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From Historical Identity to Modern Representation: The Evolving Political Role of the Polish Minority in Lithuania – An Overview

Abstract

This research examines the political influence of the Polish ethnic minority in Lithuania, analyzing its historical foundations, contemporary representation mechanisms, and future integration prospects. Despite constituting only 6.5% of Lithuania's population, the Polish minority maintains political presence, particularly in southeastern regions such as Vilnius and Šalčininkai districts. The study employs qualitative content analysis of official documents and institutional formation from 2021–2025, focusing on three key dimensions: historical identity formation, political representation and institutional participation, and future integration visions. The analysis reveals that the the Lithuanian Polish Election Campaigns – Unions of Christian Families party (EAPL) has served as the primary vehicle for Polish political mobilization since 1994, achieving consistent success in municipal elections (securing 56–67 mandates) and maintaining representation in national parliament and European Parliament. However, recent developments indicate an evolving pattern of political integration, with Polish-origin politicians increasingly participating in mainstream parties beyond ethnic-based platforms, exemplified by appointments such as Robert Duchnevič as mayor and Ewelina Dobrowolska as former Minister of Justice. The adoption of the National Minorities Law in November 2024 addresses a 14-year legislative vacuum, providing formal recognition and enhanced protections for minority rights. The research concludes that the Polish minority represents a relatively successful case of minority political integration in the Baltic region, though future challenges persist regarding language policy, cultural preservation, and balancing ethnic identity with broader civic participation. The study demonstrates that political mobilization in nationalizing states relies increasingly on symbolic representation rather than substantive policy delivery, while

successful integration depends on maintaining cultural vitality alongside active engagement in Lithuania's pluralistic democratic processes.

Keywords: Lithuanian Polish minority, political representation, EAPL, minority rights, Baltic states, cultural integration.

Santrauka

Šiame tyrime nagrinėjama Lenkijos tautinės mažumos politinė įtaka Lietuvoje, analizuojami jos istoriniai pagrindai, šiuolaikiniai atstovavimo mechanizmai ir ateities integracijos perspektyvos. Nors Lenkijos tautinė mažuma sudaro tik 6,5 % Lietuvos gyventojų, ji išlaiko politinę įtaką, ypač pietryčių regionuose, pavyzdžiui, Vilniaus ir Šalčininkų rajonuose. Tyrime taikoma kokybinė oficialių dokumentų ir institucinio formavimo 2021–2025 m. turinio analizė, sutelkiant dėmesį į tris pagrindinius aspektus: istorinės tapatybės formavimąsi, politinį atstovavimą ir institucinį dalyvavimą bei ateities integracijos vizijas. Analizė rodo, kad nuo 1994 m. Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcijos – Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjungos partija (LLRA-KŠS) buvo pagrindinė lenkų politinės mobilizacijos priemonė, pasiekusi nuoseklų sėkmę savivaldybių rinkimuose (užsitikrinusi 56–67 mandatus) ir išlaikiusi atstovavimą nacionaliniame parlamente ir Europos Parlamente. Tačiau naujaisi pokyčiai rodo besikeičiančią politinės integracijos tendenciją, kai lenkų kilmės politikai vis dažniau dalyvauja pagrindinėse partijose, neapsiribodami etninėmis platformomis, pavyzdžiui, Robertas Duchnevičius buvo paskirtas meru, o Ewelina Dobrowolska – buvusia teisingumo ministre. 2024 m. lapkričio mėn. priimtas Nacionalinių mažumų įstatymas užpildo 14 metų trukusią teisėkūros spragą, suteikdamas oficialų pripažinimą ir stipresnę mažumų teisių apsaugą. Tyrime daroma išvada, kad lenkų mažuma yra palyginti sėkmingas mažumų politinės integracijos Baltijos regione pavyzdys, nors ateityje išlieka iššūkiai, susiję su kalbos politika, kultūros išsaugojimu ir etninės tapatybės bei platesnio pilietinio dalyvavimo pusiausvyros išlaikymu. Studija rodo, kad politinė mobilizacija nacionalizuojančiose valstybėse vis labiau remiasi simboliniu atstovavimu, o ne esminių politikos priemonių įgyvendinimu, o sėkminga integracija priklauso nuo kultūrinio gyvybingumo išlaikymo ir aktyvaus dalyvavimo Lietuvos pluralistiniuose demokratiniuose procesuose.

