

# Assimilation in contemporary Lithuanian society: choosing the language of education

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## SUMMARY

### Introduction

When sociological discourse was dominated by modernisation theories assimilation was considered one of the main processes in modernising society (e.g. Gordon 1964; Deutsch 1969), but the wave of multiculturalism and rise of activism among ethnic minorities in many countries of the world in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> c. established a critical perception of assimilation. Forced assimilation was part of policy in many 20<sup>th</sup> c. states, and there were grounds for giving assimilation negative meaning. But as a result assimilation began to be associated exceptionally with losses rather than with equal treatment and equal choices. Throughout the last few decades, a theoretical approach to the analysis of assimilation as a social process has been lacking. Different approaches emerged only when the search for bases of society and for forms of commonality reappeared in discourse of social science (Barry 2002; Brubaker 2001; Joppke 1999).

Most ethnicity and nationalism studies seek to explain how people that belong to a certain category begin to associate, agree on collective goals and act in solidarity (Brubaker 2000). The analysis of assimilation is part of this field of study, yet the focus is not on the identity construction that takes place at the centre of ethnic or racial groups, but on transgressing ethnic boundaries, i.e. the process through which ascribed identity and belonging changes.

Interest in this research on assimilation in contemporary Lithuania was prompted by the changing ethnic composition of the country as registered in the 2001 census, also, by data on the changing proportions of schoolchildren in the sectors of public education (there are sectors of the educational system in Lithuania that differ in the language of instruction – Lithuanian, Russian, or Polish). The census revealed that the share of those who identified themselves as Lithuanians increased from 80 perc. in 1979 and 1989 to 83 perc. in 2001, but there was a lack of clear data on the demographic structure within ethnic groups. Apart from that, information on the education system showed that a proportion of non-Lithuanian pupils opt for education in Lithuanian, at the same time, the reorganisation of education system (e.g. decreasing number of schools) were viewed as controversial, especially by the largest minority communities, the Polish and Russian.

Previous researches have identified the uneven social situation of Lithuanian ethnic groups and revealed that integration is not all-encompassing or the same for all groups. 2002–2003 statistics disclosed higher unemployment rates among ethnic minorities; other research has discovered that minority members self-evaluate their social status worse than Lithuanians do (Kasatkina, Leončikas 2003), and are not evenly represented in the public sector (Beršnevičiūtė 2005). This data encourages new questions about how the ethnic and social structure will affect identity changes and assimilation in particular. However, regardless of preconditions for assimilation discussed in ethnicity studies, social factors stimulating assimilation at the level of individual are not obvious and defined – this is what is needed for disclosing real contents of assimilation.

This research continues and complements that stream of ethnicity studies that focuses on changing ethnic structure and analyses the formation of different social segments within ethnic groups. This study relies on original empirical research and introduces new data with regard to uneven social positions of ethnic groups in Lithuania.

This study suggests a theoretical scheme of social factors that affect assimilation at the level of the individual. The study approaches assimilation as a process in social space rather than an issue of quantitative (im)balance between ethnic groups. In developing such an approach, the traditional perception of assimilation as a process taking place within an ethnic group is abandoned, and the role of majority society is emphasised. Therefore separate attention is devoted to the ethnic majority's attitudes and the empirical analysis of relationship of minority members to majority and to majority (Lithuanian) identity. For the first time there is an attempt to identify obstacles to assimilation as experienced by people of non-majority background in contemporary Lithuanian society. This publication provides detailed analysis of the main assimilation trend in Lithuania – i.e. assimilation into mainstream society but does not cover other specific assimilation scenarios such as segmented assimilation or reassimilation.

