

KRZYSZTOF TARKA
Opole

LITHUANIANS IN THE THIRD REPUBLIC OF POLAND

The process of political transformation initiated in Poland in 1989 was of great significance for national minorities. In the new post-1989 reality, old problems in relations between the majority and minorities did not disappear automatically. In fact, new problems emerged. In addition, both parties did not forget about old disputes and quarrels. National minorities, however, were finally able to make their voice be heard. In the new situation, minorities became more active. Some set up new organisations and started to publish their magazines. They have also been granted regular access to public radio and television.

None of the general censuses conducted in the communist People's Republic of Poland included a question about national affiliation or native language. The lack of reliable statistical data on national groups made it difficult to determine the precise number of Lithuanians (and other national minorities) and thus changes in their population in Poland. Estimates should be treated with caution if only because of huge discrepancies between them. The estimates were not based on self-determination of an individual, which should be decisive, but on such criteria as language, origin, religion and surname. Those criteria produced unreliable data and thus the estimated population size of national minorities was imprecise.

In the 1990s, according to activists of the Lithuanian minority, approximately 20 to 25 thousand people of national Lithuanian affiliation lived in Poland, including 10 to 12 thousand living in the former Suwalskie voivodship (till 1998). The Lithuanian population has long been concentrated in a small area in the north-eastern part of the historical Suwałki Region, mainly in the commune¹ of Puńsk (where, according to old estimates, Lithuanians were supposed to constitute 80% of the population), in rural communes of Sejny (estimated 40% of the population) and Szypliszki, as well as in two towns: Sejny and Suwałki.² Basing on those estimates, the Office for Culture of National Minorities at the Ministry of Culture and Art assumed that the

¹ Commune [*gmina*] is the smallest administrative unit in Poland.

² E. Pietruszkiewicz, *Liczebność i rozmieszczenie społeczności litewskiej w Polsce. Status prawny. Stan organizacyjny (organizacje, ich cele i warunki działania) i dostęp do środków masowego przekazu*, in: *Litwini w Polsce. Materiały informacyjne o sytuacji mniejszości litewskiej w Polsce*, Puńsk 1995, p. 8.

population of the Lithuanian minority in Poland was around 20 thousand people strong³. The above estimates, however, seem to have been strongly overstated.

The estimates of Cezary Żołędowski were much more realistic. He used statistical data on the population number in administrative subdivision units of *gmina* [commune] called *sołectwo* [roughly “parish”] in 1983, which he obtained from commune administration.

According to Żołędowski, in the early 1980s, the Lithuanian population was under 9 thousand people of whom nearly 7 thousand lived in the Suwałki Region.⁴ The source of such discrepancies were mainly different estimates of the number of Lithuanians living outside the area of their compact population. According to Żołędowski, their number was 2 thousand while minority activists estimated their number to be over 10 thousand. Estimates of the Lithuanian population the Suwałki Region also differed but less.

Lithuanians were a clear majority in the commune of Puńsk. The following villages were entirely or mostly Lithuanian: Buraki, Dziedziule, Giełusze, Kalinowo, Kompcie, Krejwiany, Nowiniki, Ogórki, Oszkinie, Pelele, Przystawańce, Puńsk, Rejsztokiemie, Sankury, Szlinokiemie, Taurosyzski, Trakiszki, Trompole, Widugiery, Wiłkopedzie, Wojciuliszki, Wojtokiemie, and Zwikiele. Mixed Polish-Lithuanian villages included Buda Zawidugięrska, Poluńce, Sejwy, Skarkiszki, and Szoląny. In the commune of Sejny, Lithuanians constituted a clear majority in the following villages: Burbiszki, Dusznica, Jenorajście, Jodeliszki, Klejwy, Rachelany, Radziucie, Rynkojeziory, and Żegary. Mixed villages included Hołny Mejera, Krasnogruda, Krasnowo, Łumbie, Nowosady, and Ogrodniki. In the commune of Szypliszki, two villages, Jegliniec and Wojponie, were mostly Lithuanian. Mixed Polish-Lithuanian villages were Budzisko, Podwojponie and Sądawki. Some Lithuanians lived also in the following villages: Dębniak, Romaniuki, Szymanowizna, Wesołowo, and Zaboryszki.

Żołędowski calculated that commune of Puńsk was inhabited by almost 3,700 people of Lithuanian origin, the commune of Sejny by 1600 Lithuanians, and the commune of Szypliszki by 300. According to his estimates, the town of Sejny was inhabited by around 1 thousand Lithuanians. Thus, in total, the number of people of national Lithuanian affiliation was 6,600. The above numbers were estimates only. In the opinion of Żołędowski, the above total number of Lithuanians was more likely to be overestimated than underestimated due to the calculation method used.⁵

Estimates of local Church authorities were slightly lower. According to the bishop of Ełk, only 5.5-6 thousand members of the congregation in the Suwałki region wanted pastoral services in the Lithuanian language.⁶

³ *Mniejszości narodowe w Polsce. Informator 1994*, Warszawa 1995, p. 11.

⁴ C. Żołędowski (1992), *Roźmieszczenie i liczebność mniejszości litewskiej w Polsce*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Instytutu Nauk Politycznych” Uniwersytet Warszawski, No. 17, p. 186

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 183-185.

⁶ W. Zięmba (1995), *Narodowa różnorodność bogactwem Kościoła Ełckiego*, “Lithuania” No. 2(15), p. 89.

