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Minority Response to Ethnic Democracy: Poles in
Lithuania after EU Accession

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Abstract

This article focuses on the evolution of Polish minority responses to Lithuanian minority policies in the post-EU-accession period. State-minority conflicts in Lithuania have not generated violence or minority radicalization, despite continuing discontent among members of the state's Polish minority (which constitutes Lithuania's largest ethnic minority population) and the failure of the Lithuanian state to resolve the causes of discontent. Employing Smooha's concept of ethnic democracy, the article addresses this puzzle through an ethnographic exploration of the views held by members of the Polish minority about the Lithuanian state's policies of nation-building. The findings reveal a diverse set of critical perceptions among Poles in Lithuania, which emphasize the ineffectiveness of state policies in addressing minority needs. However, a shared perception of threat from Russia, generated after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, helps to sustain the regime's stability and its strategy of stalling the resolution of minority concerns.

Keywords: Europeanization, Ethnic democracy, Minority rights.

1. Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, former communist states, pressured as they were by the international community and in particular the EU, embraced multiculturalism as a precept for minority governance. However, principles such as ‘the respect for and protection of national minorities,’¹ enshrined in the so-called Copenhagen criteria – a set of conditions for Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries to join the EU – have not been implemented in full (Kymlicka, 2007). Successful though they were for designing minority-rights-related legislation before accession, these criteria had little observable impact on greater minority accommodation in CEE countries (Sasse, 2005).

This is because, beside the path of democratization, the newly established CEE polities also engaged in the process of nation-building, aimed at creating a state of and for the nation (Brubaker, 1996; 2011). Nation-building processes varied across the post-communist CEE. Contemporary encyclopedias of ethnicity and nationalism distinguish ‘Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania’ (Agarin, 2015) – a group of states with national minority problems of a similar kind. Despite overthrowing the communist regime without sinking into bloody ethnic conflicts, these states have not fully managed to solve problems of their national minorities.

Democratization in the Baltic states has been called ‘a cat’s lick’ because the state in these countries has been ‘privatized’ by the titular nation, thereby marginalizing national minorities and excluding them from accessing public goods (Agarin, 2010). The idea of a nation-state has been enshrined in each country’s constitution and the language of the titular nation has been established as the state language. Estonia and Latvia have deprived a substantial part of their Russian-speaking population of citizenship, thereby turning them into *de facto* stateless persons (Agarin, 2015). However, each country failed to implement and protect minority rights in its own way.

In contrast to Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania from the beginning granted citizenship to all its minorities in the re-constituted state (Budrytė, 2005). This may explain why implementation of EU minority right principles in Lithuania has been more successful than in the neighboring Latvia (Duina and Miani, 2015: 535–552). However, while Estonia and Latvia struggled to accommodate their national minorities’ citizenship claims, Lithuania had problems with the implementation of minority rights. After Lithuania’s EU accession in 2004, minority policy became characterized by a strategy of stalling, which found its expression in a number of unsolved Polish minority-related problems.² It may be said that while the existing legal system in Lithuania guarantees the state’s minorities all the rights known to international law, some of these rights that are articulated in Lithuanian laws, (mostly related to linguistic issues), are not implemented fully.

Therefore, one could agree that ‘[t]he three Baltic states are democracies, but also incomplete or flawed nation-states with a poorly developed sense of political community. After more than two decades of independence, being Estonian, Latvian,

¹ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/ec/pdf/cop_en.pdf Accessed: 26.05.2017.

² The argument is developed in more detail in another paper, the writing of which is currently in progress.

and even Lithuanian remains a question of ethnic belonging – of *ethnos* rather than *demos* (Duvold and Berglund, 2013: 362). The three Baltic states, simultaneously pursuing divergent policies of democratization and nationalization, albeit each in its own way, could be called ‘ethnic democracies’ – a term coined by Sammy Smooha to describe political regimes where structured ethnic dominance is matched with democratic rights for all (Smooha and Jarve, 2005: 7). However, if all the three states conform to the major characteristics of an ethnic democracy, then the concept does not help us understand how one ethnic democracy differs from another, or how unique each ethnic democracy is.

Ethnic democracy faces conceptual problems similar to those described by the other famous concept: the ‘nationalizing state’. According to Brubaker, as a concept the nationalizing state ‘does not enable one to predict *how nationalizing* states will be or – more interestingly – *how* they will be *nationalizing*’ (Brubaker, 2011: 1807). Perhaps noticing a similar conceptual dead end, Smooha suggested that ethnic democracy not only helps in the normative analysis of political regimes in ethnically divided societies, but also ‘proves to be a sensitizing tool, at the hands of the investigator, for unravelling the desires, ideas, measures, constraints and institutional arrangements that install ethnic dominance and privilege into a democracy or into a democratizing regime’ (Smooha and Jarve, 2005: 22). In other words, this is a good tool for asking why and how certain democracies become ethnic.

The above use of the concept implies a certain methodological perspective. Critical use of the model could be facilitated by the anthropological perspective and ethnographic research methods. As argued by Charles Tilly, ‘if you believe [...] that how things happen is why they happen, then ethnography has great advantages over most other conventional social scientific methods as a way of getting at cause-effect relations’. It ‘engages the analyst in looking at social processes as they unfold rather than reasoning chiefly from either the conditions under which they occur or the outcomes that correlate with them’ (Tilly, 2007: 428).