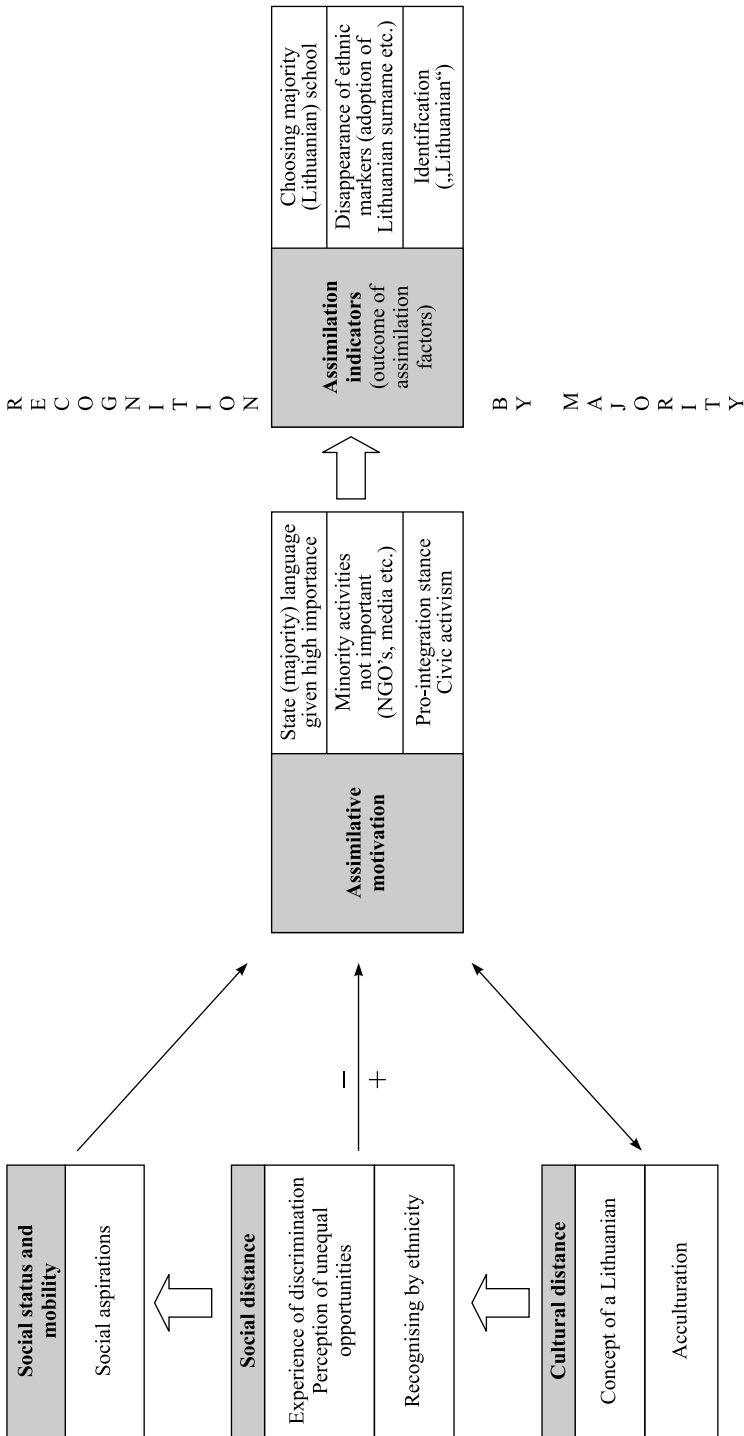
The major part of quantitative data used in statistical analysis comes from an original 2005 survey conducted for the purposes of this study. The research concentrated on a comparison between four categories of parents of first-graders: ethnic Lithuanians who chose schools with Lithuanian as a language of instruction for their children; people of non-Lithuanian background who chose schools with Lithuanian; those who chose schools with Polish; those who chose schools with Russian. The size of the entire sample was 829; it covered 12 Polish, 17 Russian, and 21 Lithuanian schools. Data collection took place in the areas that, overall, contain 80 percent of Lithuania's minority population.

For secondary analysis, official statistics, data from the Ministry of Education and Science and various applied researches, and 2001 census data were used. Qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with parents that chose different schools for their children and expert interview materials are presented. The document analysis of legal acts that regulate education and citizenship is also used. The work also relies on data from a study on adaptation of Lithuanian ethnic groups (Kasatkina, Leončikas 2003), 1990 and 1999 European Value Survey data, and data from surveys conducted by *Vilmorus* and RAIT.