To the end of 1994, the Team for Religions and Nationalities at the Central Statistical Office carried a survey which was also a source of estimates. The survey covered 23 localities situated in the area densely populated by Lithuanians. Due to the lack of national statistics, it was not possible to preselect a representative sample of Poles and Lithuanians at the level of individual localities and the survey population. It was only possible to determine who was a Pole and who was a Lithuanian during interviews. All respondents were 15 years of age or older. A total of 2,533 questionnaires was filled in. The number of persons who declared their Lithuanian affiliation was 1,054 (42%) and 1,462 (58%) declared their Polish affiliation (17 persons declared other national affiliation than Polish or Lithuanian). The survey confirmed the estimated size of the Lithuanian population. The commune where the percentage of Lithuanians was the highest was the commune of Puńsk where 80% of respondents declared their Lithuanian affiliation. The percentage of Lithuanians in the commune of Sejny was 33% and only 9% in the town of Sejny.⁷

In the 2002 census, a question about national affiliation and language spoken at home was included for the first time after World War II. According to its results, 5,639 Polish citizens declared that their national identity was Lithuanian. The vast majority of them (5,097 people) lived in the Podlaskie voivodship (created in 1990) on the Polish-Lithuanian border. Every fifth resident of the *powiat* [poviat: administrative unit between the commune and the voivodship, a group of neighbouring communes] of Sejny (4,595 people, i.e. 21% of the poviat population) was a Lithuanian. The highest percentage of Lithuanians lived in the commune of Puńsk. According to the census, they constituted over 74% of its population (3,312 people). In the rural commune of Sejny, the percentage of Lithuanians was 18.5% (775 people) and in the urban commune of Sejny it was almost 8% (469 people). In the rural commune of Krasnopol, their percentage was only 0.85% (34 Lithuanians). In the poviat of Suwałki, 123 people belonged to the Lithuanian minority, including the commune of Szypliszki where 109 Lithuanians lived (almost 3% of its population). In addition, 316 Lithuanians lived in the town of Suwałki, and 41 in Białystok.⁸

Small, scattered groups of Lithuanians live all over Poland. Contrary to Lithuanians who live in areas where their percentage is high, they undergo the natural process of assimilation (Polonisation) to a larger extent. According to the results of the 2002 census, the number of Lithuanians in all other voivodships was 542, including 99 persons in the Mazowieckie voivodship (73 in Warsaw), 83 in the Warmińsko-mazurskie voivodship (18 in Olsztyn), 75 in the Pomorskie voivodship (24 in Gdańsk, 21 in Gdynia), 67 in the Zachodniopomorskie voivodship (21 in Szczecin), 53 in the Dolnośląskie voivodship (21 in Wrocław), 48 in the Śląskie voivodship (11 in Katowice, 10 in Gliwice), 32 in the Wielkopolskie voivodship

⁷ *Litwini w Polsce – Polacy na Litwie – 1994*, Warszawa-Wilno 1995, pp. 12-14.

⁸ Results of the 2002 National Census of Population and Housing concerning the declared nationality and language spoke at home, table 3/m, Minorities by voivodships, poviats, and municipalities in 2002 (data of the Central Statistical Office).

(19 in Poznań), 18 in the Kujawsko-pomorskie voivodship (10 in Bydgoszcz), 17 in the Łódzkie voivodship (11 in Łódź), 15 in the Lubuskie voivodship, 13 in the Małopolskie voivodship, 10 in the Lubelskie voivodship, 7 in the Opolskie voivodship, 3 in the Świętokrzyskie voivodship, and 2 in the Podkarpackie voivodship.⁹

In the national census of 2011, residents of Poland were for the first time able to express their multiple national and ethnic identities declaring membership in one or two ethnic categories. According to the census results, 7,863 persons declared their Lithuanian identity. For 5,559 people it was their first declared identification and for 2,264 people it was their second identification (for 4,830 people the Lithuanian identity was the only one, and for 2,961 people it was declared together with the Polish identity).¹⁰

Estimates according to which 6.5-7 thousand Lithuanians live in the Suwałki Region seem most realistic. The size of the Lithuanian population living outside that area can be estimated to be 1 thousand. Thus, the size of the Lithuanian minority in Poland is approximately 7.5 to 8 thousand people.

Assimilation processes and migration movements contribute to the steady shrinking of the Lithuanian community. A few dozen years ago, Lithuanian was spoken on a much larger territory. It was used in such localities as Smolany, Berżniki, Dworzysko and Wiżajny which today are populated almost exclusively by the Polish population. Lithuanian traces are found only in surnames of persons who now declare their Polish identity, and in the names of localities, rivers, lakes, forests, swamps and hills.¹¹ In the 1990s, that process was halted but what had been lost cannot be restored. The gradual assimilation of the Lithuanian population was primarily the result of natural processes within the minority itself.

The early 1990s brought changes in the organised life of Lithuanians. In May 1990, some activists of the then Lithuanian Social and Cultural Association [*Litewskie Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne, LTS-K*] established a new organisation, i.e. the Lithuanian Society of St. Casimir in Sejny [*Litewskie Towarzystwo św. Kazimierza*], the name of which refers back to a society active before WW2. It was founded by Lithuanians from Sejny who felt ignored and stranded by leaders of the Lithuanian Social and Cultural Association who lived mostly in Puńsk. Some were uneasy about former activities of the Association, its name and communist past, and thought that a new organisation should be established after the political system changed in Poland. The chairman of the Society has been Vytautas Grigutis. The organisation is active mainly in Sejny and the surrounding area. The Lithuanian Society of St. Casimir underlines its Christian (Catholic) character. Its members founded the first

⁹ *Ibidem*. See also: L. Adamczuk and S. Łodziński (eds) (2006), *Mniejszości narodowe w Polsce w świetle Narodowego Spisu Powszechnego z 2002 roku*, Warszawa.