Raktažodžiai: Lietuvos lenkų mažuma, politinis atstovavimas, LLRA-KŠS, mažumų teisės, Baltijos valstybės, kultūrinė integracija.

Introduction

The Polish ethnic minority in Lithuania, although relatively small in size, plays a significant role in the nation's political landscape. With historical roots that date back centuries, this minority's influence is felt in various spheres of Lithuanian society, from local governance to national politics. Understanding their impact requires an examination of the historical context, current political dynamics, and future implications. Historically, the Polish minority in Lithuania traces its origins to the Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth, a political union that shaped much of the region's history. The close ties between the two nations resulted in a shared cultural and linguistic heritage, particularly in the Vilnius region, where a significant proportion of the Polish community resides today. After the partition of the Commonwealth and the subsequent political shifts in the 20th century, including Soviet occupation and Lithuania's eventual independence, the Polish minority's position evolved in relation to national identity and state-building efforts.

The objective of this research is to analyze the political influence of the Polish ethnic minority in Lithuania by: (1) tracing its historical foundations, (2) examining its current mechanisms of political representation, particularly through the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, and (3) assessing evolving forms of political engagement beyond ethnic party structures. The research question: how the Polish minority balances the preservation of cultural identity with effective participation in Lithuanian democratic processes, especially in light of the 2024 National Minorities Law. Although the Republic of Lithuania officially recognises the rights of national minorities, the Polish community is particularly active in the political life of the country, especially in south-eastern Lithuania. The Polish Electoral Action, representing Polish interests, has become an important political player, influencing not only regional but also national politics.

Historical Context

The Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth, which existed from 1569 to 1795, was a pivotal period that shaped the cultural and political relations between Poles and Lithuanians. Following the dissolution of the Commonwealth, the territories that now comprise modern Lithuania experienced various

political shifts, but the Polish minority continued to be an integral part of the region's cultural fabric. During the interwar period, the Polish minority in Lithuania faced challenges, including political and social discrimination. After World War II, the Soviet regime's policies towards ethnic minorities had a considerable impact, but the Polish community managed to maintain its cultural and linguistic identity¹.

The problems caused by ethnic relations (national minorities, migrants) are becoming more and more relevant in today's world, so a comprehensive approach to these problems is necessary. In Europe, the political influence of nationalist and far-right movements is growing, which encourages the assessment of the relationship between ethnicity and politics in security contexts. This is illustrated by the events in France, Spain, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, and Germany, where this problem is becoming more and more relevant and receiving evaluation from a security perspective. Any domestic or foreign policy problem (language, migration, "energy dependence on a single source", etc.) can become the object of securitization, but the nation and the state are considered the most important. The so-called "threats" are the securitization of otherness (another state, culture, nation, etc.), i.e. making difference a threat. De-securitization – returning a security issue to the sphere of public debate. It is also worth mentioning the essential, conditioning connection of the discourse of ethno-political identities with the discourse of statehood of national post-Soviet democracies – depending on the identity subject, statehood visions, models, value principles, etc. differ which actualizes this problem as a constituent part of the forms of democracy and their sustainability in our region.

In the modern world, it is difficult to find a state that consists of the population of only one ethnic group. In Europe, in the 20th century, there were two territorial transformations based on ethnic principles, and both times were accompanied by the collapse of empires. 20th century At the beginning of the 20th century, these events were caused by the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the second major change occurred with the collapse of the communist regime of the Soviet Union. In the first case, as many as a dozen new states (including the Republic of Northern Turkish Cyprus) were formed after the collapse of the empire, and in the second case, states such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia disappeared after the collapse of the communist regime. The change of political borders, neither before

¹ D. Janušauskienė, *Identities of and Policies Towards the Polish National Minority in Lithuania*, "Ethnopolitics" 2021 (20), p. 136.

nor now, has not reduced the tension in the sphere of the national composition of the states. No matter how the territorial boundaries of states are drawn, there will always be ethnic groups living outside the borders of their national states.

After the Second World War, almost all the countries of Western Europe faced the wider consequences of the geopolitical and demographic changes in the states. This is also reflected in the collapse of the Soviet Union, which made this type of problem more prominent. According to Natalia Kasatkina and Tadas Leončikas, a researchers of the relationship between ethnicity and politics, “the new situation and new status forced Russians, Russian-speakers and others to decide whether to seek the status of a full-fledged citizen through ethnic adaptation, or to emigrate to countries that were on the territory of the Soviet Union or outside of it². According to the research conducted in 1991, approximately 27 million inhabitants were separated from their homeland, and as a result, the population of the current CIS and Baltic countries includes not only representatives of nominal nationalities, but also residents of the former state³. About 14 percent in Lithuania the population consists of minorities⁴. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent re-establishment of the Baltic states⁵, the minority of the society became the majority, and the former majority became the minority⁶.