## 1. Theoretical concepts of assimilation in sociology

A critical review of the main concepts of assimilation in sociology begins with a discussion of M. Gordon's (1964) scheme of sub-processes of assimilation. His study became a classic thanks to the elaboration of concepts that are continuously used in discussing assimilation; however, his scheme is not a theory since it does not formulate statements about causes of assimilation. Moreover, he does not distinguish clearly between individual and group levels of analysis. There is evidence that the role of the group in preserving ethnicity may be different than described by Gordon; structural assimilation (the sub-process that leads to all other kinds of assimilation according to Gordon) does not necessarily ensure full acceptance of minority individuals by majority. Alba and Nee (1997) have advocated an alternative view claiming that assimilation outcomes are related to existing ethnic stratification that manifests itself in the social distances between ethnic groups, therefore the exploration of the criteria of belonging to a society is essential for assimilation analysis. In addition to this, an important point for advancing sociological understanding of assimilation is reconciliation between pluralist and assimilationist approaches, i.e. recognition that both persisting diversity and assimilation continue to be part of life in contemporary society.

Lallukka's (1990) work on assimilation of autochthonous groups in the Soviet Union and Laitin's (1998) research of assimilation prospects in post-Soviet space are selected as example studies that highlight the broader context, which is important to the experience and formation of Lithuanian society. Lallukka introduces a concept of ethnic erosion for designating a situation where ethnicity gradually loses its significance in social life. Laitin provides ample empirical material about the accommodation of Russians in post-Soviet states, explaining the dynamics of assimilation and develops the argument that assimilation is a likely outcome in many contexts, especially in the Baltic states. Assimilation has received little theoretical consideration in the studies of Lithuanian society, however, the empirical researches on ethnically mixed families and on regional peculiarities are acknowledged.



THEORETICAL SCHEME: Assimilation factors at the level of the individual

New attempts to resuscitate the concept of assimilation have appeared in sociology, political philosophy, and immigration policy and citizenship studies. Brubaker (2001) claims that differentialist fever in social science is giving turn to interest in commonality, B. Barry (2002) in his egalitarian critique of multiculturalism provides a normative rehabilitation of the assimilation concept, and immigration policy studies represented by e.g. Ch.Joppke provide evidence that citizenship and ethnicity become increasingly disattached in many Western democracies while ethnic minorities, even though keeping their transnational ties, integrate into the social mechanisms of their host societies. It all leads towards the study of assimilation as a socially constructed process rather than seeing it as a demographic fact. (The review of theoretical concepts of assimilation and discussion of relevant sociological concepts is a basis for the theoretical scheme of assimilation factors at the level of the individual, provided above.) In this process, individual factors such cultural distance, experience of social distance, and attempts at social mobility, may all lead to high assimilative motivation, but the decisive barrier, without crossing which assimilation cannot occur, is recognition by the majority (or accepting group).

## 2. Structural factors of assimilation

Structural factors considered are the demographic structure of minority groups and the infrastructure of public education. Based on 2001 census data, the comparative review of age structure between ethnic groups reveals that Russians have become a relatively ageing group. The factors behind this change may include low fertility, emigration of the young and the mobile, and assimilation. In addition to this, the rate of university graduates is decreasing within the younger generation of Russians; whilst the unemployment rate within Russian community is also higher than the national average. Separate analysis is conducted in the cases of those who did not declare their ethnicity in the census. Having considered their age structure and mother tongue, there are grounds to claim that these are people of non-Lithuanian background that have certain motives not to disclose (or choose) their ethnicity. The data suggests that certain incentives to identify themselves as Lithuanians exist not only in case of children (their ethnicity was reported by parents) but also among those who are in their socially active phase of life, i.e. aged 20–39.

Poles and Russians have the lowest rate of those with Lithuanian as a mother tongue, while certain other groups (notably the Ukrainians and Belarusians who to large extent are the Soviet time migrants), have considerably higher rates of young age groups with Lithuanian as their native language. This

suggests that the formerly popular hypothesis about formation of an overarching identity of Russian-speakers is not becoming a reality.

