Educational role of Lithuanian cultural and educational associations in the Wilno region in the Second Republic of Poland

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This activity, which was under the influence of different and never stable in their assumptions and objectives of the policy of Polish and Lithuanian authorities implemented different forms and content. Cultural – educational and social associations of Lithuanian minority among their statutory objectives and tasks for education and upbringing also played a crucial role of the factor creating national identity of Lithuanians, together with expected attitudes and behaviors in political, social, religious and moral dimensions. They also played a great educational role activating in the field of education, economy and culture minorities Lithuanian. They united and strengthen the people living in the Vilnius region of Lithuanian nationality.

Key words: *Lithuanian minority; Lithuanian cultural and educational associations; Educational Association "Rytas"; St. Casimir Association*

In the autumn of 1920 the fighting between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Lithuania ended. This did not mean, however, that the relations between the two countries were normalised. The main causes of disagreement included the unsolved problem of the nationality of Wilno and the Wilno region as well as the situation of the Lithuanian population of this area[1].

The inclusion of the Wilno region into the state of Poland – the result of the utter failure of the concept of a federation – led to the introduction of general guidelines of the policy of the Polish government, the implementation of which began as early as 1921 in the remaining north-eastern lands. In the undertaken assumptions, presuming that the assimilation of minority communities (including the Lithuanian ones) would be quick, it was proposed, among others, that non-Polish

[1] Śleszyński, W. (2009). *Świat pogranicza. Stosunki społeczno-polityczne na pograniczu polsko-litewsko-białoruskim w XX i XXI wieku.* Białystok: Wydawnictwo PRYMAT, p. 61.

(Lithuanian) schooling be dissolved, and the activities of cultural, educational, and social minority associations (including Lithuanian ones) be limited. National (Lithuanian) minority centres were being shut down under a number of formal pretexts (e.g. low level of education, too low number of students, actions contrary to the interests of the state or legal regulations). For example, in March 1923 the number of Lithuanian public schools dropped to 44 from the 62 that functioned in 1921.

This state of affairs was in fact an informal state of war between Poland and Lithuania. This was reflected in the attitude of the Polish state towards the Lithuanian minority, and the minority's attitude towards the state[2].

According to the 1931 population census in the wileńskie, nowogródzkie, and poleskie voivodships (provinces) there lived 82,000 Lithuanians (0.3% of the entire population) and 1,342,000 Poles (also: 1,407,000 Belarusians, 216,000 Jews, 7,000 Russians, and 61,000 other nationalities). In the wilieńsko-trocki poviate (district) alone there lived 18,812 Lithuanians and 178,991 Poles which constituted accordingly 8.87% Lithuanians and 83.34% Poles in relation to the entire population of 212,117[3].

From 1926 to 1927 the gminas (communes) in the wileńskie voivodship with the highest Lithuanian population were the following:

- Twerecka (out of the population of 5,256 settled in 8 villages Lithuanians constituted 92%, and Poles – 1%),
- Daugieliszki (out of the population of 11,522 settled in 11 villages Lithuanians constituted 83.2%, and Poles – 4%),
- Zabłociska (population of 8,246 in 7 villages, 83.2% Lithuanians, 11% Poles),
- Łyngmiany (population of 4,357 in 8 villages, 79.6% Lithuanians, 9% Poles),
- Dukszty (population of 5,745 in 10 villages, 70% Lithuanians, 10% Poles),
- Mielegjany (population of 7,928 in 6 villages, 67% Lithuanians, 11.3% Poles),
- Hoduliszki (population of 10,045 in 10 villages, 42% Lithuanians, 24.3% Poles)[4].

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2 Ibidem.

3 Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybes Archyvas [LCVA], Wileński Urząd Wojewódzki [WUW], Ruch narodowościowy, f. 51, op. 17, Issue 53, pp. 104, 133.
In light of the latest studies the figures appear underestimated. Wojciech Śleszyński states that in the north-eastern regions of the Second Republic of Poland there lived: 1,400,000 Poles, 1,400,000 Belarusians, 308,000 Jews, 219,000 Ukrainians, 100,000 Lithuanians, 66,000 Russians and a few thousand other minorities, including 3,000 Germans.

