

National Minorities in Lithuania; A study visit to Vilnius and Klaipėda for Mercator Education

7-14 November 2006

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Introduction

The Mercator-Education project hosted at the Frisian Academy has been established with the principal goal of acquiring, storing and disseminating information on minority and regional language education in the European region¹. Recently a computerised database containing bibliographic data, information about people and organisations involved in this subject has been established. The series of Regional Dossiers published by Mercator-Education provides descriptive information about minority languages in a specific region of the European Union, such as characteristics of the educational system and recent educational policies. At present, an inventory of the languages in the new states of the European Union is being made showing explicitly the position of ethnic minorities. In order to investigate the local situation in one of these new states in more detail and to inform representatives of the communities about the work of Mercator Education and the policies of the European Union in this field, a delegation from the Frisian Academy visited Lithuania in the week 7-14 November 2006. Together with Lithuanian colleagues a program for this visit was prepared according to the following schedule.

Schedule of the study trip to Lithuania 7 – 14 November 2006

Tuesday 7 November: Arrival in Vilnius at 13:25 with TE465

16:00 Meeting at the Department of National Minorities and Lithuanians living Abroad, discussion with its director Antanas Petrauskas and staff

Wednesday 8 November: Introductory meetings at the Institute for Lithuanian Language

10:00 Lectures by Tjeerd de Graaf and Cor van der Meer

12:00 Meeting with the director Jolanta Zabarskaitė and other staff members

14:00 Excursion to the Institute, its archives, demonstrations of the work

Thursday 9 November: Visits related to Polish and other Slavic minorities

9:30 Polish school, meeting its director Adam Blaskiewicz

11:00 Department of Polish Language and Literature at the university
Discussion with students

15:00 Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, its sound archives

16:00 Vilnius Pedagogical University, Faculty of Slavonic Philology
Meeting the Dean Gintautas Kundrotas and professors of
Russian, Polish and Byelorussian

Friday 10 November: Meetings related to Karaim and Yiddish, Stateless Cultures

9:00 Vilnius Yiddish Institute at the University, discussion with
Sharunas Liekis (director) and staff members

11:00 Trip to Trakai, visit to the Karaim Community House,
Kenesa (religious temple) and ethnographic museum

17:00 Meeting with Karina Firkavičiūtė, representative of the
Karaim community and Ministry of Education and Science

Saturday 11 November: Visit to Klaipėda and Samogitia (North-Western Lithuania)

10:25 Departure of the bus from Vilnius to Klaipėda, sight seeing of the town

¹ The work of Mercator has been described on the web site www.mercator-education.org.

Sunday 12 November: Trip to Nida (former German territory in Memel Land)
 Neringa/Kurische Nehrung, Thomas Mann House, Balt Tours
 Information about the German minority and local history

Monday 13 November: Meeting related to minorities in Klaipėda and Samogitia

8:30 Hermann Sudermann School for German bilingual education
 Meeting with its director Jolita Andrijauskiene, staff and children

11:00 Departure to Telšiai, center of Samogitian culture
 Local museum, meeting with Samogitian community members

15:00 Šiauliai University
 Discussion with vice-rector Juozas Pabrėža and colleagues

19:00 Departure by train to Vilnius

Tuesday 14 November: Final meetings in Vilnius

10:00 Evaluation and planning of future possible contacts at the Department of
 National Minorities and Lithuanians living Abroad
 Final meeting with its director Antanas Petrauskas and staff

12:00 Visit to the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum and other places

16:50 Departure for Amsterdam with TE464

National Minorities in Lithuania

Our stay in Vilnius started on the first day with a general orientation at the Department of National Minorities and Lithuanians living abroad, which is supported by and giving advice to the government of the Republic of Lithuania. The director provided us with material on the projects initiated for the various minorities in the country. The most important national minorities are presented in the table below²:

	Number	percentage of the total population
Lithuanian	2907.200	83,4 %
Polish	234.900	6,7 %
Russian	219.700	6,3 %
Byelorussian	42.800	1,2 %
Ukrainian	22.400	0,65%
Jewish	4.900	0,12%
German	3.200	0,09%
Tatar	3.200	0,09%
Latvian	2.900	0,08%
Roma	2.500	0,07%
Armenian	1.400	0,04%
Other nationalities	6.100	0,18%
Not specified	32.900	0,94%
Total	3483.900	100 %

This shows that in a total population of the country about 16,6 % of the people do not have a Lithuanian background. Nationalities such as the Polish and Byelorussian are autochthonous and have been living within the borders of present-day Lithuania since times immemorial. This holds for instance for the Karaims who came to Lithuania 600 years ago. There they found a new motherland and were able to preserve their national identity, faith and customs. In later

² Data in this section are quoted from the brochure *National Minorities in Lithuania*, which is probably a later publication than the booklet with a similar title (Vilnius 2000), where the minorities (in particular the Russian one) are larger. More details can be found on the web site www.tmid.lt.

times representatives of many other nationalities came and in this way Lithuania always was a multinational state. In the publication of the Department on *National Minorities in Lithuania* 17 of these national groups are mentioned, which are organised into more than 200 public organisations. The Department supports per year more than 300 projects, such as 40 weekend schools for children belonging to a certain minority group.

In addition the Department organises activities for Lithuanians living abroad, where in 46 countries there are 150 Lithuanian schools for their children (about one million Lithuanians are living abroad). Lecturers of Lithuanian are sent to these schools and information on Baltic culture and history is provided to schools, universities and other institutions.

In article 37 of the Lithuanian constitution it is written that citizens who belong to ethnic communities shall have the right to foster their language, culture and customs. This right is also protected by the Law on Ethnic Minorities, the Law on the State Language, the Law on Citizenship, the Law on Education, the Law on Equal Opportunities and other ones. Lithuania is the party in most international agreements related to the protection of human rights and rights of national minorities. In 2000 the government ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe. However, for some reason the Charter for Minority and Regional Languages has not yet been ratified.

The Institute of the Lithuanian Language and Vilnius University

On the following days of our visit we met colleagues and students at the Institute of the Lithuanian Language and the University. In the morning we first presented our work at the Frisian Academy and Mercator Education in lectures titled *The Mercator network and the language situation in Friesland* (Cor van der Meer) and *Endangered Languages and Endangered Archives* (Tjeerd de Graaf).

The Institute of the Lithuanian Language is a centre for research into the Lithuanian language. It is a research institution, the main activities of which are related to lexicology, lexicography, and research into the grammatical structure of the Lithuanian language, research into the history and dialects of the Lithuanian language, and sociolinguistic research.

The main work of the Institute of the Lithuanian Language consists of:

1. The preparation of the *Dictionary of the Lithuanian Language* (in 20 volumes) and its computerised version, the accumulation of a computerised database of the Lithuanian lexicon.
2. The preparation of the *Dictionary of the Standard Lithuanian Language*.
3. The compilation of an academic grammar of the Lithuanian language, research into the evolution of Lithuanian syntax.
4. The gathering of data on and research into Lithuanian dialects, the preparation of an atlas of European languages and more similar projects.

During our visit we saw the very modern facilities of the archives for language material, in particular sound recordings and we learned about the digital techniques which are used for the preparation of the 11-million word contents of the Lithuanian language on the internet. In the archives of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore we were informed about the local safeguarding of endangered sound material.

In the University of Vilnius (which is one of the oldest in the Baltic countries) we met with the staff of the Department of Polish philology and had the opportunity to tell a group of students about our work. We also had a nice discussion with these students, who informed us about their language background, their motivation to study and their plans for the future.

Schools with curricula in the languages of national minorities (Polish and German)

A very important way to preserve the national consciousness is education in the mother tongue. In 1999-2000 there were 223 secondary schools with non-Lithuanian teaching³; among them were 69 schools with Russian language education, 73 with Polish, and 1 with Belorussian. There were also mixed schools: 29 of Lithuanian-Russian, 11 – Lithuanian-Polish, 28 Russian-Polish, 1 Russian-Byelorussian and 10 – Lithuanian-Russian-Polish. Several national minorities, such as Poles, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Germans, Jews, Armenians, Karaims, Tatars and Greeks have their own Sunday schools and special summer courses, like the one for the Karaim language.