Since gaining independence, the topic of ethnic minorities in Lithuania has been discussed not only by representatives of social sciences, but also by politicians. The main political debate and research focus is on the internal politics of these countries and the relations between minorities and the dominant ethnic groups in the countries. Certain communities of ethnic minorities must be evaluated in the broader context of international relations, because the relations of countries with diasporas living in other countries are particularly important in shaping the political discourse, which includes return migration, dual citizenship and other issues. In assessing Lithuanian – Polish relations, the key document remains the 1994 Polish –

² N. Kasatkina, T. Leončikas, *Lietuvos etninių grupių adaptacija: kontekstas ir eiga*, Vilnius 2003, p. 46.

³ C. King, N. J. Melvin, *Diaspora Politics: Ethnic Linkages, Foreign Policy, and Security in Eurasia*, “International Security” 1999–2000, vol. 24, no. 3, p. 108.

⁴ Tautinių mažumų departamentas prie LR Vyriausybės. <https://tmde.lrv.lt/lt/tautiniu-mazumu-kulturos-centrai-ir-tautines-bendrijos/statistika> (access: 12.06.2025)

⁵ The Baltic countries are perceived as Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

⁶ D. J. Galbreath, *From Nationalism to Nation-Building: Latvian Politics and Minority Policy*, “Nationalities Papers” 2006, vol. 34, no. 4, p. 4.

Lithuanian treaty, which defines the rights of minorities, although its provisions are often interpreted differently by both sides⁷.

Presentation of research methodology

To identify Polish ethnic minority in Lithuanian official discourse, qualitative content (documents and official institutional information) analysis will be used. Qualitative content analysis will be used, as it is more descriptive and allows making more profound analysis of the official discourse. Qualitative analysis will have 3 categories: 1. Formation of historical identity and memory (focus of analysis: how events are presented and interpreted in the Polish community and in Lithuanian political discourse). 2. Political representation and institutional participation (focus of analysis: how and to what extent the Polish national minority participates in politics (e.g., through the Lithuanian Polish Election Campaigns-Unions of Christian Families party, municipal councils, the Seimas)). 3. Visions for the future and prospects for integration (focus of analysis: how political leaders, community representatives, or the media talk about the place of the Polish minority in Lithuanian society in the future).

Qualitative analysis will help to analyze how the image of Polish ethnic minority in Lithuania is constructed by assigning it to different contexts, giving it some evaluations, connecting it to current situation. It also helps to identify which variables of each category are dominant. According to the results of content analysis, Polish ethnic minority image will be created using phrases and quotations from the analyzed documents.

Period of analysis chosen for the research – 2021–2025. Several significant legal and administrative decisions concerning the rights of national minorities, the spelling of surnames, the restructuring of the school network, and the education of national minorities were made or are being made in 2021–2025. After 2021, bilateral relations between Poland and Lithuania have become significantly more active, especially in the areas of security, energy, and regional cooperation. Since 2021, the importance of information campaigns and identity politics in public discourse has grown significantly, providing an opportunity to observe how the image of the Polish minority is being shaped in the digital space.

⁷ A. Eberhardt, B. Jundo-Kaliszewska, *Polacy na Litwie w świetle współczesnych przemian – szanse, wyzwania, zagrożenia. Analiza strategiczna*, Łódź 2024, p. 11, 18.

Overview of the situation of ethnic minorities in Lithuania

Lithuania is a relatively homogeneous country. According to the results of the 2021 general population and housing census of the Republic of Lithuania, in 2021, Lithuania had a population of 2,810,000, of which 432,000 identified themselves as representatives of national minorities. In such a homogeneous state, a clear division between the majority and the minority emerges.

Table no 1. Population by ethnicity in 2021.