4 LCVA, WUW, Ruch narodowościowy, f. 51, op. 17, Issue 53, pp. 86, 153.

Lithuanian authorities led an intensive anti-Polish propaganda campaign among the Lithuanian minority inhabiting the Wilno region. The action would reinforce the already powerful Lithuanian aversion to the Polish state. The lack of trust in the Polish state was also prominent among Lithuanian youth, who would decide to migrate to Lithuania in order to, among others, organise institutions, cultural, educational, economic, and social associations, or to join the growing anti-Polish resistance movement. The tendency was particularly strong from 1921 to 1923, and it would weaken in the following years[5].

On 15. March1923 the Council of Ambassadors recognised the demarcation line as the actual state border between Poland and Lithuania. This led to a change in political and diversion actions on the Lithuanian side. The aim of the resistance groups that were still being organised in Lithuania in 1924 was only to initiate minor conflicts and incidents, with no hope for a future war. The intention of the Lithuanian authorities, that did not arrive at a decision to use force, was to foster the sense of insecurity and a Polish threat among the citizens. It was announced repeatedly that Wilno would be set free. On 16. February1925 in Lithuania there took place a referendum (in district towns) for the inclusion of Wilno in Lithuania. The goal of these actions was to keep the Lithuanian minority hostile towards the Polish state. As a result, Lithuanians would assume negative attitudes and act against the interests of the state. The state of tension between Poland and Lithuania was clearly reflected in the relations between the Polish and the Lithuanian population. There were numerous conflicts and fights between neighbours. Polish authorities, fearing an escalation of conflicts near the border, followed closely the establishment and development of social and political organisations in Lithuania and their influence in Poland[6].

The Temporary Committee of Lithuanians of the Wilno Region [Tymczasowy Komitet Litwinów Wileńskich] was a subject of particular interest of Polish authorities. It was a social and political organisation that claimed to represent all the Lithuanian communities in Poland. The committee was established when the Polish administration was still being formed – in April 1919. Since the beginning it advocated the inclusion of Wilno and its region in Lithuania. In relation to questions of administration it would provide Lithuanians with legal counselling, consider their complaints, and it would issue permits for Polish citizens travelling to Lithuania confirming that they did not act against the Lithuanian state. The

5 Śleszyński, W. (2009). *Świat pogranicza…* op. cit., p. 61.
6 Śleszyński, W. (2009). *Świat pogranicza…* op. cit., p. 62.

committee coordinated the works of other Lithuanian organisations in Poland, chiefly social and cultural and educational ones. As the main representation of Lithuanians in Poland it would organise, among others, central observations of national holidays, anniversary celebrations, as well as lectures on history, politics, and economy. The Committee played the role of an informal representation of the Lithuanian state in Poland, and that is why Polish authorities tolerated its activities[7], even though they were often harshly criticised. In 1929 the Committee was chaired by Konstanty Staszys and, according to Polish state administration, it was "*a political organisation, representing the general Lithuanian population (...) Unofficially it served the role of consulate. It received funds from Lithuania and the US. It attitude towards the Polish state was exceptionally adverse. It used its funds to finance its subordinate associations: 'Rytas', 'Dobroczynność' [Charity], and 'Św. Kazimierz' [St. Casimir]*"[8].

A characteristic trait of the political life of the Lithuanian minority in Poland was the lack of typical political parties. It was largely the result of the Lithuanian communities' adversity towards the Polish state, which was fuelled by the permanent conflict between the two states. The rhetoric of the invasion and occupation of Wilno that was employed by Lithuanian propaganda was the dominant factor that reduced the ideological differences between the various national Lithuanian political groups. That is why the role of the political party of the Lithuanian minority in Poland was played by cultural, educational, and social associations that, apart from their statutory educational aims, served the role of a factor that shaped the political attitudes of the Lithuanian minority in concordance with the politics of the Lithuanian state[9].