Therefore, this study takes an ethnographic approach to analyzing Lithuanian ethnic democracy. The aim of this article is not to offer a typology of the Lithuanian political regime, but rather to study it critically. This is done by examining how ‘ordinary Poles’ accommodate (or not) to Lithuanian ethnic democracy. Studying ethnic democracy through its national minorities could help explain how this type of political regime functions and persists. The article addresses this issue by first establishing the theoretical and methodological setting of the inquiry. It then turns to explaining the current situation regarding state-minority relations in Lithuania. The second half of the article discusses the findings of the study and outlines how they imagine, explain, and negotiate the minority policies pursued by the state in the post-EU accession period.

2. Ethnic Democracy in Lithuania: A Bottom-up Approach

Building on the Israeli example, Smooha developed a model of ethnic democracy as an analytical tool for researching political systems in ethnically divided societies (Smooha, 2002). Later, the model was adjusted for use in the analysis of ethnically divided post-communist societies (Smooha and Jarve, 2005), including Estonia and Latvia (Pettai, 1998; Jarve, 2000; Diatchova, 2005). However, it has not been applied to Lithuania, although the latter has many features of an ethnic democracy.

Ethnic democracy is a type of a political regime marked by an 'inherent contradiction between two principles - civil and political rights for all and structural subordination of the minority to the majority' (Smooha and Jarve, 2005: 21-22). It is also characterized by two main features: ethnic ascendancy and a perceived threat. Ethnic ascendancy is the idea that an ethnic nation precedes the ethnic state, the state therefore serves the needs of a nation, and that nationality, not citizenship, is a necessary condition for membership in the nation (Smooha and Jarve, 2005: 32). In Lithuania, this is exemplified by the fact that the state's independence was not simply declared, but 'restored', suggesting the country was re-established as an inter-war nation-state. Another feature - the perceived threat - means that minorities are considered less desirable and/or a threat to the ethnic nation, and that this threat needs to be controlled by imposing various restrictive measures against the minority (Smooha and Jarve, 2005: 32). Lithuanian Poles make an interesting case here. The minority is seen as the main internal threat, while Russia continues to be seen as the main external threat to Lithuania. Such a paradox may be explained by the pro-Russian³ leadership of the Polish minority party - the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania - Christian Families' Alliance (EAPL-CFA). Nevertheless, despite various restrictions imposed on minorities, Lithuania is a democracy because of the ethnic majority's ideological or practical commitment to it (Smooha and Jarve, 2005: 33). In Lithuania's case, this commitment stems from the state's desire to belong to major Western political and economic institutions (the EU and NATO).

A few more factors that sustain ethno-democratic regimes are the following: 'a clear and continued numerical and political majority of the ethnic nation', 'continued threat perceived by the majority', 'non-interference of the "external homeland"', as well as 'non-intervention or even extension of legitimacy and support by the international community (foreign states and NGOs engaged in the protection of human and minority rights)' (Smooha and Jarve, 2005: 33). In Lithuania's case, ethnic Lithuanians constitute a clear majority in the country (by comparison, Poles and Russians comprise 6.6 and 5.8 per cent of the state's total population, respectively),⁴ Russia is further perceived as the main threat to the state's security, while the external homeland(s) - Poland and Russia - as well as international organizations such as EU and NATO do not interfere regarding the protection of minority rights.

Yet, as admitted by Smooha, '[t]he organization of the state on the basis of this

³ <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21645522-leader-ethnic-polish-party-tries-broaden-his-appeal-reaching-out-ethnic> Accessed: 26.05.2017.

⁴ Source: http://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/217110/Lietuvos_gyventojai_2011.pdf/8321a3c1-c8b9-4468-825c-52a7b753f281 . Accessed: 26.05.2017.

structural incompatibility constantly generates ambiguities, contradictions, tensions and conflicts, but not necessarily ethnic and political instability' (Smooha and Jarve, 2005: 22). Minorities do not receive equal treatment, are suspected of disloyalty, and may therefore face the imposition of various control measures. However, the state always leaves room for improving the minorities' position. Therefore, the question is how the aforementioned 'ambiguities, contradictions, tensions and conflicts' do not result in 'ethnic and political instability.'

The objective factors behind instability can vary in different countries, yet the phenomenon may also be caused by people's subjective perceptions. Scholars of the social psychology of minorities have emphasized the need to examine the effect of objective factors such as economic, social, and cultural conditions on members of minority groups (Tajfel, 1981). Similarly, anthropologists try to understand how people perceive themselves and how they behave in everyday life. Anthropologists of the state – a body of anthropological work in itself – have a particular interest in 'the cultural constitution of the state – that is, how people perceive the state, how their understanding is shaped by their particular location and intimate and embodied encounters with state processes and officials, and how the state manifests itself in their lives' (Sharma and Gupta, 2009: 11).

Anthropology and its research methods have contributed significantly to the study of nationalism (Eriksen, 1993; Brubaker, 2006). Relevant to this study is Gregory Feldman's study of the way the post-Soviet Estonia forged a new national imaginary that helped to legitimize the denial of citizenship to its Russian speakers (Feldman, 2010). However, the object of such anthropological inquiries is mostly state-led minority policy, not minorities' perceptions of these policies. But there are some exceptions. Concerning the Baltic states, Ammon Cheskin has shown how Latvian Russian speakers pursue strategies of integration through building a distinct identity of Latvian-Russians (Cheskin, 2012). Monika Frėjutė-Rakauskienė demonstrated the importance of Lithuanian Polish civic and political organizations in terms of minority mobilization and identity building through referencing and recalling the minority's collective memory (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, 2015). This study tries to fill this gap. Following the anthropologists of the state, it asks how Poles perceive the state and how these perceptions shape their response to the state's minority policies.