¹⁰ *Ludność. Stan i struktura demograficzno-społeczna. Narodowy Spis Powszechny Ludności i Mieszkań 2011*, Warszawa 2013, p. 91.

¹¹ E. Pietruszkiewicz (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 8; C. Żołędowski (1992), *op. cit.*, pp. 178-183.

Lithuanian parish choir and persistently argued for a separate school in Sejny where the language of instruction would be Lithuanian. In addition, they started to organise a festival of amateur artistic groups from the Sejny region. The organisation supported also the construction of the Lithuanian House in Sejny.¹²

At the time, the Lithuanian Social and Cultural Association, founded in 1957, experienced a serious crisis. The convention of the Association scheduled for June 1990 was not held due to the lack of quorum. Half a year later, members of the Association introduced substantial changes to its Statutes. The former editor in chief of the *Aušra* journal, Eugeniusz Pietruszkiewicz from Suwałki, was elected its new chairman (from among three candidates). During the subsequent 12th convention of the Lithuanian Social and Cultural Association, the organisation changed its name to the Association of Lithuanians in Poland. The name change was to symbolise a new beginning. The statutory objectives have remained the same. Except for the new chairman, the composition of the Board did not change. Under the communist rule, for nearly 35 years of its existence, the Lithuanian Social and Cultural Association was the only organisation of the Lithuanian minority in Poland. It played a significant role in the history of that community sustaining its national identity. Despite its functioning in the said environment, the Association tried to halt the assimilation of the Lithuanian population. Entangled in official structures of the political life in communist Poland, it did not act against their compatriots. The main objective was to protect the Lithuanian enclave against denationalisation even though that was never mentioned in the statutes of the Association. The society has had significant achievements in the sphere of culture and education. It was long the only organiser of associational life of Lithuanians in Poland. The Board of the Association of Lithuanians in Poland has its seat in Sejny. The Association is the most important organisation of the Lithuanian minority in Poland. In 2013, its chairman was Olgierd Wojciechowski.¹³

In April 1993, another organisation was founded, i.e. the Polish Lithuanian Community. It has established contacts with the large (about 0.5 million) Lithuanian minority in the US and Canada and is part of The Lithuanian World Community which includes the Lithuanian diaspora scattered around the world. In addition to representing Polish Lithuanians in the country and abroad, the Community tries to coordinate activities of various Lithuanian organisations and institutions. Its statutory objective is to preserve the national identity of Lithuanians living in Poland, to promote their national culture, and to participate in social and political life. The activities of the Community have been managed by Józef Sygit Forencewicz, Bronisław Makowski, and Irena Gasperowicz¹⁴.

¹² K. Tarka (1998), *Litwini w Polsce 1944-1997*, Opole, pp. 198-199.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 199-201. See also: P. Łossowski (2000), *Mniejszość litewska w Polsce 1944-1999*, "Przegląd Humanistyczny" No. 5, p. 37.

¹⁴ K. Tarka (1998), *op. cit.*, pp. 201-202.

Lithuanians run in election to local Councils and have been very successful in Puńsk. Representatives of the Lithuanian minority have kept winning an overwhelming majority of seats in the commune Council and their candidate has been elected the *wójt* [vojt, the commune leader]. Lithuanians succeeded also in winning some seats in the commune Council of Sejny. In contrast, their attempts to win seats in the Parliament failed. In the 1991 parliamentary elections, Lithuanian activists together with members of Czech, Slovak, and Ukrainian minorities registered the Electoral Bloc of National Minorities. The coalition, however, did not win any seats in the Parliament. In the Białostocki constituency, the Lithuanian candidate won only 1,285 votes. Also attempts of Lithuanians to win seats by introducing their candidates to lists of Polish political parties were unsuccessful. The main reason was the small size of the Lithuanian community in terms of the country population.¹⁵

In the early 1990s, there were organisational changes and the Lithuanian community undertook new publishing initiatives. In 1990, the *Aušra* quarterly was transformed into a monthly and, starting from 1992, the magazine has been published as a biweekly. *Aušra* is financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Its editor-in-chief was Alicja Sitarska and, since 1997, that function has been performed by Irena Gasperowicz. The biweekly focuses on social, cultural, and political issues. Articles are devoted to Lithuanian culture and education, the history of the region, and the chronicle of events. There is also a religious section. In addition to the informative, educational, and cultural role, the main function of *Aušra* is to sustain the sense of the national identity among Lithuanians living in Poland. The written word is also of key importance to maintaining the Lithuanian tongue.

In addition to *Aušra*, the Lithuanian minority publishes some other magazines in its native language. Their role, however, is significantly smaller. *Aušrelė* monthly for children has been published since 1997. In addition, since 1992, the Suwałki branch of the Association of Lithuanians in Poland publishes its *Suvalkietis* bulletin (now a quarterly). Another quarterly has been published by the Society of St. Casimir since 2005.

In 1993, for the first time after World War II, the *Aušra* publishing house began to print books in Lithuanian (in total, around 100 different books and textbooks have been printed so far).¹⁶

In March 1990, the Lithuanian minority gained regular access to public radio. Initially, the Radio Białystok broadcast a half-hour programme in Lithuanian once a week (on Sunday). At present, radio programmes in Lithuanian are broadcast three times a week (on Tuesdays and Thursday evenings and on Sunday mornings (60 minutes in total per week). They include news on the life of Lithuanians in Poland, commentaries, essays, reports, discussions on important current and past events

¹⁵ L. Nijakowski, S. Łodziński (ed.) (2003), *Mniejszości narodowe i etniczne w Polsce. Informator 2003*, Warszawa, pp. 171-172.