Education is considered a crucial factor in both social mobility and assimilation analysis. It is specifically important in the case of Lithuania due to the existence of sectors of educational system in Lithuania that differ in language of instruction – Lithuanian, Russian, or Polish. The statistics reveal a trend of diminishing numbers of pupils over the 1995–2005, however, the largest decrease is observed in the case of schools with instruction in Russian. Reorganisation of schools (that is, closing of schools and/or change of the language of the instruction) is a sensitive issue for minority communities. Although the analysis of exam results between graduates of schools from different linguistic sectors reveals only minor differences, the process of non-Lithuanians switching to Lithuanian schools is observed not merely in statistics, but also in the daily experience of primary schools. Experts report that schools with instruction in Lithuanian realised that they have to mobilise extra resources for helping non-Lithuanian-speaking pupils achieve fluency in Lithuanian, since their non-Lithuanian parents are not always able to assist in this matter. It poses a question for research – what is driving those non-Lithuanian parents to send their child for education in Lithuanian even if they are aware of emerging language difficulties in the education process?

### 3. Preconditions of assimilation

The third part presents empirical research of the parents of the first-graders and analyses differences exhibited by those who choose different primary schools for their children. Blocks of indicators discussed basically correspond to the factors of assimilation illustrated in the theoretical scheme above, and include such issues as ethnic background, self-identification, social status and self-evaluation of social mobility prospects, priorities in choosing education and language of education for the children, priorities in media and language use, experience of discrimination, voting turnout, and the concept of what it means to be a Lithuanian.

The ethnic background of the parents varies across schools, with Polish schools being the most mono-ethnic; Lithuanian schools have 13 percent of pupils of both-non-Lithuanian parents (mixed families not included); a half of parents that chose Russian schools are of non-Russian (i.e. other minority) background. Having assessed ethnic diversity of first-graders' parents, the conclusion is made that the schools with the instruction in Russian tend to accommodate a larger share and spectrum of non-Lithuanian population than analogous Lithuanian institutes. Half of non-Lithuanians, who chose Lithua-

nian schools for their offspring, have graduated from Russian schools. Among the parents who sent their children to Lithuanian schools, the survey found almost no Polish school graduates.

The four groups of parents are found to differ with regard to basic social characteristics. Lithuanians, compared to the other categories of parents that were surveyed, have the highest rate of university graduates, highest income rates, and more than half of them are concentrated in white-collar jobs. More than one third in each of all the other parent groups are comprised of people in blue-collar jobs. The survey revealed that belonging to Lithuanian social and economic milieu is positively related to higher income. Non-Lithuanians, that chose schools with Lithuanian language for their children, occupy the middle strata in terms of education, but have higher income than parents of schoolchildren of the Russian and Polish schools.

Non-Lithuanians that chose Lithuanian schools feel more positively about their social advancement prospects than those who chose schools with minority language of instruction. They also have a greater degree of Lithuanian language use – both at work and through media. Assimilation prospects are seen as related to strategies of social mobility. It is concluded that school cannot be considered an independent factor in the assimilation process; the choice of a school is an aftermath of the parents' integration and of their assimilative attitudes rather than the other way round.

Non-Lithuanians that chose Lithuanian schools find the label of Lithuanian more acceptable in various situations as compared to other non-Lithuanian groups. More than others, they tend to prefer being considered Lithuanians and in many cases accept if their children are labelled Lithuanian. As far as criteria of who can be considered a Lithuanian are concerned, all non-Lithuanian categories surveyed emphasised fluency in Lithuanian language. Moreover, they also placed a high importance on personal names – the kind of marker that is rarely reflected or recognised in public, but which nevertheless is a powerful everyday practice. Ethnic Lithuanians gave highest rank to citizenship which may mean the emergence of a broader and more inclusive notion of nation than an ethnic one (which used to prevail).

Regression analysis reveals that social success makes it more likely that the individual will find assimilation acceptable. The single strongest correlation was between expressed preference to be considered a Lithuanian and a belief that one's children have enough opportunities to acquire social status not any lower than that of a respondent. Ethnic Russians, who as a category see their prospects for social advancement in the worst terms, display the highest level of disapprobation with being labelled Lithuanian. Poles tend to be more willing to be considered Lithuanian themselves, but are more reluctant to have their children labelled so. Again, it means that assimilation into Lithua-

nian identity is not necessarily a straightforward assimilation narrowly understood, but a process that involves emergence of a broader (than ethnic) concept of a nation.

#### 4. Obstacles for assimilation in social interaction

Obstacles for assimilation are considered in three areas: individual interaction as shown in the analysis of interview material; the level of societal attitudes as can be seen from the survey data; the level of institutional arrangements as can be seen through examination of citizenship law.