Consequently, if the state is to be understood as a phenomenon emanating from people's everyday perceptions and imagination, then the state should be looked for among its subjects. In other words, the state understood as a category of cognition should be grasped as an effect produced on people and experienced by them. The anthropologist Timothy Mitchell proposed that the key clue to the state's nature is its elusiveness, and suggested that the state should be studied as a structural effect (Mitchell, 1991: 77). The effect would mean that the state is perceived as an autonomous reality, existing beside society and governing it. If this distinction is accepted as self-evident, the state functions smoothly. Yet, the state can also become visible through its negative effects; i.e., when it is not able or not willing to govern its subjects (e.g. through the non-decisions the Lithuanian state makes about minority governance).

3. Analyzing Minority Governance from Below

The present study was facilitated by several methods: historical context analysis – to reconstruct the history of Polish-Lithuanian relations and the Polish minority's governance in an independent Lithuanian state –; and semi-structured and unstructured interview guides and participant observation methods for analyzing the nation state from the minority's point of view. Fieldwork took place on six occasions at four different sites: Eišiškės and Šalčininkai (two predominantly Polish speaking towns in the southeast of the country), Vilnius, and Rukla (a military town in central Lithuania). The first occasion was 6 January, 2016 in Eišiškės, when five interviews were undertaken: four semi-structured interviews with local public officers, pedagogues, and one with randomly met youngsters. The rest of the fieldwork lasted from 31 March, 2016 until 5 May, 2016. During this period five participant observations were carried out: four at events organized by the Polish Discussion Club (PDC) – a non-political alternative to the Polish minority party presenting itself as a platform for the exchange of ideas and discussions for a Polish and a Lithuanian audience,⁵ and one at the public celebration of the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad Day (30 March) in Vilnius.

In addition, 24 semi-structured and two unstructured interviews were made in total: 15 interviews with Polish conscripts serving in Rukla; two interviews/conversations with three 'ordinary' Poles in Šalčininkai and Vilnius, nine interviews with minority politicians, experts, a journalist, businessmen, and members of cultural and paramilitary organizations. Participants were mostly recruited using a snowball sampling strategy. The sites were chosen for several reasons. Lithuanian Poles live in both the center and the periphery of the country, yet the cultural, political and economic life of the minority members differs in these locations. Major minority-related institutions, organizations, events, and celebrations take place in Vilnius, the capital city. However, in the periphery one can get a better understanding of the community's more down-to-earth life.

Different categories of people were chosen for this study, primarily for the purpose of addressing a diverse sample. Despite their different social backgrounds, most of the interviewees (except for the conscripts) are active members of the Polish community. However, some people, mostly associated with a more conservative part of the Polish community, were reluctant to participate in the study. I encountered some of them indirectly, during several discussions of the PDC, but despite this, this segment of the Polish minority remains under-represented in this research.

The interview guides were organized around three main thematic blocks: 1) questions related to personal and symbolic issues (i.e., the Lithuanianization of personal names and possible negative experiences due to discrimination on ethnic grounds); 2) institutional issues (i.e., those relating to Polish schools and conscription); and 3) changes in state-minority relations through different periods (i.e., the minority situation during the Soviet regime and afterwards during independence). However, only the responses of interviewees were expressed an interest in matters relating to the

⁵ https://www.facebook.com/pages/Polski-Klub-Dyskusyjny-Lenk%C5%B3-Diskusij%C5%B3Klubas/359810477515105?sk=info&tab=page_info Accessed: 26.05.2017.

Polish community were analyzed. Some interviewees called themselves Poles but later said they were not very interested in Polish matters. This was the case with the majority of the Polish soldiers interviewed for this study.

Data were analyzed along the three broad categories identified after the first review of materials: the minority's perception of the state's policies; individual and group self-perceptions in terms of strategies for improvement of the community's position *vis-à-vis* the state; and perceived threats to the community. I analyzed these categories in several ways. First, I looked 'inside' each category and tried to define it through the commonalities in the category-related answers of my interviewees. Then I conducted a meta-analysis, treating these three perceptions as interrelated: the way the minority members see the state's actions allows one to analyze how these members see themselves, their peers, and their collective future *vis-à-vis* the state; this, as well as the perceived threats to the community, informs the strategies for improving the minority's position.

4. The Governorless Minority

The Lithuanian Polish political scientist Marijusz Antonowicz distinguished three stages of Lithuanian politicians' attitudes towards the state's national minorities after independence (Antonowicz, 2015). During the first stage (from 1988 to 1996), which M. Antonowicz has called 'pacification', the state's elite tried to pacify minorities so as to win their support for state independence. During the second stage (from 1998 to 2004) called 'co-optation' minority rights were addressed with careful attention, because as a candidate state Lithuania wanted to conform to the norms and standards of the EU and NATO. When membership had been acquired, minority matters started receiving less attention or were ignored. Therefore, the third stage is characterized by disregard. However, the Lithuanian political elite rediscovered minorities after 2014 when Russia seized Crimea, allegedly to protect its kinsmen from what the Russian political elite often calls.

After Lithuania joined the EU, the state's elite started disregarding one set of minority-related problems repeatedly raised by Poles. These problems include the shutdown of Polish schools; the unification of the Lithuanian language matura exam for all students irrespective of what school – Lithuanian or minority – they attend; the increase in the number of subjects taught in Lithuanian at minority schools; and the possibility to write anthroponyms in Lithuanian passports in their original (Polish) form.