¹⁶ K. Tarka (1998), *op. cit.*, pp. 228-232. See also: S. Birgiel (1995), *Działalność wydawnicza (historia i stan obecny)*, in: *Litwini w Polsce...*, pp. 14-19.

and recordings of Lithuanian folk assembles. In the mid-1990s, Lithuanians gained access to public television. The regional branch of Polish Television in Białystok broadcasts a programme in Lithuanian titled *Lietuvių panorama* once a week (on Sundays, broadcast time: 7 minutes and 30 seconds).¹⁷

The Lithuanian minority living in the north-east of Poland is especially active in the area of culture. The cultural movement is an important factor integrating the community. Despite inevitable changes in the lifestyle, Lithuanians are still attached to their traditions and customs. Their massive (active and passive) participation in cultural events integrates them. It has contributed to the development of authentic personal bonds, created positive values, and strengthened the sense of distinctness and national awareness. Contacts with the native culture have positively affected their identification with the community and shaped the national awareness of new generations.

Starting from the 1980s, Lithuanians wanted to build a new community centre in Puńsk (as the old one was situated in a small, wooden, pre-war building). Their intent was to create the Centre for Lithuanian Culture. At the time, however, the voivodship authorities in Suwałki supported the idea of a Commune Culture Centre or, alternatively, a Polish-Lithuanian or a Polish-Soviet Culture Centre. It was underlined that the very name of the new institution should integrate the two local communities: Poles and Lithuanians. Lithuanians, however, strongly opposed such ideas. In result of the dispute, the project was withheld for several years. The construction works started in 1988 but, due to the lack of funds, the investment was not completed on time and lasted (with interruptions) until 2001. The largest part of the new Centre for Lithuanian Culture is the auditorium with over 300 seats. In the mid-1990s, Lithuanians launched the construction of another culture centre in nearby Sejny. The construction of the Lithuanian House took four years and was financed by the Lithuanian government. Most important art events include meetings of amateur folk groups held in Burbiszki at the Gaładuś Lake and the Barn Theatre Festival in Puńsk.¹⁸

National awareness of Lithuanians is high and they are able to organise themselves to safeguard their interests. In their postulates addressed to Polish authorities after 1989, the issue of education was raised particularly frequently. A construction of an educational facility in Sejny, consisting of a nursery and kindergarten, a primary school and a secondary school with Lithuanian as the language of instruction was considered an urgent and critical issue. Lithuanian teachers strongly criticised the solution implemented for economical reasons which consisted in creating inter-class groups of pupils studying Lithuanian in the commune of Sejny (in Klejwy, Łumbie, Ogrodniki) and in the primary school in Szymanowizna, the only one in the commune of Szypliszki (where, however only two children were interested in

¹⁷ K. Tarka (1998), *op. cit.*, pp. 232-233.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 223-228. See also: J. Kordowska (1995), *Działalność kulturalna*, in: *Litwini w Polsce...*, pp. 20-22.

Lithuanian classes). They also pointed out that school buildings required refurbishment (in particular in Widugiery). Insufficient facilities, however, were not only the problem of Lithuanian schools or, speaking more broadly, of ethnic minority education. Similar difficulties were faced by a number of Polish schools in rural areas. There were no major problems with the teaching staff in the commune of Puńsk (in the town of Puńsk, actually, there was a teacher surplus) although not all schools employed qualified teachers of Lithuanian. In the commune of Sejny, there was no teacher of the Lithuanian language with higher education qualifications. The number of teachers who could teach other subjects in Lithuanian, was not sufficient either. Lithuanian organisations (the Association of Lithuanians in Poland, the Society of St. Casimir, the Polish Lithuanian Community) requested the Ministry of National Education to design and publish a new Lithuanian language textbook for primary schools (in connection with curriculum changes), a history textbook and an anthology of Lithuanian literature. They also asked the Ministry to systematically import textbooks (e.g. for Lithuanian language classes in upper secondary schools) and teaching aids from Lithuania, to issue bilingual certificates, to introduce History of Lithuania as a separate subject, to enable teachers in Lithuanian schools to participate in various forms of professional development trainings in Lithuania, to build new schools (in particular in Widugiery and Sejny), and to formally give schools bilingual names and to produce bilingual plaques and seals. They demanded that the voivodship school inspectorate employs a plenipotentiary for Lithuanian education. It was also postulated that groups of Lithuanians all over the country would have the opportunity to master the Lithuanian language.¹⁹

The Ministry's response was positive. In 1992, the Suwałki school inspector inaugurated the "11 March" Secondary School with Lithuanian as the Language of Instruction in Puńsk. Next to the Polish plaque, another one in Lithuanian was mounted. In June 1993, the first bilingual certificates were issued for all types of Lithuanian schools. In 1994, a new building of the primary school in Widugiery was opened. Two years later, a branch of the Suwałki primary music school was opened in Puńsk. In December 2005, the "Žiburys" School Complex with Lithuanian as the Language of Instruction was opened in Sejny. The centre consists of a kindergarten, a primary school, and a lower secondary school. Its construction was financed by the government of Lithuania. In 2006, the construction of a Lithuanian upper secondary school in Puńsk begun. Four years later, the building was officially opened.²⁰

¹⁹ *Pro memoria* with appendix of 19 March 1991. Cf. "Lituanica" No. 1, 1991, pp. 27-28; *Raport o stanie szkolnictwa z litewskim językiem nauczania i jego najpilniejszych potrzebach z 25 IX 1991 r., and Litwini w Polsce...* (1995), p. 55.

