

***„Geographical-political aspects of the situation of Polish minority in Lithuania and Latvia after 1990<sup>1</sup>”***

In this thesis the author has taken geographical and political comparative study of the Polish minority in Lithuania and Latvia, despite of the completely different situation of both groups. In addition, undertake research on Polish minority in Latvia is an attempt to fill the gap which according to the author, occurs in the geographical literature concerning to the situation of Poles abroad. The choice of Polish minority in Lithuania and Latvia stems not only from the author's personal interests and her previous empirical studies, but also from the attractiveness of this topic arising from the historical variability of the relations between the majority and minority, and also the current rank of the relations between Poland and Lithuania and Latvia in the context of the strategic partnership.

The subject of this research are Poles living in Lithuania and Latvia, whereas the object of the study are geographical and political aspects of its situation on the political changes taking place after 1990.

Analyzed minorities can be classified as traditional minorities, for centuries living in territories of Lithuania and Latvia, constituting a kind of relic of the multinational Rzeczpospolita. It is worth to mention that these minorities have been subjected to significant quantitative, institutional, social and cultural transformations in the last century.

In this thesis assume the following objectives:

- the analysis of the causes and consequences of changes in the distribution and number of Polish minority in Lithuania and Latvia;
- determination the impact of political changes on the position of Polish minority in Lithuania and Latvia;
- the research of activity and diversity of Polish community in Lithuania and Latvia and its relations with the country of residence and the dominant nations;
- the comparative analysis of changes in political and social situation of Polish population in Lithuania and Latvia after 1990.

The adopted research assumption allows for constructing the following hypothesis:

- assumed that the main factors affecting the situation of Poles in Lithuania and Latvia after 1990 were the changes of political and legal conditions, which were a consequence of regaining the independence by two Baltic states. These changes have contributed to the relative improvement in the political and social situation of Poles living in both countries and to increase their institutional activity;
- assumed that different situation of the Polish minority in Lithuania and Latvia is result of completely different demographic potential and also political potential of both communities and also different, in the case of both countries, historical factors influencing the relations on the line Polish minority and state of residence in the past.

In this thesis used the following methods of analysis: study methods, the analysis of textual and cartographic materials, desk research and cartographic methods. In the thesis also used the methods of field research, like: in-depth interviews, direct observation in the field, the participant observation, the query of statistical data, sources and literature, photographic documentation.

By analyzing of the obtained results the author has formulated some common conclusions for the situation of Poles in Lithuania and Latvia, like:

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- the regions of the highest concentration of Polish minority in Lithuania and Latvia were framed historically and did not change significantly after regaining the independence by both states;
- legal, political and social situation of Polish minority in Lithuania and Latvia nowadays is much more beneficial than in the USSR period;
- the largest decreases in the number of Poles in Lithuania and Latvia in the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century were recorded in places of their greatest concentration, decline of the Polish minority is largely due to the processes of assimilation and emigration, intensified especially after the accession of both countries to the EU;
- the main impulse for the creation of Polish organizations were political changes taking place both in Lithuania and Latvia, as a consequence of the collapsing of USSR;
- the organizations which are the leaders in Polish environment are Union of Poles in Lithuania and the Union of Poles in Latvia,
- the intensity and range of activities of most organizations depends mostly on financial support from Poland,
- most organizations were established over 20 years ago (in the early 90s) and currently the exchange of generation on the boards causes stagnation in their activity.

Apart from the common elements relating to the situation of Polish minority in Lithuania and Latvia, there are also many features which are completely different. In Lithuania functions a large number of Polish organizations but actively operates only about half of them, as a rule the biggest associations. There is no clear coordinator for the activities of individual organizations, resulting in the convergence of range of activities of many organisations. Poles are the most conflicted national minority in Lithuanian state (in Latvia this role played Russians). Many problems of Polish minority in Lithuania are exaggerated by the media and the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania and used for political propaganda, but some exist objectively. Ethnic conflicts, especially with the political and legal ground, although obviously undesirable and often destabilizing, can serve a positive function and unite, mobilize and strengthen minority group. It could be postulated that a strong internal integration, a clear sense of identity and national identity of Polish minority in Lithuania are largely a consequence of discriminatory - in the opinion of Poles living in Lithuania - Lithuanian authorities' activities undertaken after 1990.

In contrast, in Latvia functions a small number of Polish organizations. The reason for this is not only a low level of involvement of Poles in organizational activities, but also insufficient financial support from Polish side, resulting in the cessation of broadcasting Polish programs in Latvian radio and television. Poles in Latvia are considered as a model example of the integration of national minorities into Latvian society, so the occurrence of conflicts with Latvians and other ethnic minorities is sporadic. On the other hand, the progressive integration of Poles in Latvian society accelerates the processes of assimilation and consequently leads to a decrease of number and activity of Polish minority.

Completely different is also the situation in Polish education system in both countries. In Lithuania the system is the only one outside Poland which gives the possibility of education at all levels in Polish language. Schools receive also help from Poland both financial and in the sphere of improvement of teachers' work. In turn, the number of Polish schools in Latvia is very low and Polish minority is not seeking to enter the teaching of all subjects in Polish language because of any subsequent problems of integration in Latvian society. This follows from the fact that most of local Poles consider Russian as their mother tongue.