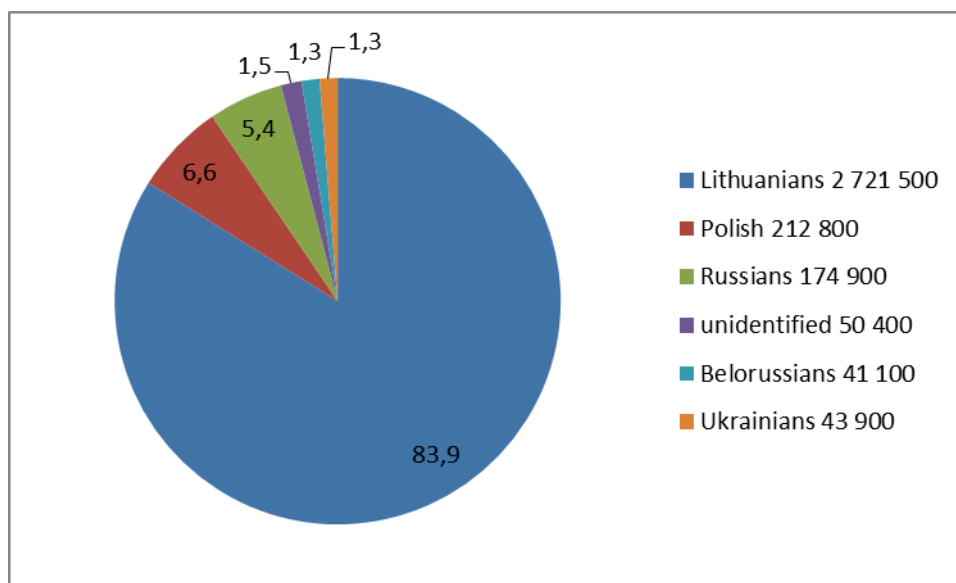
According to Article 12 of the State Language Law “All secondary schools must teach the state language by the order approved by the government.” [...]

According to Article 10 of the State Language Law “The official events of the state, local authorities, state agencies, and companies (such as sessions, congresses, meetings, conferences, etc.) must be organized in the official language. When the speaker uses another language, it must be translated into national language. If the international events are organized in the Republic of Lithuania, Lithuanian language is not obligatory.” [...]

Article 37 of the Constitution of Lithuanian Republic states that “citizens who belong to ethnic communities shall have the right to foster their language, culture and customs.” [...]

Article 45 of the Constitution of Lithuanian Republic states that ”ethnic communities of citizens shall independently administer the affairs of their ethnic culture, education, charity, and mutual assistance. The State shall render support to ethnic communities”. [...]

Department of Statistics gives such data about distribution of population by ethnicity in Lithuania.ⁱ



Lithuanian population by ethnicity in 2011

Lithuanian Republic recognizes and supports the efforts of minority using education always to keep the language and to strengthen the original ethnical identity. There are many political and legal documents, devoted to increase the role of the schools in implementing language policy:

1. Law on Education;
2. National Education strategy;
3. Convention for the Protection of Ethnic Minorities;
4. Program of Socialization of children and youth;
5. Regulation of education of Ethnic Minorities, etc.

Ethnic minority communities see opportunity to preserve and promote national identity developed in connection with their native language in school activities.

There is a concept of Saturday and Sunday schools of ethnic minorities' embedded in the educational system of Lithuania. This type of school is not state funded institution of formal education. There are Armenian, Belorussian, Greek, Latvian, Polish, Roma, Romanians, Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, German and Jewish Sunday (Saturday) schools. The students learn their native language, the history of their nation, religious and ethnic cultural issues. There is a legal basis for a language study of ethnic minorities in state funded schools as well.

Law on Education (Article 28.7) states that "in areas traditionally inhabited by a substantial number of ethnic minority, the municipality ensures learning the minority language according to the communities' request." [...]

Law on Education (Article 28.6) states that "the municipality must have an optimal network of the providers of the programs of the primary and secondary education, which ensures individuals' learning and their right to learn the national language." [...]

Article 30 of the Law on Education ensures "the right to learn the state, and mother-tongue language." [...] It also embeds following provisions:

- Education in the national language and a right to study Lithuanian language is guaranteed for every citizen of the Republic of Lithuania and the foreigner who has a permanent or temporary residence in Lithuania;
- The regulations of the general education school ensure teaching all the subjects or the part of the subjects in minority language and fostering the minority culture depending on the parents (guardians) and students' request. In these schools the subject of Lithuanian language is an integral part of the curriculum and devotes as much time for Lithuanian language as for the mother- tongue language teaching;
- State funded schools create conditions for national minority students to study their native language additionally if needed. This opportunity is provided if the expert of that particular language works in Lithuania;
- Ethnic minority person can learn the native language at institution which provides non-formal education programs or with another education provider;
- The children of the person, who is entitled to a permanent or temporary residence in Lithuania, are allowed to learn the national language, official language, and to learn their mother- tongue language if possible;
- All schools providing general education must ensure the knowledge of the state language in accordance with the general programs approved by the Minister of Education and Science.

The latter provision raised Polish minority dissatisfaction, because some of representatives of Polish minority argue that it is unrealistic to pass State language final exam. Some of representatives claim that Law on Education, which requires passing State language final exam for non-Lithuanian, is discriminatory and restricts the rights of the Polish. However, it should be noted that the law stipulates that no matter what ethnic group the student belongs, all students completing the school must take the Lithuanian language exam. From 2013 year the level of exam will be the same for Lithuanian-speakers and all non-Lithuanian- speakers.

There are 160 schools in Lithuania, which provide education in non-Lithuanian language. 100 schools are devoted for Polish students. 60 schools have classes for Russian-speakers. EU Human Rights Agency study found that 42 percent of Lithuanian ethnic minorities has a lack of the Lithuanian language proficiency, which reduces their ability to compete in the labor market. Therefore, recent

changes in Lithuanian legal regulation of education likely will improve Lithuanian language proficiency and will raise the ability of the members of ethnic minority groups to compete in the labor market.

<http://db1.stat.gov.lt/statbank/selectvarval/saveselections.asp?MainTable=M3010215&PLanguage=0&TableStyle=&Buttons=&PXSIId=3236&IQY=&TC=&ST=ST&rvar0=&rvar1=&rvar2=&rvar3=&rvar4=&rvar5=&rvar6=&rvar7=&rvar8=&rvar9=&rvar10=&rvar11=&rvar12=&rvar13=&rvar14=>