Nationality	2021 Population	Percentage
Total	2,810,761	
Lithuanians	2,378,118	84.61%
Poles	183,421	6.53%
Russians	141,122	5.02%
Belarusians	28,183	1.00%
Ukrainians	14,168	0.50%
Jews	2,256	0.08%
Tatars	2,142	0.08%
Germans	1,977	0.07%
Roma	2,251	0.08%
Latvians	1,572	0.06%
Armenians	1,125	0.04%
Azerbaijanis	575	0.02%
Moldovans	451	0.02%
Georgians	333	0.01%
Estonians	233	0.01%
Karaims	192	0.01%
Others	3,009	0.11%
Not specified	49,633	1.77%

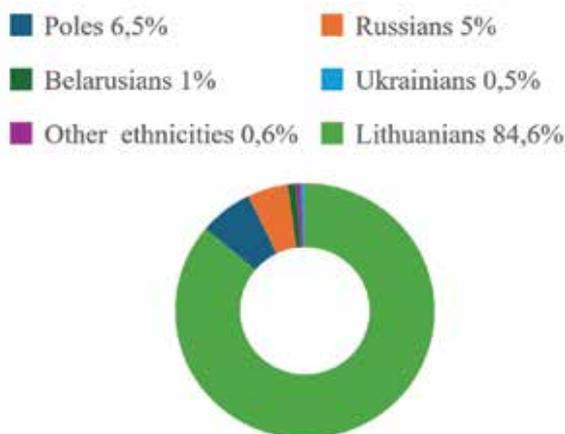
Source: chart prepared by the author of the work, based on the data of the Department of Statistics⁸

According to statistics, the largest ethnic communities in Lithuania in 2021, apart from the Lithuanian ethnic majority, were Poles and Russians, with population numbers shown in thousands and percentages beside. This

⁸ Department of Statistics, Lithuania. Distribution of national minorities in Lithuania: data from January 2023.

indicates, that in general all other ethnic minorities do not have any effect on national political, cultural influence. From a historical perspective, the Russian ethnic group in Lithuania exerted a relatively greater influence on the country's political and cultural development, particularly during earlier periods of state formation and regional integration. Over time, however, this group was unable to sustain its collective political interests, experiencing gradual assimilation or, in some cases, integration into the Polish ethnic minority. The institutional trajectory of the Lithuanian Russian Union, established in 1995, subsequently weakened, and ultimately dissolved in 2021, illustrates this process of organizational decline and political marginalization. By contrast, the Polish ethnic minority, though numerically small, has demonstrated a more consistent capacity to preserve and advance its political interests. In articulating its own demands, the Polish community has simultaneously come to embody, at least symbolically, the broader concerns of Lithuania's ethnic minorities, thereby consolidating its role as a key representative actor within the country's multiethnic political landscape.

Table no 2. The largest ethnic communities in Lithuania



Source: chart prepared by the author of the work

The largest national minority in the country are Poles, they make up 6.5 percent of the population. Russians also make up a considerable part (5%). Jews, Latvians, Tatars, Germans, Romani and others in Lithuania comprise 0.6% each, for this reason they are presented in one group in the table.

As the Polish ethnic group is the largest minority in Lithuania, they make up a significant part of the Lithuanian population, especially in the south-eastern part of Lithuania, near the Polish border. The Polish ethnic minority in Lithuania faces various situations and challenges related to cultural identity, language, education and other issues. Aspects of culture and language become particularly emphasized in the state discourse, as Poles in Lithuania preserve their cultural heritage, language and traditions. There are Polish schools and cultural centres in the country, which promote the preservation of the Polish language and culture⁹.

When assessing the aspect of education, which often becomes an actualized problem, it should be noted that there are Polish schools in Lithuania where citizens can receive education in Polish. However, sometimes these issues of funding and order of educational institutions raise disputes and challenges at the state level. Civil rights are becoming an increasingly relevant aspect when monitoring information in the public space, because even though the Polish national minority in Lithuania has civil rights, there are also disputes regarding the scope and assurance of certain rights. And this encourages the assessment of political relations with the representation of ethnic minorities in the country¹⁰. Various organizations of the Polish national minority operate in Lithuania, which aim to protect the interests of the Polish national minority and improve its situation. However, the most debates arise from the representation of national minorities in politics, because for a long time in this area this area has been concentrated in the prerogative of one political party, the Lithuanian Poles' Election Action – Union of Christian Families, when the political party, in order to be seen as a political force in the country, often escalates many problems, due to which the ethical behavior of Poles the minority falls into a threatened context in Lithuania.

Currently, various international legal acts are in force in Europe, but there is no single and specific definition of the concept of a national minority¹¹. The theories formulated in legal provisions and doctrines allow us to conclude that a group of persons living in the territory of a specific state,

⁹ G. Hogan-Brun, M. Ramonienė, L. Grumadienė, *The language situation in Lithuania*, „Journal of Baltic Studies” 2005, 36 (3), pp. 345–49.