The first two problems illustrate the elite's unilateral decision-making style regarding minority problems. State authorities explained that minority schools were shut down because of the shrinking number of students. These reforms were presented as general in character, and therefore as having nothing to do with national minorities. It was said that these reforms were intended to help foster national minorities' integration into Lithuanian society. However, both decisions were passed

without discussion with members of the Polish minority, and disregarding the arguments they presented at numerous protests against the reform.⁶

The third cluster of problems relates to the problematic enactment of minority rights and exemplifies the state elite's strategy of stalling with respect to ensuring minority rights in Lithuania. The right to write one's name in Polish in the Lithuanian passport has been debated for years among Lithuanian politicians. However, opponents of the idea say that such a law would contradict the Law on the State (Lithuanian) Language. Linguistic problems could have been solved by passing the Law on Ethnic minorities which existed in Lithuania until 2010, but which has been defunct since. No new law has yet been adopted due to endless discussions in parliament. Thus, decisions that are important for Poles are being stalled, and the legal vacuum in Lithuania's ethnic minority rights protection continues (Vasilevich, 2013).

However, Russia's annexation of Crimea changed the security environment in the Baltic region. It was feared that Russia could attempt to destabilize the situation in Lithuania by acting 'on behalf' of the former state's minorities: Russians, and also Russified Poles. Doubts about minorities' loyalty arose and strengthened when leaders of the Polish minority party expressed criticism about the Maidan revolution⁷ and indicated their sympathies towards Russia (see: Picture 1), as well as when it became known that Lithuanian minorities, including Poles, receive information mostly from Russian TV channels⁸ and thus can be vulnerable to Russian propaganda. However, this had no effect on the practice of stalling the resolution of minority problems, and the fact that the major minority-related problems listed above remain unresolved only supports this premise.



Picture 1. EAPL-CFA's chairman Waldemar Tomaszewski at the Victory Day parade (9 May) in Vilnius, 2014 (© Delfi/Tomas Vinickas).⁹

⁶ <http://en.efhr.eu/2011/11/10/appeal-of-the-forum-of-parents-from-the-polish-schools-in-lithuania>

Accessed: 26.05.2017.

Accessed: 26.05.2017.

⁷ <http://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/politika/v-tomasevskis-kritikuoja-vakaru-remiama-ukrainos-vyriausybe-618568>

Accessed: 26.05.2017.

⁸ <http://pl.delfi.lt/aktualia/litwa/wiekszosc-osob-mniejszosci-narodowych-o-ukrainie-dowiaduje-sie-z-rosyjskiej-telewizji.d?id=66838524> . Accessed: 26.05.2017.

⁹ Source: <http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/v-tomasevskis-buvo-sukritikuotas-lenkijoje.d?id=65197831>

Accessed: 26.05.2017. EAPL-CFA's leader W. Tomaszewski is seen wearing

5. The State Effect in Minority Education and the Enactment of Minority Rights

One of the most frequently recurring topics during the interviews was education. The topic is highly politicized in Lithuania, and it is therefore no surprise that some of the Polish pedagogues declined to be interviewed. Among those who agreed was the principal of a Polish gymnasium in Vilnius. Asked to describe the state's education policy in general, and minority education policy in particular, he first remarked that 'there is no [education] policy in Lithuania'. Yet he quickly specified that the state's education policy has been undergoing reform for several years already, and that this reform is inconsistent. From the topic of the state's education policy in general we slowly moved on to the topic of minority education. According to the interviewee, the education of minorities requires specific attention and additional resources due to its nature. Therefore, this segment of education in Lithuania is perceived as an undesirable burden: 'On the one hand, attention is paid when we say that national minorities are something we value; however, the real policy throughout the period of different governments since the state's independence has been that it would be better if there were no minorities in the country. [...] This makes us sad as Poles and as pedagogues'. The principal provided several examples of how the state attempts to shake off this burden:

'For example, if we look at the preparation of textbooks... the government washes its hands of it. It gives some money through the school voucher, 20 per cent approximately, yet a textbook sometimes costs three to five times more than this. [...] In the case of primary and lower secondary schools, these textbooks are still provided. In the secondary school - not anymore, which means that the state has disregarded this duty and the last textbook was prepared, perhaps... in nineteen-ninety-something.'

Minority education, indeed, was seen not only as a burden, but also as something not worth paying proper attention to. The principal regretted that although the state guarantees and finances education in the minority's mother tongue, it later pays no attention to the results of this: 'For twelve years it [the state] finances the teaching of this thing, yet afterwards it shows no interest in the results of this education'. He gave another example of the state's disregard for minority issues. According to the new version of the Law on Education, changed in 2011, exams in the mother tongue became optional. However, after Poles organized protests against these amendments, changes were made, establishing these exams as compulsory if the minority's school council so decided.

the Ribbon of Saint George (black-orange-black) - a military and patriotic symbol associated with Russian nationalism and pro-Russia separatists in Ukraine - during the Victory Day (9 May) parade in Vilnius to mark the capitulation of Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War. The second white-red ribbon represents the Polish flag.

To clarify, the core idea behind the changes in the Law on Education was to standardize teaching and examination practices in the Lithuanian language for students of both minorities and the majority. In practice, these changes meant that minority students would need to take more subjects taught in Lithuanian. The principal was not against teaching more things in Lithuanian. Yet, as a pedagogue and as a Pole, he was concerned that the state's initiative was incoherent, because responsible institutions could not prepare the methodology for teaching Poles more things in Lithuanian without thereby worsening the conditions of their education in the mother tongue.

‘In many cases, a child from a Polish or Russian family does not have a basic knowledge of Lithuanian [...] no one talks about the methodology for teaching this minority child Lithuanian. [...] Yet, in order for this program to be realized, you need to take these hours from someone. [...] So at whose expense shall it be? The Polish language again? Well, that would not be good.’