Most parents interviewed acknowledge the functional importance of good knowledge of Lithuanian language, and emphasise importance of university education in every case. It is typical that parents have expressed detailed opinions with regard to school preferences. There are certain signs, that complement first-grader-parent survey results, that trust in the quality of education provided at schools with non-Lithuanian language of instruction is diminishing. Choosing a school with Lithuanian as the language of instruction must not necessarily mean abandoning ethnic identity, however, it often coincides with an openness to assimilation: when asked about what ethnicity their children will be when they grow up, interviewees tend to leave this for their children to choose. With regard to their own experience, the interviewees explain how ethnic markers such as non-Lithuanian surnames emerge as a sign by which they are reminded of their backgrounds. It all shows that the emotional contents of assimilation include a broad continuum: from unnoticeable conformist behaviour to individual drama. The main problem of assimilation is not so much at the state policy level, as it is the fact that society is not entirely ready to leave the choice of one's ethnicity up to an individual. Analysis of societal attitudes as measured by the surveys reveals a certain ethnic closeness of Lithuanians. Nevertheless, most ethnic groups exhibit the same hierarchies of the disliked groups which as a consequence means that the groups disliked by the most other groups have very limited chances to escape their identity. Finally, the 2002 amendments to the Law on Citizenship entrenched the distinction between ethnic Lithuanians and non-Lithuanians in legal norms. The law introduced a stipulation with regard to those who can obtain second citizenship (next to a Lithuanian one) and those who cannot: the latter category being Lithuanian citizens of ethnically non-Lithuanian origin. Instead of having this distinction which is contrary to the emerging sense of a broader concept of nation (as discussed in survey result analysis), a proposal is made to reformulate the Law's stipulation in non-ethnic terms (i.e. allowing the double citizenship to descendants of Lithuanian citizens without differentiating by their ethnic background).



## Conclusions

The research confirmed that there is a certain ethnic variety in schools with instruction in Lithuanian. This variety of ethnic backgrounds in schools supports the imperative to separate language of instruction from assuming that certain school belongs to particular ethnic community merely based on instruction language. Besides that, ethnic variety in schools with Russian language of instruction is greater than in Lithuanian schools and also better corresponds to the ethnic composition of the country: the fact which means that Russian as a language and Russian school as a social institute integrates part of non-Lithuanian population to a larger degree than analogous Lithuanian institutes.

*Sectors of Lithuanian education system with different language of instruction reflect unequal positions of ethnic groups: individuals that chose different sectors also differ in their social-economic position (measured by indicators of education, income, and type of work).* In this way, ethnicity in Lithuanian society manifests not merely as a cultural phenomenon, but as factor of social differences.

Among Lithuanians, as compared to other categories of parents that were surveyed, there is a higher rate of university graduates, higher income rates, and more than half of them are concentrated in white-collar jobs. More than one third in all the other parent groups are comprised of people in blue-collar jobs. The survey revealed that belonging to the Lithuanian social and economic milieu is positively related to higher income. Non-Lithuanians, that chose schools with Lithuanian language for their children, occupy the middle strata in terms of education, but have higher income than parents of schoolchildren of the Russian and Polish schools.

The differences across educational sectors are not determined by parents' educational attainment: having educational attainment controlled, the correlation between chosen school's language of instruction and income level remains statistically significant. The observed differences in social position may be among the early indicators that educational infrastructure becomes differentiated along the social hierarchy lines.

*Choosing education for children with instruction in Lithuanian is influenced by the strategy of social mobility: assimilative behaviour is a part of strategic social mobility planning.* Schools with Lithuanian as the language of instruction are chosen by those who are in the process of social mobility or seek it. This conclusion is best confirmed by analysis of the group of non-Lithuanian parents that chose Lithuanian schools for their children. Non-Lithuanians more than others believe that Lithuanian-school-graduates can achieve more, and educating children in the state-language is the highest rated reason of choosing a

particular school in their group. It shows that choosing a Lithuanian school is a strategic rather than accidental move and confirms the hypothesis about the relationship between assimilative behaviour and a strategy of social mobility.