¹⁰ A. Szafrąńska, G. Čiuladienė, *Szkolnictwo w stanie zagrożenia? Polska i litewska perspektywa zmian a sytuacja w szkole w Litwie*. „Edukacja Międzykulturowa” 2023, nr 22(3), pp. 162–175.

¹¹ J. Wołkonowski, *Education in Polish and a level of higher education of Polish minority in Lithuania*, „Kultura i edukacja”, 2017, nr 4, pp. 106–121.

constituting less than half of its population and distinguished from the majority by its objective and subjective features, is recognized as a national minority in international law. National states are given the discretion to define a national minority in their national legislation¹².

National minorities are also not precisely defined in Lithuanian legal acts. The Law on National Minorities, which regulated their rights and freedoms, has been formally ratified in 1989. It emphasized that all citizens in Lithuania, regardless of their nationality, are guaranteed equal political, economic and social rights and freedoms, their national identity and cultural continuity are recognized, national self-awareness and its self-expression are encouraged. In the article, national minorities are mentioned as “people of various nationalities living in Lithuania, whose historical path is closely connected with the fate of the Lithuanian nation”¹³.

However, in 2010, on January 1, the Law on National Minorities ceased to be valid, and currently there is no law in the state that determines the status of national minorities. Knut Vollebaek, the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, who visited Lithuania, said: “There is no obligation to have a law on national minorities and there are many countries that do not have it. In my opinion, the problem in your case is that you had a National Minorities Act that expired. Symbolically, this creates a different situation than if you had not had such a law. According to the Council of Europe report, there appears to be a legal vacuum after the law expires”¹⁴. A legal vacuum that persisted for 14 years was finally resolved with the adoption of the new National Minorities Law in November 2024, effectively addressing a significant legislative gap in Lithuania. The Equal Opportunities Law is designed to ensure the enforcement of Article 29 of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, which guarantees equality and prohibits the restriction of human rights or granting of privileges based on gender, race, nationality, language, origin, social status, faith, beliefs, or views. Additionally, this law facilitates the implementation of relevant European Union legal acts, as well as other international legal instruments, as specified in its annex¹⁵.

¹² A. Szafrńska, G. Čiuladienė, op. cit., pp. 165–170.

¹³ Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. Law on National Minorities http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc_l?p_id=22150&p_query=&p_tr2=2 (access: 19.06.2025)

¹⁴ Bns. Inf. *Tautinių mažumų įstatymo nebuvimas sukuria teisinį vakuumą*. <http://www.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/tautiniu-mazumu-istatymo-nebuvimas-sukuria-teisini-vakuuma-389785> (access: 21.06.2025)

¹⁵ J. Wołkonowski, op. cit., pp. 110–117.

On November 7, 2024, the Lithuanian Parliament adopted the Law on National Minorities, which formally defines the concepts of national minorities and persons belonging to national minorities, explicitly requiring Lithuanian citizenship as a prerequisite. This marks a departure from previous population censuses, which categorized all permanent residents not of Lithuanian nationality as national minorities regardless of citizenship status. Consequently, the current figures for persons classified as belonging to national minorities under this new law will need to be reassessed.

Political Representation

The main concentration of the Polish ethnic minority in contemporary Lithuania is in the Vilnius region, especially in the municipalities of Šalčininkai (76,3%), Vilnius (46.8%), Trakai (27.5%) and Švenčionys (24,3%). Their political weight is testified to by the presence of this minority in Lithuanian political life. The political party of the Lithuanian Polish Election Campaigns – Unions of Christian Families (EAPL)¹⁶ in Lithuania has been active in articulating the rights of the Polish community. It has held seats in the Seimas, or the parliament of Lithuania and has consistently positioned itself as an advocate for national minorities. At the national level, one of the EAPL's greatest achievements was the 2019 parliamentary elections, when the party, together with the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union and the Lithuanian Social Democratic Labor Party formed a coalition government and held two ministerial portfolios: the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Transport and Communications. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the party has not succeeded in addressing the most important issues affecting Polish minorities. Moreover, the much-desired Law on Minorities was adopted during a period later when the EAPL was not even in government.

According to Lijphart's consociational democracy framework, ethnic minorities can achieve political influence through proportional representation and segmental autonomy mechanisms, which is evident in EAPL's success in municipal elections¹⁷.