The reckless nature of the decision-making process in Lithuania was emphasized by another expert interviewee – a Lithuanian Polish blogger who writes about various issues related to the lives of minorities who is also a lawyer and one of the founders of the PDC. He claimed that the way this decision was implemented shows the state's lack of legal culture. The respondent did not exclude the possibility of a nationalistic ‘allergy’ to the Polish language as the real reason behind the reform. However, he, as well as the principal, said that the majority of Poles would not have minded these reforms if a proper transition period (e.g. 8 years) had been defined. In fact, even the two-year period which the government finally provided was unlawful. A two-year transition period was established by an arbitrary decision by the Minister of Education after realizing that one year was not enough for minority students to prepare for the changes. The blogger explained such arbitrary and thus unlawful decisions by noting the politicians' wish to demonstrate quick results and perhaps by the operating methods of the state's previous government. My interviewee recalled that, although discussions about educational reform had been going on for quite a long time, the reforms were made all of a sudden, ignoring suggestions from the opposition, which included EAPL-CFA. ‘First do and then look at what comes after’ – that was the guiding principle behind the reform-oriented decisions, according to the blogger. Thus, my two interviewees' comments on the hasty changes in minority education show an attempt to rationalize the state's actions by interpreting them in the context of the state's larger problems; i.e., the lack of legal culture and of the ability to plan strategically.

My other interviewees had less empathetic views about the state's educational policies. In principle, none of them minded the idea of exam standardization but all agreed it was done recklessly. One Lithuanian Polish politician described the condition of minority education as ‘good’, yet she said she would have become furious if someone had told her to take the standardized Lithuanian language exam during her last years at school. However, some pondered that perhaps such decisions spring from Lithuanian politicians' antipathy to Poles. During our conversation, a Šalčininkai-based businessman recalled the Soviet times at school, and said that he

and his classmates had encountered no obstacles to studying in Polish. He added that the situation in schools had deteriorated during the last 25 years. 'If they wanted to do it [standardization], why didn't they do it earlier, at the beginning of our independence?', he questioned. To sum up, none of my interviewees were against reforms in minority education. They were concerned instead about the way the state implemented them.

Other respondents perceived other state minority policies similarly. During my field trip to Vilnius, I undertook an interview with a third expert, a politician from EAPL-CFA and vice-president of the biggest Polish NGO, the Association of Poles in Lithuania. During the period when EAPL-CFA was active in government, this interviewee held a high position in the state's Ministry of Culture. At that time, the Ministry was the main institution implementing the state's national minority policy.¹⁰ My interviewee took a lead role in preparing the Law on Ethnic Minorities. However, when the project was finished, it got stuck within the government. As he explained, the bill was not passed due to a lack of political will and disagreements about what linguistic rights the law should provide for Poles. His example shows that there may be attempts to integrate Poles politically, yet such attempts have limits when it comes to structural changes (i.e. ensuring the minority some linguistic rights) in the Lithuanian polity.

To sum up, the state's minority policies are seen among the Poles interviewed in this study as lacking coherence, strategic planning, and genuine interest; moreover, as often based on *ad hoc* decisions and sometimes as hypocritical, ill-disposed, and nationalist. Respondents interpreted the state's actions as members of a specific minority group. However, they also explained it from their professional perspectives (as pedagogues, lawyers and politicians). Nonetheless, and speaking in terms of a Mitchellian state-effect, the enactment of minority rights in Lithuania among my interviewees was seen as ineffective, meaning that the state neither solves problems nor creates new ones. A further example illustrates this limbo. During the interview with the Polish blogger we touched upon another long-unresolved problem of Lithuanian Poles; namely, restrictions on bilingual street signs in the Polish-speaking regions. He gave an example of how the state's non-decisions with respect to minority problem resolution freezes these problems, as well as state-minority relations:

'There was the Law on Ethnic Minorities that kind of allowed [bilingual street names] and kind of didn't, there was room for interpretation, but in 2010 the Law ceased functioning. The new law has not been passed since all the problems have started... because since then it became clear that they [Polish street names] had become illegal, right? Because till then [...] the state institutions looked at these issues indulgently. When these problems appeared, the confrontation increased...because I wouldn't say that till then there had been any serious confrontation between Poles and Lithuanians due to unsolved problems, but, on the other hand, there had been no interference in [the minority's] internal affairs.... the regions were left to be ruled by Tomaszewski

¹⁰ In 2010, the state's Department of National Minorities and Lithuanians Living Abroad was reorganized. Some of its responsibilities concerning national minorities were transferred to the Ministry of Culture. The Department was reopened in 2016.

[...] the education reform was constantly postponed... the plates were left hanging... legal or not – there had been some sluggish discussion about that; however, no one was doing anything, until this wave of activities started – reforms in education started, the minority law expired, and so forth – and thus suddenly all the problems accumulated.’

Yet it should also be noted that the perceived ineffectiveness of the state does not equate to its rejection. On the contrary, all the interviewees were concerned about the state’s minority policies in particular, but also about the way decisions are passed in the country in general. At the same time, interviewees wished the state would do more to ensure minority rights. Such expectations can thus be interpreted as a kind of affirmation of the state. Nor is this ineffectiveness only perceived among Lithuanian Poles. Politicians and NGOs representing the interests of the Lithuanian-Russian minority expressed similar concerns about plans to restructure the network of Russian-language schools. These plans were criticized for being under-prepared and under-discussed with members of the minority.¹¹ However, compared to Lithuanian Russians, the Lithuanian-Polish minority is more numerous, more consolidated and better politically organized. Thus, ethnic conflict with Lithuanian Poles is more probable than conflict with Lithuanian Russians. Therefore, the next question is: how do Poles react to the state’s ineffectiveness at managing their problems?