At the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s the following organisations functioned in Poland:

- Lithuanian Educational Association "Rytas",
- St. Casimir Lithuanian Association Lithuanian St. Casimir Association of Education and Care for the Youth,
- Lithuanian Association "Kultura" – competing with "Rytas" for influence among the Lithuanians presenting pro-Polish stances; founded in 1927 and chaired by Daniel Olsejko; the Association ran 170 schools with classes in Lithuanian (in 1938 the number of the schools was reduced to 2 state public schools with classes in Lithuanian and 30 bilingual schools). The opinions about this situation

7 Ibidem.
8 LCVA, WUW, Ruch narodowościowy, f. 51, op. 17, Issue 53, p. 111.
9 Śleszyński, W. (2009). *Świat pogranicza…* op. cit., p. 62.

were negative among Lithuanians (the so-called patriots) due to the pro-Polish stance and acceptance of the Polish authorities. The so-called patriots would claim that this undermined the unity of the Lithuanians,

- Lithuanian Farmers' Association – the most active and the largest organisation of educational and, at the same time, economic character, which would focus on the economic and farming education and training of the Lithuanian minority (established in 1926 and chaired by Mateusz Stankiewicz, in 1935 it had: 130 departments, 140 "young farmers' circles", 14 cooperatives, 3 dairies, a chain of stores, 26 reading rooms with libraries, and 1,600 members),
- Lithuanian Charity Association – established in 1914, chaired by: Kotka, Stankiewicz, Jan Basanowicz, Franciszek Bielawski (in 1928), and since 1933 by Krzysztof Czybiras; it supported and ran orphanages for Lithuanian children, took care of poor school children and youth, provided financial and material support for the poorest among the Lithuanian minority,
- St. Zita Lithuanian Association of Catholic Servites – since 1933 chaired by Franciszek Bielawski, its aims were similar to those of a charity association, it also dealt with religious education,
- Association of Lithuanian Teachers – established in 1925, since 1929 chaired by Paweł Karazej, in 1931 there were ca. 600 members, it supported the "Rytas" and "St. Casimir" associations,
- Lithuanian Scientific Association, since 1929 chaired by Bronisław Untulis,
- Lithuanian Sobriety Association,
- Union of Lithuanian Academics,
- Lithuanian Association of Sanitary Help in Wilno[10].

The attention of Polish authorities was focused primarily on the associations whose cultural and educational work was aimed to awaken and preserve the national identity:

- Lithuanian Educational Association "Rytas", established in 1913,
- and the St. Casimir Lithuanian Association, started in 1925.

Lithuanian Educational Association "Rytas" played a major role in educating the Lithuanian minority. It was founded in 1913 by Jan Basanowicz and Antanas Smetona, the latter of whom would later become the president of Lithuania (the outbreak of World War I broke the short-lived activity of the association, which was re-established on

[10] LCVA, WUW, Ruch narodowościowy, f. 51, op. 17, Issue 53, pp. 111–114, 122.

02. May1916. It was subsidised by the Lithuanian state and it was of a national character[11]. It was chaired by outstanding Lithuanian activists. Long-time members of the Central Board "Rytas" (the Board was located in Wilno at Antakol 6/1) were: chairman – Piotr Kraujalis (died in 1933, succeeded by Krzysztof Czybiras, head of the teacher training seminar, hostile towards Poland), vice chairman – Marceli Szyksznis, principal of a gymnasium in Wilno, treasurer – Wincenty Budrewicz, members – Krzysztof Czybiras (until 1933), Konstanty Staszys, Nikodem Rasztutis, Antoni Juchniewicz[12].

Originally (after 1918) the Association would concentrate its activities in Wilno. The problems that minority education was experiencing caused the Association to work more "in the field"[13]. Since 1922 it would establish and run private public schools for Lithuanian children. In 1929 "Rytas" maintained: 130 public schools, with 3,500 students, 80 evening courses for adults, attended by over 1,800 people. The highest number of the public schools supported by "Rytas" functioned in święciński district – 47, wileński district – 37, and 20 in lidzki and grodzieński district each[14].