¹⁶ Lithuanian abbreviation LLRA-KŠS

¹⁷ A. Lijphart, *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries*, New Haven 1999.

Table no. 3. The largest proportion of Polish nationals in municipalities



Source: chart prepared by the author of the work

At the beginning of 1994, the Law on Public Organizations came into force in Lithuania, according to which organizations had to reorganize into political parties or continue to remain public organizations by the end of the year. Until that time, the Lithuanian Polish Union was a public-political organization, which gave it the right to participate in public and political life. In May of the same year, the Seimas of Lithuania adopted a law according to which only political parties and political organizations could participate in the elections. The Polish community, which does not have its own party, faced a difficult task – how to maintain the Union and at the same time participate in the political life of Lithuania? Lithuanian Polish Election Campaigns – Unions of Christian Families (EAPL) – Lithuanian political party founded in 1994 October. This party claims to represent national minorities, but the majority are Polish and Russian national minorities¹⁸.

EAPL implements the assumptions of the statute by participating in elections of various levels – from municipal and parliamentary to the European Parliament elections in 2004. The last 10 years The EAPL governs in districts with a large population of Polish: Vilnius (63 percent Polish) and Šalčininkai (80 percent Polish). In the municipal elections in these districts, EAPL consistently collects 60–70 percent of the votes. In several other districts, the EAPL belongs to the ruling majority and influences the decisions made. Throughout its existence, EAPL fought and defended the rights of the

¹⁸ V. Sirutavičius, *Lietuviai ir Lietuvos lenkai, Lietuva ir Lenkija 1988–1994 metais*, Vilnius 2017.

Polish national minority in Lithuania. The party has been particularly active in defending bilingual signage rights, organizing numerous protests against restrictions on Polish-language public signs and advocating for the recognition of traditional Polish place names in areas with significant Polish populations. Not once organized the protest actions held in front of the Lithuanian Seimas in defence of Polish education, language and land. Together with the Polish Union of Lithuania and the Association of Polish Schools of Lithuania “Macierz Szkolna” conducted a campaign to collect signatures for projects favourable to the Polish community, laws on education and national minorities¹⁹.

EAPL takes care of Polish schools in the Vilnius Region and the economic development of the region. 20 years of joint work ensured the strongest position in the world for the Polish community of Lithuania, compared to other Polish communities outside the homeland. EAPL currently has more the 2000 members. At the congress of the Lithuanian Polish election campaign held on May 7, 2016, it was decided to expand and supplement the name of the party. On June 16, 2016, the extended name of the party was officially registered at the Ministry of Justice. Since then, the official name of the party is the Lithuanian Polish Election Campaigns – Unions of Christian Families. It should be noted that the chairman of the party Mr. Waldemar Tomaszewski has been a member of the European Parliament of Lithuania since 2009.

Table no 4. EAPL participation in municipal, Seimas and European Parliament elections.

Year	Elections	Received mandates
1996	Seimas elections of the Republic of Lithuania	1 mandate
2000	Seimas elections of the Republic of Lithuania	2 mandates
2004	European Parliament elections	0 mandate
2004	Seimas elections of the Republic of Lithuania	2 mandates
2007	Elections of Lithuanian municipal councils	53 mandates
2008	Seimas elections of the Republic of Lithuania	3 mandates
2009	European Parliament elections	1 mandate
2011	Elections of Lithuanian municipal councils	65 mandates
2012	Seimas elections of the Republic of Lithuania	8 mandates
2014	European Parliament elections	1 mandate
2015	Elections of Lithuanian municipal councils	67 mandates
2016	Seimas elections of the Republic of Lithuania	8 mandates

¹⁹ A. Szafrńska, G. Čiuladienė, op. cit, pp. 167–173.

Year	Elections	Received mandates
2019	European Parliament elections	1 mandate
2019	Elections of Lithuanian municipal councils	56 mandates
2020	Seimas elections of the Republic of Lithuania	3 mandates
2023	Elections of Lithuanian municipal councils	57 mandates
2024	European Parliament elections	1 mandate

Source: compiled by the author

The party has strong performance in local municipal council elections, demonstrating a robust local support base. This shows a big influence in Eastern Lithuanian part municipalities. While the Seimas elections show variability, indicating changing levels of national support or shifts in political strategy. Although the persistent low representation in the European Parliament suggests challenges in gaining a foothold at the European level, but this indicates a strong EAPL party leadership influence as Mr. Waldemar Tomaszewski is the only EU member who got a mandate in European Parliament elections 4 times in a row. The Polish ethnic minorities researcher Paweł Sobik evaluates the political achievements of ethnic Poles very highly, noting that nowhere else in Europe did Poles attain such success²⁰.