6. *Negotiating Ethnic Democracy*

My fieldwork started with an assumption that ethnic conflict in Lithuania is prevented and ethnic democracy sustained by the fragmentation of the Polish minority in terms of strategies for negotiating their position within the state. Study results show that these expectations are valid to a certain point. Not only did my interviewees have different explanations for the state’s ambiguous governance, but they also used different strategies to negotiate this governance and their minority position. However, not all the strategies are (in)effective in the same way.

The first observable strategy was a strategy of assimilation. During a field-trip to Rukla, one Polish volunteer soldier and long-term rifleman complained about ‘Polish movements’, probably referring to EAPL-CFA. According to this volunteer, ‘due to their standing out, the nationality of the “Pole” becomes like a swearword. They put themselves on the front lines and then complain. One should first think about what one is doing’. One explanation for this hostility towards Poles is that people simply do not want to be associated with groups of a lower status. A few more examples of such (in)voluntary assimilation support this premise. Another soldier who was interviewed wanted to join the military police, but, as he told me, for this he would need to Lithuanianize his name. During my fieldwork in Eišiškės, a few Polish youngsters told me that Poles tend to Lithuanianize their names and surnames ‘just to avoid problems’ or in order to get desired jobs. However, not everyone opts out this way.

¹¹ <http://www.diena.lt/naujienos/vilnius/miesto-pulsas/lietuvos-rusai-sunerimo-del-planu-reorganizuoti-rusiskas-svietimo-istaigas-739155>. Accessed: 19.10.2017.

Many Poles are proud of their origin; they cherish and celebrate it. The dozens of participants marching proudly in the streets of Vilnius during the parade for the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad Day which I observed in May during my fieldwork suggest that Poles constitute a viable and visible community. The celebration was organized by the state's biggest Polish NGO – the Association of Poles in Lithuania – and marked 'the 225th anniversary of the 3 May Constitutional¹² declaration, and the 1050th anniversary of the Baptism of Poland.'¹³

Among those who choose the second strategy – active engagement in their community matters – are Poles of two kinds: those who support, and those who oppose the Polish minority party. Supporters understand participation in politics in a narrow sense and are mostly interested in their minority matters (Janušauskienė, 2015). The opposition, in contrast, sees the enactment of the minority as a problem of national significance.

However, before starting to analyze minority accommodation strategies, it needs to be said that the two groups are not necessarily homogeneous. Recently, EAPL-CFA policies were denounced from within the part of the Polish community typically associated with the party, namely Polish pedagogues. In an open letter to the Polish president, the board of one Polish school in Vilnius declared that '[i]t would be unreasonable to require that the Lithuanian side take care of the interests of the Polish community if Poles and their representatives from EAPL-CFA do not do it themselves and sometimes even cause damage to the Polish minority.'¹⁴ Similarly, there are different opinions among those Poles who oppose EAPL-CFA. One of my interviewees – a member of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, a state-supported non-profit paramilitary organization – told me he votes for EAPL-CFA despite knowing that the party is pro-Russian. Supporting the Polish party is like supporting a local football club. 'You know it will never play in the top league, but you support it anyway. What is important is to have your team playing.' However, as I mentioned in the methodological part of this study, the Poles who advocate the protection of their rights within the framework of the Polish minority party remain underrepresented in this inquiry. Therefore, I here focus on those interviewees who stand in opposition to EAPL-CFA.

This 'opposition' is mostly affiliated with the liberal-minded Poles organized around the PDC – a non-political initiative, which, as the Polish blogger told me, was born out of dissatisfaction with EAPL-CFA and its leadership:

'The main idea was to show that there are differently thinking people among Lithuanian Poles, to start dialogue first among the Poles themselves, so that they would start to communicate and to look for possibilities to achieve their aims, [...] and first and foremost to nurture new leaders... that is to say, opinion leaders... because, well.. the situation in the whole community is being associated with a single man, with Tomaszewski [EAPL-CFA'S chairman] which

¹²The Constitution of 3 May was adopted by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth Parliament in 1791.

¹³<http://media.elfhr.eu/2016/05/02/grand-celebration-polish-diaspora-poles-abroad-day-vilnius/>. Accessed: 26.05.2017.

¹⁴Source: <http://zw.lt/wilno-wilenszczyzna/rada-szkoly-im-lelewela-obroncy-funduja-kolejna-porcje-klamstwa/>. Accessed: 15.10.2017.

is... incorrect and bad in the sense that... of course he has support, huge support, but it is far from one hundred per cent... well, in fact... maybe his support reaches fifty to sixty per cent...'

Creating a non-political alternative to the policies of the conflict-oriented EAPL-CFA was not the only reason for establishing the club. It was also meant to provide a venue for a dialogue between Poles and Lithuanians (see: Picture 2). Lithuanian politicians, intellectuals, and political analysts participated in all PDC's events that I had a chance to attend during my fieldwork. Based on participant observations and interviews conducted for this inquiry, it can be said that from the Lithuanian Poles' perspective, the argument for closer cooperation between Poles and Lithuanians is based on shared history and threats.



Picture 2. Members of the Polish Discussion Club at the 11 March parade that celebrates the Day of the Restoration of the Independence of Lithuania, Vilnius, 2015 (© A. Radčenko).¹⁵

Several events I attended during my fieldwork support this argument. One of PDC's events I attended was a presentation of a newly translated book (into Lithuanian) written by Józef Mackiewicz – a famous Vilnius-born Polish writer, whose figure provides a model for the Polish-Lithuanian identity. Mackiewicz identified with *krajowcy* – a group of twentieth century pre-war Polish speaking intelligentsia, following the political tradition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As a fierce anti-communist, he advocated stronger cooperation between Poles and Lithuanians to resist the Soviets.