²⁰ Materials of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration (Problemy mniejszości litewskiej z 9 V 2011 r., mps., pp. 4-5) and the Ministry of Education (Informacja na temat sytuacji i problemów mniejszości litewskiej w Polsce oraz mniejszości polskiej na Litwie w zakresie edukacji z maja 2011, mps., p. 9-11). See also: K. Tarka (1998), *op. cit.*, pp. 238-239.

Education for national minorities is regulated by Article 12 of the Act of 7 September 1991 on the Education System.²¹ Details are contained in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 November 2007 “on the conditions and manner of performing tasks by kindergartens, schools and public institutions allowing maintenance of a sense of national, ethnic and linguistic identity of pupils belonging to national and ethnic minorities and communities using a regional language”. In accordance with the regulation of the Minister of National Education, kindergartens and public schools enable pupils belonging to national minorities “to maintain and develop the sense of national, ethnic, and linguistic identity” by teaching their native language as well as their history and culture. The classes are organised by headmasters at a written request of parents. The native language of a given minority can be taught at kindergartens and schools with the minority language as the language of instruction, in bilingual establishments, in establishments with additional classes in the minority language, or in inter-schools groups studying the minority language. A class (division) with the minority language as the language of instruction at primary schools and lower secondary schools must consist of at least 7 students, and at upper secondary schools of at least 14 students. If the number of students is lower, the teaching in the minority language is organised in inter-division or inter-class groups or, optionally, in inter-school groups.²²

At the end of 1990, teachers of the Lithuanian language prepared, in cooperation with the Lithuanian Social and Cultural Association, a curriculum for teaching Lithuanian in primary schools. In March 1991, the curriculum was approved by the Ministry of National Education. In 1993, on the initiative of Lithuanians, a curriculum for teaching history of Lithuania was developed. In addition, Lithuanian teachers developed curricula for teaching geography of Lithuania and the Lithuanian language in secondary schools.²³

In 1993, Eugeniusz Pietruszkiewicz, the then chairman of the Association of Lithuanians in Poland, the largest Lithuanian organisation, assessed that the Lithuanian educational network was sufficient to meet the needs of that minority. The best situation was in the commune of Puńsk.²⁴

In result of regime changes in Poland and Lithuania, the opportunities for Lithuanians living in Poland to continue their education in Lithuania improved significantly. Graduates of the upper secondary school in Puńsk have been able to pursue further education at higher education institutions in Lithuania. While until the end of the 1980s, no more than 2-3 persons per year were able to take up studies (almost exclusively the Lithuanian philology) in Lithuania, in the 1989-1990 academic year as many as 31 young Polish Lithuanians studied in Lithuania. What is more, they could

²¹ Journal of Laws of 1991, No. 95, item 425.

²² Journal of Laws of 2007, No. 214, item 1579.

²³ K. Tarka (1998), *op. cit.*, pp. 237-238.

²⁴ *Litwini w Polsce. Rozmowa z E. Pietruszkiewiczem, prezesem Stowarzyszenia Litwinów w Polsce*, “Kultura” No. 3, 1993, p. 97.

choose any fields of study. Later, there have been practically no restrictions on continuing one's education at higher education institutions in independent Lithuania.²⁵

In the 1990s, the number of pupils/students who learned the Lithuanian language grew. At primary schools, over 600 Lithuanian children were taught their native language. The highest number of children (685) learning Lithuanian was in the 1991-1992 school year, and the lowest (583) in 1990-1991. At that time, around 130 young Lithuanians attended the upper secondary school in Puńsk. There the highest number of students (141) was in 1996-1997 and 1998-1999, and the lowest (119) in 1992-1993.

In the following decade, the number of pupils/students in every type of school decreased. In the 1999-2000 school year, there were 528 Lithuanian children in primary schools. In 2005-2006, their number fell to 378, and in 2010-2011 to 269. In the first year following the introduction of lower secondary schools in 1999, 73 students studied Lithuanian there, in the mid-1990s, there were 177 students (in the 2003-2004 school year as many as 204), and in 2010-2011 the number of students was 164. The number of students in upper secondary schools ranged from 135 in 2001-2002 and 2004-2005 to 94 in 2010-2011. The decrease in the number of pupils/students was mainly due to a demographic decline.²⁶

In Puńsk, in the 2007-2008 school year, in the Darius and Girenas School Complex with Lithuanian as the Language of Instruction, 182 out of 243 pupils learned Lithuanian at the primary school and 116 out of 162 students at the lower secondary school. In addition, in the commune of Puńsk, primary schools with Lithuanian as the language of instruction were in Nowinki (35 pupils), Widugiery (20 pupils) and Przystawańce (7 pupils). Due to the small number of pupils, the closing of schools in Przystawańce and Widugiery is being considered.

In the neighbouring powiat, Lithuanian education is concentrated in Sejny. The "Žiburys" School Complex with Lithuanian as the Language of Instruction, established in 2005, consists of a primary school and a lower secondary school. The establishment is a non-public school with public school competencies. It is managed by the Bishop Antanas Baranasuskas Foundation "Lithuanian House". The "Žiburys" schools are attended by pupils from closed schools in Łumbie, Ogrodniki, and Krasnogruda. In the 2007-2008 school year, the "Žiburys" primary school in Sejny was attended by 27 Lithuanian pupils and the lower secondary school by 30 students. The Lithuanian language was also the language of instruction for 8 students in the Lower Secondary School No. 2 in Sejny. Starting from 2009-2010, it has been taught as an additional (optional) subject at that school. In the same year, the status of Lithuanian at the primary school in Krasnowo changed as well. In its last year of operation, only 3 children were taught in Lithuanian (language of instruction). In the 2007-2008 school year, 32 out of 74 pupils at that school learned Lithuanian as an additional subject. In the primary school in Klejwy, 4 pupils learned Lithuanian, and 10 pupils

²⁵ K. Tarka (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 241.