Despite the presence of Polish political parties in Lithuania, there is a discernible global trend impacting ethnic minorities, illustrating that it is not imperative for representatives of ethnic groups to align exclusively with parties representing their specific ethnic constituencies. This trend is evident in recent electoral outcomes and governmental appointments. For instance, in the latest elections, Social Democrat Robert Duchnevič was elected as the mayor of Vilnius District Municipality, while member of the liberal party Ewelina Dobrowolska was appointed as Minister of Justice in 2020. These appointments reflect a broader, inclusive political dynamic where ethnic minority representatives engage in various political platforms beyond those traditionally associated with their ethnic groups.

Future Implications, Challenges and Contributions

Kymlicka's distinction between polyethnic rights and national minority rights offers a valuable analytical framework for examining the aspirations

²⁰ P. Sobik, *Nowhere in Europe did Poles achieve such success*, <https://media.efhr.eu/2017/06/02/pawel-sobik-nowhere-europe-poles-achieve-success/> (19.06.2025)

of the Polish minority in Lithuania, as their demands encompass both cultural recognition and sustained political representation²¹. From this perspective, the Polish community seeks not merely the accommodation of cultural practices, but also territorially embedded rights connected to long-standing historical presence. The media landscape plays a critical role in supporting these claims. Polish-language outlets such as *Kurier Wileński*, as well as radio and television programmes produced in cooperation with Poland's public media, function as key mechanisms of cultural reproduction and linguistic continuity. Through these platforms, the community maintains access to public discourse in the mother tongue, reinforcing the symbolic boundaries that sustain minority identity²². Looking toward the future, the trajectory of cultural representation of the Polish minority may generate multiple political, social, and cultural consequences: both for Lithuania as a nation-state and for the internal dynamics of the Polish community. These developments will likely interact with broader processes including globalization, digital communication, and evolving European norms regarding minority protection. Politically, the Lithuanian Poles' Electoral Action (EAPL) may continue to secure strong electoral support in southeastern regions, enabling the party to shape debates around education, bilingual signage, and funding of cultural institutions²³. Sustained political representation through EAPL or through increasingly diversified participation in mainstream parties could further institutionalize minority concerns within national policymaking.

One of the most persistent long-term challenges remains the issue of language policy. As noted by Sirutavičius, demands for Polish to obtain co-official status in majority-Polish districts date back to the founding congress of Lithuanian Poles in 1989²⁴. These claims reflect deeper historical currents: Polish national consciousness has traditionally been more pronounced in southeastern Lithuania, shaped by complex legacies of statehood, regional identity, and interwar border politics²⁵. Whether bilingualism evolves into a sustainable, state-supported model will depend on the balance between

²¹ W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights*, Oxford 1995.

²² G. Hogan-Brun, M. Ramonienė, L. Grumadienė, *The language situation in Lithuania*, „Journal of Baltic Studies” 2005, 36 (3), pp. 345–368.

²³ D. J. Smith, J. Hiden, *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State: National Cultural Autonomy Revisited*, London 2012; D. Budrytė, *Taming Nationalism? Political Community Building in the Post-Soviet Baltic States*, Aldershot 2005.

²⁴ V. Sirutavičius, *Lietuviai ir Lietuvos lenkai, Lietuva ir Lenkija 1988–1994 metais*, Vilnius 2017.

²⁵ A. E. Senn, *Lithuania Awakening*, Los Angeles 1990.

national language consolidation policies and European standards promoting the protection of regional or minority languages²⁶.

If current domains of Polish language use, education, public signage, media, and religious life, remain stable or expand, bilingualism may become a durable feature of southeastern Lithuania's sociolinguistic landscape. Such an outcome would allow the Polish minority to maintain linguistic and cultural continuity while participating actively in Lithuania's political and civic life. Conversely, restrictive interpretations of language laws or inconsistent implementation of minority rights risk generating alienation, particularly among younger generations who confront competing linguistic identities and differential opportunities tied to language proficiency²⁷. A successful model of integration – one that acknowledges minority cultural heritage while promoting civic inclusion – could enhance social cohesion and strengthen interethnic cooperation. This scenario would reinforce both internal solidarity within the Polish minority and its ties with other ethnic communities, enriching Lithuania's overall cultural landscape.