However, Lithuanian educational circles did not find the situation satisfying. During a meeting of Lithuanian teachers that took place in December, 1930 in Wilno they urged the "Rytas" Association to organise evening courses for the illiterate in all the schools, and demanded that Polish authorities issue special acts regulating Lithuanian schooling, and protested against discharging Lithuanian teachers by the authorities without providing any reasons[15].

Introduction of the act of Minister Janusz Jedrzejewicz (11. March 1932) on private schooling provided school authorities with wide prerogatives to limit the work of schools of this type under of a number of pretexts. "Rytas" subsequently started the action of teaching at students' homes. The classes were conducted by the Lithuanian private schools teachers who had been made redundant by Polish authorities. However, in numerous cases the school authorities of the School District Board of

11 Mauersberg, S. (1968). *Szkolnictwo powszechne dla mniejszości narodowych w Polsce w latach 1918–1939*, (p. 117). Warszawa–Wrocław–Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, p. 117.

12 LCVA, WUW, Ruch narodowościowy, f. 51, op. 17, Issue 53, pp. 62–71, 111, 113.

13 Walasek, S. (2007). *Towarzystwa i organizacje oświatowe na ziemiach północno-wschodnich ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Wilna* In: M. Pękowska (Ed.). *Z dziejów oświaty na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku,* Kielce: Wydawnictwo Uczelniane Wszechnica Świętokrzyska, p. 311.

14 Ostrowski, J. (1930). *Litwini na ziemi wileńskiej*, Wilno, p. 15.

15 Mauersberg, S. (1968). *Szkolnictwo powszechne…* op. cit., p. 118.

Education (Kuratorium Okręgu Szkolnego – KOS) in Wilno did not issue homeschooling permits and would prosecute the teachers engaged in illegal education. E.g. in 1934 in święciański district ca. 300 teachers and in the wileńsko-trocki district ca. 200 teachers who ran Lithuanian language classes outside of school without the necessary permits stood accused[16].

There was great public interest in non-systematic courses for illiterate adults organised by "Rytas" (systematic courses required meeting the criteria outlined in the act of 11. March 1932 on private schools and scientific and educational centres and a permit from the Board of Education and the district mayor. In 1935 such courses (in which one did not receive a diploma), conducted in Lithuanian in: Lithuanian language, history, geography, nature, arithmetic, hygiene, singing, handicraft, and farming, with groups of 8 to 15 people, were organised in nearly all the villages inhabited by Lithuanians. They would typically take place in the reading rooms owned by the Association, libraries, as well as private homes, and the courses were conducted by qualified teachers-activists of Lithuanian roots. From 1.02 to 15.05 such courses were organised in 15 villages in Olkiennicka, Orańska, and Gierwiacka gminas (communes), and in the Wilno district in Gieniuny, Pierciupie, Bucwidance, Widzieniance, Macki, Poszolice, Czyżuny, Miciuny, Gieluny, Darguże, Naniszki, Ogrodniki, Galczuny, Gajgole, Petryki[17].

"Rytas" also ran two secondary schools: Vytautas the Great Gymnasium in Wilno (Gimnazjum im. Witolda Wielkiego w Wilnie) that in 1925 was attended by 360 students (the gymnasium functioned from 1915 to 1927 when it was taken over by the "Kultura" Association) and a 4-class pre-gymnasium in Święciany that in 1928 was ran by dr Aleksander Rymas. There were scouting sections in the gymnasiums, which educated youth in the national spirit[18].

Until the moment when the Association was suspended by Polish authorities (28. February 1938, reactivated on 6. June 1939) it would organise public schools, support gymnasiums and a teachers training seminar in Wilno, conduct training courses for teachers and the illiterate, organise lectures, libraries, and reading rooms in many towns and villages in the area of the Wilno KOS.

The teaching level in "Rytas" schools was not very high, but the Lithuanian population would nevertheless happily send their children there,

16 Ibidem, p. 119.

17 LCVA, Starostwo Powiatowe Wileńsko-Trockie, Sprawy kursów „Rytas" 1935, f. 55, op. 2, Issue 591, pp. 29–65.

18 Mauersberg, S. (1968). *Szkolnictwo powszechne*… op. cit., p. 118.

because books, notebooks, and pencils were distributed free of charge, and the school year started in October and finished in April, which was convenient for villagers because of the periods when help was needed in the fields[19]. However, the opinions of the Polish society about the schools were negative. They were believed to isolate Lithuanian children from Polish students and to be a source of anti-Polish education[20].