²⁶ Materials of the Ministry of National Education: Informacja na temat sytuacji..., p. 10.

in the primary school in Poćkunki (in 2010-2011, due to the lack of applications there were no classes in Lithuanian). In the Mjr H. Dobrzański Primary School in Sejny, 15 out of 500 pupils learned Lithuanian, and at the Lower Secondary School in Sejny, only 5 out of 299 pupils. In Suwałki, 34 pupils/students learned Lithuanian in three inter-school groups consisting of pupils and students of primary and lower secondary schools.²⁷

In 2011-2012 school year, 5 primary schools with Lithuanian as the language of instruction (in Puńsk, Nowiniki, Przystawańce, Widugiery, and Sejny) and 2 schools with Lithuanian taught as an additional subject (Krasnowo, Sejny) were attended by 269 pupils in total. In Lithuanian lower secondary schools in Puńsk and in Sejny and in the lower secondary school in Sejny with Lithuanian taught as an additional subject, there were 164 students learning Lithuanian or in Lithuanian. Moreover, there were 107 students at the Lithuanian upper secondary school in Puńsk and the upper secondary school in Sejny where the Lithuanian curriculum is an option. In total, in the 2011-2012 school year, there were 530 pupils/students studying Lithuanian in all types of schools.²⁸

In the early 1990s, the *Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne* publishing house specialising in textbooks prepared the fourth set of textbooks for teaching Lithuanian in primary schools. It complied with the new curriculum. The new books were supposed to be published gradually, i.e. one title per year. However, no textbook was published until the end of 1996 when a textbook for teaching Lithuanian to pupils in their 8th school year was published. In the following year textbooks for the 7th and 6th school years were published. Authors of those textbooks were Lithuanian teachers. Historian Bronisław Makowski (Bronius Makauskas), a Lithuanian activist working at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, wrote a textbook for the history of Lithuania for upper secondary school students which was published to the end of 1997.²⁹

Changes in the national system of education (e.g. introduction of lower secondary schools) and in the curricula content required new textbooks. All costs connected with the writing, print and distribution of textbooks for national minorities in Poland are covered from the state budget. Textbooks for the Lithuanian minority are printed by the *Aušra*, the Lithuanian publisher in Puńsk, as commissioned by the Ministry of National Education. Due to a low number of copies, the cost of publishing textbooks for national minorities is very high. For instance, the total cost of a textbook on grammar, spelling and history of a minority language for the 3rd school year in upper secondary schools printed in 2009 in 100 copies was as high as PLN 930 per copy. After 2000, a set of textbooks of the Lithuanian language for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools was published, as well as workbooks for

²⁷ Materials of the Ministry of National Education: Szkoły z litewskim językiem nauczania oraz szkoły prowadzące dodatkowe nauczanie języka litewskiego w roku szkolnym 2007/2008.

²⁸ Materials of the Ministry of National Education: Informacja na temat sytuacji..., p. 10.

²⁹ K. Tarka (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 241.

learning mathematics and a textbook of the history of Lithuania for primary schools, textbooks of natural environment and geography of Lithuania for primary schools and lower secondary schools, and Polish-Lithuanian glossaries of mathematics, geography, art, physics, chemistry, biology, and IT terminology.³⁰

Students graduating from Lithuanian upper secondary schools must take the school-leaving exam [*matura*] in the Lithuanian language. They may also take exams in other subjects (excluding Polish language and literature) in their native language. Also primary school pupils and lower secondary school students may take their respective school-leaving exams in Lithuanian.³¹

Polish legislation provides that pupils/students belonging to national minorities may learn in their native language and ensures that schools where minority language is taught are financed from the state budget. Schools for national minorities receive subsidies which are 20% and 150% higher than other schools. An additional subsidy, increased at first by 50% (in 2002) and then by 100% (in 2005) and 150% (in 2006) is dedicated to small schools in which the number of students does not exceed 84 (primary schools) or 42 (lower and upper secondary schools). The increased subsidies for small schools were a demand of the Lithuanian minority.³²

Ethnic education is an important element supporting national and cultural distinctness. Compared to education provided for other national minorities, the situation of the Lithuanian community is outstanding. It is stable and the access to education in the Lithuanian language is universal. Lithuanian schools have not experienced a rapid decrease in the number of students, and almost 70% of Lithuanian children in school age receive education in their mother tongue. This demonstrates that both parents and students are interested in education in their native language and have a strong sense of their national identity and distinctness. That sense is definitely stronger among young Lithuanians than among their Belarusian peers for instance. In result, Lithuanians are relatively little affected by assimilation processes. The concentration of the Lithuanian minority in a small area and the involvement of Lithuanian teachers and organisations are conducive to the provision of teaching and having own facilities. In a survey conducted by the Central Statistical Office in 1994, over 67% of Polish Lithuanians were of the opinion that their children should received education in their native language and only 14% favoured education in the Polish Language.³³

The role of schools in supporting the linguistic and cultural distinctness is extremely important. Education orientated towards protection of minorities and preservation of their national identities may prevent their assimilation. It performs its function through the teaching of the native language, cultivating traditions and protecting values and culture of the minority. Its objective is to maintain national awareness e.g.