Comparative regional analyses support the view that the Polish minority in Lithuania constitutes a relatively successful case of minority political integration in the Baltic region. Galbreath's examination of Latvian minority policies indicates that Lithuanian approaches, despite periodic tensions and legal inconsistencies, remain comparatively more effective in incorporating minority claims into democratic processes²⁸. Furthermore, as Agarín and Dambraška argue, the success of the ideologically distinct EAPL demonstrates that in nationalizing states symbolic representation often outweighs substantive policy delivery: it is sufficient for a minority party to articulate shared grievances rooted in contested nation-state building²⁹. In this context, the political mobilization of the Polish minority relies significantly on identity-based narratives and historical memory, even as new trends indicate gradual diversification of political engagement.

Overall, future challenges and opportunities for the Polish minority in Lithuania will hinge on the complex interplay between national legislation, European minority-rights norms, local community initiatives, and broader

²⁶ F. Palermo, J. Woelk, *Diritto costituzionale comparato dei gruppi e delle minoranze*, Milano 2021.

²⁷ N. Kasatkina, V. Beresnevičiūtė, *Ethnic structure, inequality and governance of the public sector in Lithuania*. „Etniškumo studijos/Ethnicity Studies”, 2010, no. 1–2, pp. 7–25.

²⁸ D. J. Galbreath, *The role of the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the EU in the promotion of minority rights in the Baltic states*. In: J. Joachim, B. Reinalda & B. Verbeek (eds.) 2006. *International organizations and effective policy implementation*, London 2006, p. 161–173.

²⁹ T. Agarín, K. Dambrauskas, *Pork Barrel and Identity Politics: Explaining a Minority Party's Electoral Success in Lithuania*, „Nationalities Papers” 2024, vol. 53, no. 4, p. 1–20.

political developments in the Baltic region. If managed constructively, these dynamics may consolidate a model of minority integration that balances cultural vitality with active civic participation.

Conclusions

The political presence of the Polish minority in Lithuania, despite its relatively small demographic share, constitutes a notable case of minority agency within a nationalizing state. Concentrated primarily in the Vilnius and Šalčininkai regions, this community continues to draw on historically rooted identities shaped by the legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which informs both its collective self-perception and patterns of political participation. Contemporary political influence has long been articulated through the Lithuanian Poles' Election Action (EAPL), a party that has served as the primary platform for mobilizing minority interests at the local and national levels. While traditionally associated with education, language rights, and cultural protection, the party's role has also extended to broader debates on minority policy frameworks in Lithuania.

Recent developments, however, indicate a gradual reconfiguration of representation dynamics. Increasing numbers of politicians of Polish origin, such as Robert Duchnevič or Ewelina Dobrowolska, have attained prominent positions within mainstream political parties, suggesting an ongoing diversification of political avenues beyond ethnically defined platforms. This shift reflects a broader trend towards more inclusive, civic-oriented modes of political integration and demonstrates that ethnic affiliation no longer exclusively determines political alignment or opportunities for political advancement. Such diversification may signal an emerging model of minority participation in which symbolic representation intersects with substantive engagement across various segments of the political system.

Nevertheless, these positive tendencies coexist with persistent challenges related to cultural and linguistic continuity. Ensuring the long-term vitality of Polish educational institutions, media, and cultural organizations remains central to the community's ability to preserve its identity while navigating the pressures of integration. The adoption of the National Minorities Law in 2024, after a 14-year legislative hiatus, marks a significant institutional step: it strengthens legal protections, clarifies rights linked to citizenship, and reinforces the normative framework governing minority-state relations. Yet its effective implementation will be critical in determining whether it

can meaningfully support both cultural preservation and equitable participation.

The future trajectory of the Polish minority's integration hinges on the extent to which bilingualism, cultural resilience, and civic engagement can be reconciled within Lithuania's democratic environment. Successful integration may foster deeper mutual understanding and cooperation between the majority and minority populations, whereas insufficient or uneven integration – especially among younger generations – risks reinforcing feelings of marginalization or cultural dislocation.

In sum, the Polish minority in Lithuania represents a comparatively successful example of political integration in the Baltic context. Its evolving forms of representation, sustained cultural vitality, and increasing presence in diverse political arenas contribute to the pluralistic character of Lithuanian democracy, even as ongoing debates over language policy, identity maintenance, and minority rights continue to shape the contours of this integration process.

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