St. Casimir Lithuanian Association, established in 1925 and closed in 1937, dealt with extramural education of adults and youth. The organisation promoted national and fideistic ideas. Since 1928 the Association was ran by the Board consisting of chairman pr. Antoni Wiskont, vice chairman – Nikodem Rasztutis, and members Konstanty Aleksa and Ignacy Budrejko[21].

In 1930 the Association had about 15,000 members and ca. 300 departments. As early as 1932 there were 477 departments (in almost all villages with Lithuanian population) and ca. 20,000 members. A year later there were 16,000 members and 405 departments ran by Lithuanian priests and teachers, who organised educational meetings, discussions, and lectures. They would also develop an amateur artistic movement[22]. For example, in August, 1933 alone in brasławski, święciański, and wileńsko-trocki district 8 meetings with lectures with 155 participants, 6 amateur plays with games for 240 participants, and a ceremony with 200 participants were organised[23].

Not all of the initiatives of the Association were approved of by and accepted by Polish authorities. In a number of cases Polish administration would see them as a threat to the Polish state and population. For example, the mayor of the Święciański district refused to issue a permit for the Association Department in Nowo-Święciany (upheld by the Wilno Province) to organise a play with dances (on 3. Nowember 1933) in the village of Płatuny "*because the department takes prominent part in the Lithuanian action and organising a play in the gmina would be an act of agitation rather than a cultural and educational activity (...) and the idea behind it would be to do some initial work to establish a department of the Lithuanian association in the village of Płatuny*"[24]. On 1. March 1935, in

19 Ibidem, p. 118.
20 Walasek, S. (2007). *Towarzystwa i organizacje oświatowe*… op. cit., p. 311.
21 LCVA, WUW, Ruch narodowościowy, f. 51, op. 17, Issue 53, p. 113.
22 LCVA, WUW, Ruch narodowościowy, f. 51, op. 17, Issue 53, pp. 89–91.
23 LCVA, WUW, Sprawozdania z ruchu politycznego i społeczno-narodowego na terenie województwa, f. 51, op. 17, nr. 406, p. 18.
24 LCVA, WUW, Sprawy mniejszości litewskiej 1933, f. 51, op. 7, nr. 675, p. 8.

turn, the Święciański mayor refused the department in Nowo-Święciany permission to organise the staging of "Red Riding Hood" with singing, recitations, and games in the home of the Association in Orzwecie. Declining the permission was justified as follows: "*'Red Riding Hood' has been altered is such a way that it illustrates the liberation of Wilno (Red Riding Hood symbolizes Wilno, and the Wolf – Poland)*"[25].

Lithuanians had also their own press, which played a vital role in the education of the Lithuanian minority. In 1928 the following were published in the Wilno region: "Kejlas", "Vilniaus Aidas", "Jaunimo Draugas", "Dirwa", "Życie ludu", "Vorpas", and the most popular one, "Vilniaus Rytojus"[26]. The papers typically had a clear political line, concordant with Lithuanian politics. Apart from the questions connected with shaping the national identity of the Lithuanian minority (through articles introducing history, culture, and customs of Lithuanians), as well as education, economy, and religion, the papers would also frequently address political issues. Discussing political problems and stances adverse to the Polish state often led to the intensification of conflicts between the two states and nations. Polish authorities treated such opinions and attitudes as hostile to the Polish state. They believed that the hostile stance of the Lithuanian community was largely the work of the press as well as the educational and cultural associations that awakened unwelcome emotions and shaped social and political attitudes of the Lithuanian minority that were contrary to the interests of the state. That is why the criticism of the Lithuanian press as well as the limiting of the role and the scope of the work of the cultural and educational associations was seen as a priority by Polish administration at the end of the 1920s[27].