³⁰ Materials of the Ministry of National Education: Informacja na temat sytuacji..., pp. 12-14.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 5-8.

³³ *Litwini w Polsce – Polacy na Litwie...* (1995), pp. 38-39.

by improving mother tongue skills to facilitate quality communication. Education in the native language strongly supports its preservation, contributing to its use at home and in everyday life.

Another issue important to Lithuanian Catholics was the language of liturgy and pastoral care. Nearly forty years of efforts to restore the celebration of the mass in the Lithuanian language in the Minor Basilica in Sejny antagonised Lithuanians and Church authorities (the then local priest and the bishop of the Łomża diocese) as well as Polish parishioners. The mass in Lithuanian started to be celebrated in Sejny only in October 1983. The memory of past conflicts affected everybody involved and current events. In result, the seriousness of apparently lesser issues grew.³⁴

On 25 March 1992, Pope John Paul II approved a new administrative division of the Catholic Church in Poland. As a result of the reorganisation, the Suwałki Region belonged now to the newly created diocese of Ełk headed by bishop Wojciech Ziemia. One of his firsts decisions was to introduce the celebration of the mass in Lithuanian in Suwałki, at the Church of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus initially, once a month, and later on every second Sunday. In addition, to the end of May 1992, he appointed prelate Ignacy Dziermejka, a long-time parish priest in Puńsk, the Episcopal vicar for the Lithuanian congregation.³⁵

Shortly, the relations between the Curia and Lithuanians deteriorated rapidly. In order to bring the Church closer to the congregation and to ennoble the local community, the bishop decided to establish a new parish in Widugiery. It was supposed to consist of Lithuanian villages of the Sejny parish and part of the Puńsk parish. It was also planned that the new parish would be joined by Zegary and Ogrodniki, i.e. localities which, if connected by a straight line on a map, were not far from Widugiery but were separated by the Gaładuś Lake. Their residents would need to travel 25 km and pass through Sejny in order to get to Widugiery.

The construction of the chapel in Widugiery started in the mid-1980s. The initiator of that project was the bishop of Puńsk, who was about to retire. Financial means came from Lithuanians from Chicago and the local congregation. Initially, it was supposed to be only a chapel or a filial church for those congregation members who lived a dozen or so kilometres from the parish church. The Sunday mass was to be celebrated by priests from Puńsk. In June 1992, when the construction works were almost finished, parish priests from Puńsk and Sejny announced from the pulpit the intent to establish a new parish in Widugiery. The decision met with protest from the surprised Lithuanian community. The Puńsk parish council was of the opinion that the manner in which the new decision was taken had all the characteristics of “conspiracy led by his Excellency [bishop Ziemia – K.T.] against the Lithuanian congregation”.

The bishop of Ełk did not act in bad faith. It seems that being new, he was not familiar enough with the complicated situation. Lithuanians interpreted the actions

³⁴ More in: K. Tarka (1998), *op. cit.*, pp. 50-55, 69, 171-186.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

of the Curia as attempts at their Polonisation. They believed that the detachment of Lithuanian villages from the parish in Sejny was to reduce the number of Lithuanians in that parish, which would result in cancelling the only mass in Lithuanian celebrated in the basilica for which they struggled for almost 40 years. In their opinion, that was the real, hidden agenda behind the changes.

When the talks between the parish council and the bishop, held in August 1992, did not produce any results, Lithuanians closed the church in Widugiery and did not let in priest Zenon Parakiewicz, a former vicar of Lithuanian descent in Sejny who was supposed to be the new parish priest. The front door was secured with chains fastened with padlocks. When they were removed after few days, representatives of the parish council mounted metal bars on the door and welded them.

Establishing a parish against the will of the congregation was doomed to failure. The bishop, instead of abandoning the unfortunate idea as quickly as possible, kept postponing his decision. That worsened the situation and led to the conflict escalation.

Lithuanians expected bishop Ziemba to confirm in writing that he would not establish a parish in Widugiery. Such a confirmation letter was not delivered. For the unrest they also blamed priest Dziermejka and dean Stanisław Rogowski from Sejny who were the authors of the new territorial division of the parish. The unrest among Lithuanians grew and in mid December, the parish council from Puńsk decided to refuse traditional Christmas home visits of their parish priest.

On 29 December 1992, representatives of all Lithuanian organisations, namely Eugeniusz Pietruszkiewicz (Association of Lithuanians in Poland), Witold Grygutis (Lithuanian Society of St. Casimir) and Józef Sygit Forencewicz (Polish Lithuanian Community), appealed to the diocesan Curia. Once again they asked the bishop to determine the status of the new church as soon as possible. "The lack of decision or postponing the decision, they warned, carries the risk that the conflict between the congregation and their local priests and between Polish and Lithuanian congregations will escalate". They underlined that the establishment of a new parish should be an initiative of its inhabitants and could not be done against their will. They argued that the establishment of a parish in Widugiery "violates the existing territorial unity of Lithuanians and reduces their representation in two neighbouring parishes of Puńsk and Sejny, thus posing an additional threat". The concerns and sensitivities of Lithuanians might have been unjustified in that case but they had their roots in past experience.

The dispute about the status of the church in Widugiery deepened the conflict between the parish priest in Puńsk and its congregation. In response to the community's boycott of traditional Christmas visits, priest Dziermejko refused to perform pastoral services (baptisms, funerals). That was a dead end. In addition to the issue of Widugiery, another postulate was voiced. Lithuanians accused the parish priest of "almost pathological malice towards the congregation" and, underlining his disabilities due to his advanced age (poor memory, sight problems, and the like), they requested the Curia to replace the parish priest and appoint a new Episcopal vicar.