Non-Lithuanians, that chose Lithuanian schools for their children, are more confident about possibilities for non-Lithuanians in larger society than those who chose Russian or Polish schools or than ethnic Lithuanians. When compared to other surveyed groups in respect of social status (based on indicators such as income, education, and type of work), non-Lithuanians seem to be people who have gained momentum in social mobility. Their position is one of the proofs that entering the Lithuanian milieu helps the individual gain advantage, and this fact may be among the main incentives for assimilation.

*Research data do not confirm that school is a major factor in assimilation, as it is often assumed in minority discourse. Rather, individual integration and emergence of assimilative attitudes (among the parents of the first-graders) takes place before they choose particular educational sector. Choosing school with a particular language of instruction (e.g. Lithuanian) is an expression of the latter process, not its cause. Firstly, an individual enters a particular social milieu, economic activity or segment of labour market which results in his/her belonging to a strata of higher income, and only then s/he is likely to choose a school for the children, not the other way round.*

*Social distance, related to actual or perceived inequality, stimulates assimilative behaviour if minorities have opportunities and resources for social mobility. Social success makes assimilation more acceptable: those who do not experience social distance and believe in their social advancement, have stronger agreement with assimilative attitudes than those whose self-evaluation of their status is negative and who see the opportunities for advancement as limited. Indicators of social mobility, that according to research data correlate with pro-assimilation attitudes, are the following: positive self-evaluation of achieved status and positive evaluation of social mobility prospects.*

For ethnic minority members, social mobility often has an extra dimension that is related to how the surrounding society reacts to their ethnic differences. A notion of what it means to be Lithuanian and what features a person has to have to be regarded one, reflects requirements and obstacles a minority member has to counter if s/he wishes to belong to the core society. The surveyed category (i.e. non-Lithuanians that chose Lithuanian schools) that is similar to the ethnic majority in respect to its channel of social mobility (i.e. the chosen Lithuanian school) emphasises achieved characteristics. Other categories put greater emphasis on origins (such as Poles do) or ascribed features such as personal names (emphasised by those who chose schools with Russian language of instruction). That means that individual's features which

explicitly refer to his/her minority background might not be the right resources for achieving equity in society at large. Yet, if opportunities are open, social success makes assimilation more acceptable: one of the main findings of this dissertation is that those who do not perceive to be socially distanced and believe in social advancement tend to find assimilation more acceptable. Strictly speaking, these conclusions are limited to that segment of Lithuanian ethnic minorities who have children of primary school age. Nevertheless, it is the segment of minority population which partially shapes choices of their descendants and therefore reflect future trends.

Survey data expands former knowledge and shows that there is increasing evidence of Russians sliding into social exclusion. Russians are the group that feels discriminated more often than others, are most negative in self-evaluation of their social status and social mobility opportunities. Earlier interpretations that [in post-1990 period] among Lithuania's Poles, segregational attitude prevails, and among Russians, prointegrationist attitude dominates, were too generalising. They expressed the political opinions of the day, but did not take account of rapid social changes. The situation of two largest minorities in Lithuania has changed. Results of this study help setting up further research guidelines: to identify what processes prevail among the minority elite, and what trends are characteristic for the relatively unprivileged minority members.

Demographic features of the ethnic groups as registered in the 2001 census show that structural preconditions for assimilation have strengthened: younger age groups of the minorities, in comparison to their elders, have better knowledge of Lithuanian and tend to have it as a mother tongue more often.

*However, adopting a Lithuanian identity [identifying oneself as a Lithuanian] does not necessarily mean ethnic assimilation. Tendency among those with non-Lithuanian background to accept Lithuanian identity shows that within the identity of Lithuanian, the civic dimension becomes a reality. Lithuanian language and identifying oneself as a Lithuanian may be acceptable or non-acceptable to various groups at a different degree, but all this is not necessarily related to ethnic assimilation in a narrow sense; rather, it shows a new, i.e. civic, dimension in this identity option. Emphasis on citizenship as expressed by ethnic Lithuanians and the fact that those minority members who have a clear non-Lithuanian ethnic identity accept them being considered Lithuanians, show the tendency for ethnic and civic identity to be overlapping rather than mutually exclusive. It does not mean that assimilation will spread or gain pace or that we can predict the future scale of assimilation processes. Instead, the emerging foundations of the national identity (as overarching ethnic identities) means that individuals of diverse backgrounds have more chances for a common identity, and also, that assimilation for those, who opt for it, can become easier.*