The extensive limiting of the influence and the role of legal Lithuanian associations began with the death of Marshall Józef Piłsudski. In the years 1935–1938 the policy of the Polish authorities regarding the Lithuanian minority became increasingly confrontational. In February 1936 at the sitting of the Council of Ministers a decision was passed to initiate the dissolution of all the Lithuanian organisation questioning that Wilno and its region belonged to Poland and failing to met the regulations issued by the Polish authorities. It was also decided that greater emphasis was to be placed on pro-state agitation among Lithuanians. In the Wilno region the Wileńskie Voivod Ludwik Bociański was responsible for carrying out all these decisions pertaining to the "entirety of Lithuanian

25 LCVA, WUW, Sprawy dotyczące stosunków polsko-litewskich, f. 51, op. 7, Issue 809, p. 42.

26 LCVA, WUW, Ruch narodowościowy, f. 51, op. 17, Issue 53, p. 99.

27 Śleszyński, W. (2009). *Świat pogranicza…* op. cit., p .62.

issues"[28]. The decisions of the government as well as the actions of Polish administration in the voivodship led to the dissolution of Lithuanian cultural and educational associations in the Wilno region.

On 3. December 1926 the St. Casimir Lithuanian Association was forbidden to work in the borderlands, and on 31. December 1937 it was ultimately dissolved with the decision of the Grodzki mayor in Wilno. In 1937 the Lithuanian Teachers' Union was dissolved. So was the case with Association "Rytas" and with Lithuanian Scientific Association in 1938. Other Lithuanian organisations, e.g. Committee of Wilno Lithuanians (the process of its dissolution started in 1935, and the activities of the organisation were finally terminated in 1937) would soon face the same fate[29].

As Zigmantas Kiaupa writes, "*Lithuanian centres unified Lithuanians living in the lands that had become a part of Poland, they helped form their national identity. One of the functions of the centres was to preserve links with the independent Lithuania and to support the Lithuanian side in its conflicts with Poland. Without losing hope to regain the lost territories Lithuanian authorities unofficially supported the activities of Lithuanians in the Wilno region, which was negatively received by Polish authorities, who did all that they could to prevent it. For example, in 1922 33 Lithuanian activists were exiled to the independent Lithuania. In 1937 repressions were aimed at Lithuanian education. The situation of Lithuanians in Poland as well as Poles in Lithuania depended on the relations between the two sides and the methods that they both employed. By the half of the fourth decade, when Poland put pressure on Lithuania, repressions were aimed at Lithuanian organisations, schools, and press in the Wilno region*"[30].

A substantial change in Polish-Lithuanian relations took place only after diplomatic relations with Lithuania were established in the second half of 1938. This had a significant influence on the situation of the Lithuanian minority in Poland, although the situation of Lithuanians in the Polish state was still dependent on the further course of the development of the relations between Kowno and Warsaw. One of the concessions made by the Polish side was the permission for the reactivation of Association "Rytas" issued on 6. June 1939.

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[28] Śleszyński, W. (2009). *Świat pogranicza*… op. cit., p. 63.

[29] Śleszyński, W. (2009). *Świat pogranicza*… op. cit., pp. 63–64.

[30] Kiaupa, Z. (2012). *Litwa w dwudziestym wieku. Republika litewska w latach 1918–1940*, p. 10. Retrieved September 11, 2014. from http://www.iesw.lublin.pl/projeky/pliki/IESW-121-02-10pl.pdf

The decision was a source of hope for the improvement of Polish-Lithuanian relations and recreation of the cultural, educational, and social organisations. Unfortunately, the development of the process of the normalisation of Polish-Ukrainian relations was broken by the outbreak of World War[31] which led to the loss of the chance to re-establish Lithuanian cultural and educational associations in the Wilno region. Regardless of the typically critical assessments of Polish authorities, these associations played a vital educational role – they made the population more engaged in the educational processes – and they were crucially important for the economic and cultural issues of the Lithuanian minority in Poland in the interwar period.

[31] Śleszyński, W. (2009). *Świat pogranicza*… op. cit., p. 64.