After over 2 months, on 9 March 1993, bishop Ziembra personally assured the Lithuanian delegation which arrived at the Curia that the legal status of the church in Widugiery had not been changed, which meant that it was still a filial church of the parish of Puńsk. He sent a letter confirming the above to parish priests in Puńsk and Sejny.

After 9 months of confusion, the strange tug war on Widugiery was finally over. The conflict was the reason for the retirement of father Dziermejko who, as it turned out, was a real victim of the dispute. The parish priest lost the trust of his parishioners and, after 26 years of pastoral service in Puńsk, was forced to leave the parish in June 1993. The bishop appointed Jan Jerzy Macek new parish priest. Macek happened to be a Pole fluent in Lithuanian. Father Dziermejko was dismissed from the function of the Episcopal vicar in the diocese of Ełk for Lithuanian congregation.³⁶ Starting from 2000, the function of the parish priest in Puńsk has been performed by father Czesław Bagan.

Shortly after, another conflict surfaced. In the summer of 1994, priest Parakiewicz was appointed the parish priest of the neighbouring Giby parish. Every week, he would go to Sejny but the mass in the Żegary chapel was celebrated by a new vicar (a Pole) in Polish while the people attending the mass would respond in Lithuanian. The situation in other “Lithuanian” parishes deteriorated as well. In mid-1995, father Virginijus Veprauskas, who provided pastoral services to Lithuanians in Poland, was requested by his archbishop to return to Lithuania. Fortunately, another priest from Lithuania arrived three months later. In addition, at the same time the Missionary Oblates of Saint Mary left Smolany and the authorities of that order called off father Antoni Deguits who worked with and for Lithuanians. In result of a series of different events, the mass in Lithuanian was suspended in Żegary, Suwałki and Smolany. That situation worried the Lithuanian community. They blamed the parish priest in Sejny and the bishop of the Ełk diocese for neglecting the problem and for taking actions detrimental to maintaining the sense of national identity. In July 1995, leaders of Lithuanian organisations and parish councils in Puńsk, Sejny and Suwałki appealed to the Curia. They underlined that their natural right to pastoral services in their native language was “once again severely” violated “in the entire area inhabited by the Lithuanian-speaking population”. They demanded from bishop Ziembra to “repair the damage” and restore the complete pastoral service. They threatened that some actions of the desperate Lithuanian community may be beyond their and the bishop’s control. They argued that the cumulation of negative developments was the result of not appointing Lithuanian priests to parish priests which made them move to central and western Poland. Therefore, they strongly suggested that the bishop of the diocese of Ełk should appoint Alfons Jurkiewicz new parish priest in Sejny. Jurkiewicz is a priest of Lithuanian descent who worked in the archdiocese of Wrocław for years. In addition, they informed the Primate of Poland, the Vatican

³⁶ More on the conflict in Widugiery in: *ibidem*, pp. 243-248.

Secretariat of State and the Episcopate of Lithuania of their demands. The build-up of tensions became real again.

This time bishop Ziemia reacted quickly. He explained that the issue of “human resources” should be resolved as soon as a Lithuanian priest from the Ełk diocese completes his studies in Rome and returns to Poland. Another Lithuanian student was about to complete his last year of studies at a local seminary. The bishop insisted also on the arrival of new priests from Lithuania. His calm, balanced tone and concrete answer helped to mitigate the emerging conflict.³⁷

Currently, the mass in Lithuanian is celebrated every day in churches in Puńsk, Sejny and Smolany, every Sunday in Widugiery and Żegary, every second week in Suwałki, and once a month in Warsaw.

Lithuanians are one of the smallest national groups in Poland. The main objective of social and cultural activists of that minority have been to protect the Lithuanian community against discrimination and assimilation. The high level of the community internal integration has mitigated the process of assimilation and safeguarded Lithuanians from being absorbed by the Polish majority. It helped Lithuanians to retain their distinctive identity, their own language, culture and education. Factors which have contributed to the above include Lithuanians’ concentration within a small area, peripheral location, and relative isolation from the Polish society. The strong identification of the Lithuanian minority with their “little motherland” (the region of Puńsk) has been another factor strengthening their sense of national identity.

ABSTRACT

The article presents the situation of the Lithuanian minority in the Third Republic of Poland. Lithuanians who densely inhabit a small area of the north-east Suwałki Region, in and around Puńsk and Sejny, form a close-knit community. This is the autochthonous and almost exclusively rural population. Lesser and dispersed groups of Lithuanians live in the entire territory of Poland. The overall number of the Lithuanian minority of Poland is approximately 7.5-8 thousand people. In the new reality after 1989, there have been changes in the organised activity of Lithuanians. The Lithuanian Social and Cultural Association, which had existed for over thirty years, changed its name to the Association of Lithuanians in Poland. New organisations were also founded, including the Lithuanian Society of St. Casimir and the Polish Lithuanian Community. For Lithuanian activists a most important issue was education in their native tongue. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Aušra Publishing House began the printing of first books in Lithuanian after the Second World War. The Aušra quarterly was transformed into a monthly and then into a biweekly. Besides, regional stations of the public radio and television began broadcasting regular programmes in Lithuanian. Lithuanians are characterised by high national self-awareness and the ability to organise themselves in defence of their interests. A high degree of internal integration minimised the process of assimilation and allowed them to retain their distinctive identity, their own language, culture and system of education. The factors that have facilitates the above are: a compact population inhabiting a small area, peripheral location, and isolation from the Polish society.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 248-251.