¹⁵ Source: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/nepriklausomybes-dienos-eitynese-ir-patriotiskainusiteike-lietuvos-lenkai-56-490300>. Accessed: 19.10.2017 Members of the Polish Discussion Club are seen participating at a parade commemorating the restoration of Lithuania's independence from the Soviet Union on 11 March, 1990. 'Wolnosc = Laisvė' means 'Freedom' in Polish and Lithuanian, respectively. Participants are seen holding Ukrainian, Polish and Lithuanian flags.

Another event was called 'From the Constitution of May 3 to NATO's Warsaw summit'.¹⁶ Here, members of the PDC together with Lithuanian security experts from Lithuania and Poland discussed common security concerns as well as the bilateral relations of Lithuania and Poland. During the discussion, the political scientist M. Antonowicz reminded listeners that more than 200 years ago, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth adopted the first modern constitution in Europe. However, Russia and the state's other neighbors met these constitutional reforms with hostility. The state was partitioned and the reforms were lost. The speaker said that the two nations face challenges similar to those posed by Tsarist Russia several hundred years ago, and back then, like today, these challenges could be met only if the two states stand together. These events demonstrate how the emphasis on common history serves as an argument for engaging the Lithuanian majority in a common dialogue and breaking away from the minority's marginal position, and thus improving the minority's situation in the country.

Some of the interviewees had similar arguments. During our conversation, the aforementioned Polish rifleman explained that his reason for joining the Rifleman's Union was Russia's attack on Ukraine. He, too, sympathized with *krajowcy* and said that the Russian threat could be contained only if both nations start to cooperate the way they used to when both formed a single state. Interviewees who advocated the protection of minority rights within other Lithuanian parties held somewhat similar positions, but in their case the rationale for tighter cooperation was discontent with the activities pursued by Lithuanian politicians. During my visit to Vilnius, I interviewed two Polish politicians from a Lithuanian liberal party. Asked what brought them into politics, the first politician said it was EAPL-CFA's detrimental dominance in terms of the political representation of Lithuanian Poles. As explained by the interviewee, this became possible due to Lithuanian politicians' disregard for minority matters. The second politician expressed a somewhat similar position, saying that she missed the progress that the country's other political parties, including EAPL-CFA, were not able to deliver. With respect to both respondents, the strategy of advocating for minority rights within the framework of a Lithuanian party can be seen as rooted in the expression of Lithuanian-Polish identity. This identity could explain the warm feelings towards Lithuanians and dissatisfaction with the EAPL-CFA's pro-Russian stance. During our conversation, the first politician told me that she comes from a centuries-old Polish-Lithuanian noble family, while the second politician, at the end of our interview, said 'What kind of Pole am I? I don't even speak proper Polish.'

The quote highlights another problem as well as a strategy for improving the minority's position in the country: strengthening the minority culture among the Poles. This was the main mission of the director of a Polish theater in Vilnius. As he put it during our conversation, he was trying to 'bring culture to the masses.' Similarly, the principal of a Polish school said that the state should provide a means of positive discrimination to strengthen the education of Poles in their mother tongue. He said that the fears about minority schools nurturing disloyal citizens are nonsense and assured me that his school educates Polish-speaking Lithuanian patriots. A recent large-scale study of Lithuanian Polish identity supports such a conclusion: Lithuanian

¹⁶ <http://www.bernardinai.lt/straipsnis/2016-05-05-nuo-geguzes-3-d-konstitucijos-iki-nato-virusiniu-susitikimo-varsuvoje/143979> . Accessed: 15.10.2017.

Poles have a strong feeling of regional (Vilnius-based) and national belonging (to Lithuania) (Matulionis et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, strengthening the minority's cultural position is not presented as a goal in and of itself. As mentioned earlier, during our discussion on minority education the principal said that teaching more subjects in Lithuanian should not mean hampering Poles' education in their mother tongue. This was important because, as he explained, 'we have a Russification problem, because Russian culture had a strong influence over Poles as there was no Polish intelligentsia [after WWII]. Moreover, the two languages are very similar. On the other hand, we do nothing to reduce the amount of Russian propaganda...' He argued that Lithuanians should help Poles, who were highly Russified during the Soviet period (Stravinskienė, 2010), to strengthen their own culture. This would make them more resilient to Russian propaganda, which, in turn, would contribute to the greater security of the state.

Thus, the strategy of advocating for an improvement in the cultural position of Poles is linked to a strategy of presenting Polish problems as shared problems, and thereby encouraging the Lithuanian majority to take an active stance in the protection of minority rights. Emphasizing common threats serves to strengthen the minority's culture, and *vice versa*: strengthening Polish culture is understood to strengthen Lithuania's national security. Moreover, it seems that this twofold strategy works. After years of active lobbying, members of the PDC have finally convinced Lithuanian politicians to guarantee the retransmission of Polish TV channels in the southeastern part of the country. This, as claimed by the club members, will give Poles an opportunity to receive undistorted information from a friendly, pro-European country, which, in turn, will help to counter Russian propaganda among Lithuanian Poles and prevent their Russification.

Considering what has been said up to this point, the study's starting assumption about the existence of a variety of strategies for improving the minority situation and about the role this variety of strategies plays in sustaining the Lithuanian ethno-democratic regime seems to be valid. However, the perception of common threats seem to be another factor that is sustaining peaceful state-minority relations in Lithuania. By nature, this factor distinguishes Lithuania from the other two Baltic states, where national threats are not perceived as common.¹⁷ The Lithuanian Poles described in this study are comparable to those Russian-speakers in Latvia and Estonia who have developed a distinct local Russian identity and identify themselves with a pro-European Latvian and Estonian demos (Cheskin, 2012; Nielsen and Paabo, 2015).

The use of this strategy supports Smooha's argument that perceived threats may sustain ethnic democracy, but the mechanism is different from that described by Smooha. According to the former author, an ethnic democracy emerges when minorities are perceived as a threat to the (nation) state. Such a definition fits the situation in Lithuania, where Lithuanians sees Poles as pro-Russian and potentially disloyal. Recently, Lithuanian intelligence services have warned that '[g]ranting of exclusive rights [linguistic rights] to the Polish community would pave way for Russia

¹⁷ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/24/ethnic-russians-in-some-former-soviet-republics-feel-a-close-connection-to-russia/>. Accessed: 16.10.2017.

and its groups of influence to demand analogous rights and, ultimately, an exclusive status for Russian communities in all Baltic states.’¹⁸ However, some Poles agree that the threat of Russia’s meddling in Lithuania is real and suggest that the two nations cooperate against it. Similarly, the perceived threat then becomes an argument for different things. For Lithuanians, EAPL-CFA’s pro-Russian outlook is a reason to suspect and/or disregard Poles, while for Lithuanian Poles it is an argument for a more effective state: one that protects the rights of national minorities. Thus, such a situation could be called a conflict without response. Moreover, it seems that this strategy of emphasizing common threats works: Poles have managed to attract the attention of the Lithuanian majority to Polish problems and engage them in dialogue, and, as a result, Poles will be able to watch several Polish TV channels in Lithuania.¹⁹ However, these are small victories that have not brought structural changes in state-minority relations, as none of the aforementioned Polish problems have been solved so far.

Yet how are we to explain such a convergence of different perceptions of threat? Henri Tajfel argued that minorities accept the existing *status quo* in national minority-majority relations if the system that defines these relations among minority members is perceived as legitimate, stable, and permeable (Tajfel, 1981). In their study of the ethnolinguistic vitality of ethnic groups in the Baltic countries, Zabrodskaja and Ehala found that the perceived legitimacy of power relations among national minorities in Baltic states is lowest among Latvian Russians, Estonian Russians, and Lithuanian Russians and Poles in descending order (Zabrodskaja and Ehala, 2013). However, Lithuanians’ distrust of Lithuanian Poles is greater than Lithuanian Poles’ distrust of Lithuanians. According to Zabrodskaja and Ehala, the most significant intergroup discordance may be observed between the Russian speakers in Latvia towards Latvians, and Lithuanians towards Lithuanian Poles. ‘Given the small size of the Polish community and its negative discordance in relation to the Lithuanians, this [...] is somewhat unexpected and probably reflects the sensitivity of Lithuanians to the problems of Lithuanian territorial integrity (in relation to Poland)’ (Zabrodskaja and Ehala, 2013: 72). These results are surprising because Lithuanian Poles ‘considered themselves very close to Lithuanians in culture, closer than to Russians’. Concerned about Russification and dissatisfied with EAPL-CFA’s pro-Russian leadership, Lithuanian Poles perceive the Russian threat as common and therefore as legitimate. On the other hand, the situation that the Lithuanian state does not help the Poles might be perceived as a situation in which the state does not actively try to impair their position either.

Thus, it can be said that various (mis)perceptions of interests create room for negotiation and give Poles hope that their position can be reformed. This room is expanded by self-perceptions: Lithuanians want to see their country as progressive and democratic, and therefore refrain from impairing minority rights in the country. Lithuanian Poles, in contrast to most Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia, are autochthons who are aware of their ethnic origins and cherish them.

¹⁸ <http://bnn-news.com/lithuanian-intelligence-singles-out-six-major-threats-to-national-security-163571> . Accessed: 19.10.2017.

¹⁹ https://www.baltictimes.com/polish_tv_channels_to_be_broadcast_in_southeastern_lithuania_to_off_set_russian_propaganda . Accessed: 15.10.2017.

Moreover, Poles see the two nations as having much in common: the same religion, history, and historical threats. However, the same cannot be said about Lithuanians, whose distrust of Poles is deeply rooted in a shared history (the interwar Polish occupation of Vilnius) and is reproduced by the state's education system (Vyšniauskas and Baltrušaitytė, 2015). Nevertheless, the different perceptions of 'the other' do not prevent both sides from interpreting threats similarly.

7. Conclusion

This ethnographic study has explored why and how major tensions in majority-minority relations have been avoided in post-EU-accession Lithuanian ethnic democracy by looking at how Lithuanian Poles accommodate to their governance. Overall findings support a twofold answer: majority-minority tensions were prevented because, after 2004, Lithuanian governments deployed a strategy of stalling the protection of Polish minority rights. The strategy allowed further discussion, with no clear resolution. The study showed that Lithuanian Poles are aware of such a strategy, and, speaking in terms of a Mitchellian state-effect, see the Lithuanian state as ineffective at protecting their rights. However, the state's ineffectiveness is interpreted and negotiated in different ways (a path of assimilation, organizing politically around the minority party, or seeking dialogue with the Lithuanian majority). Together with Lithuanian state's stalling strategy, this variety of imaginings and strategies for negotiating the minority's position in the country create another explanation for the stability of ethnic democracy in Lithuania. Although divided and invested with little power, Lithuanian Poles accommodate to the existing *status quo* of power relations by drawing the majority's attention to a common historical Lithuanian-Polish identity, a shared Russian threat, and by aiming to engage the Lithuanian majority in dialogue about improving their rights. In terms of factors that help to sustain ethnic democracy, the perceived common threat distinguishes Lithuania from its two Baltic neighbors. The study also demonstrates that, from a micro perspective, ethnic democracy can be a useful tool in the critical analysis of ethnically divided regimes in post-communist Europe.

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