During a visit to the Jono Pauliaus 11-ojo gimnazija, a Polish school in Vilnius, we met the director Adam Blaskiewicz and attended a few lessons. This school is situated in a building in the outskirts of the town, where before Russian was used as language of education. Most of the lessons are given in Polish, but the students have to pass their final examination in Lithuania according to the requirements of the Lithuanian Ministry of Education. In addition to the mother language (Polish) and the national language (Lithuanian) foreign languages can be chosen (at present mostly English)

In Klaipėda we met with the director and staff members of the Hermann Sudermann secondary school, the only German school in the Baltic countries⁴. This school has been initiated in 1992 mainly for children who are of German descent, such as from families who stayed after the war when the former German Memel Land became (again) Lithuanian and part of the Soviet Union. The number of pupils increased from 90 to 550, because also non-German parents send their children to this school. In the school we attended a few lessons, where in the higher classes part of the curriculum is provided in German. There are links with the Simon Dach Haus, a community centre for the German minority, which organises all kinds of cultural activities.

Both schools expressed their interest in a further exchange of information on bilingual and trilingual schools in the Netherlands and should like to participate in the Mercator Network of Schools.

In the Faculty of Slavonic Philology of Vilnius Pedagogical University we met with the dean, Gintautas Kundrotas and professors of Russian, Polish and Byelorussian, who told us that in recent years also the interest in teaching Byelorussian in secondary school education is increasing.

Projects for stateless cultures and languages (Karaim and Yiddish)

During our visit to Trakai, a small town west of Vilnius, we learned about the Karaim minority which settled in Lithuania at the end of the 14th century on the invitation of the grand duke Vytautas. Trakai became the administrative and spiritual centre of this community, which was able to keep its traditions until present time. Their language belongs to the Turkic language family and it is still spoken by very few community members. Recently a special teaching method with multimedia equipment has been developed by Eva Csato, a Hungarian linguist, who learned the Karaim language and provides special summer courses for the

³ This information can be found in the booklet *National Minorities in Lithuania* (Vilnius 2000)

⁴ The school is presented on the web site www.zudermanas.ku.lt/de (German version)

Karaim people in Trakai⁵. We met with representatives in the new community centre, enjoyed the products of the Karaim kitchen and visited the religious temple (kenesa) and a special ethnological museum. With one of the community members we considered possibilities to continue the teaching and other cultural activities for Karaim with the support of Mercator or similar international organisations. This should be done in the framework of projects for the safeguarding and revitalisation of endangered languages.

In the past the Jews had very important communities in Lithuania, where before the Second World War Vilnius was called the Jerusalem of Eastern Europe. In 1924-25 Jews had about 300 secondary schools and 20 gymnasiums, one teachers' seminar in Kaunas, and two rabbinical academies. In that time 93% of the Jewish children attended schools with subjects taught in Yiddish, which was the most important common language spoken by the Jews in Eastern Europe. During the tragic events of the Second World War more than 200.000 people of Jewish origin were massacred and whole communities ceased to exist. Also in the Soviet time, Jews did not have their own schools, press or publishing facilities. However, in recent years a certain revival takes place and schools have been created where Jewish subjects are taught, such as Hebrew.

During a visit to the Vilnius Yiddish Institute we learned about these matters. In 2001 this institute was founded at Vilnius University with the mission to organise academic and cultural programs for the preservation, enrichment and continuity of Yiddish and East European Jewish culture. It provides courses in the Yiddish language and Jewish culture, together with special summer courses in these subjects⁶.

Regional activities in North-West Lithuania (Klaipėda and Samogitia)

The Klaipėda area has a special history which is related to the German empire, to which in the past (from 1252 until 1920) it belonged as the so-called Memel Land. During and after the Second World War most of the German and also many Lithuanian inhabitants left this area and new people came to the town of Klaipėda and surroundings, often from various other parts of the former Soviet Union. This explains why many people in this area are speaking Russian and belong to several ethnic groups.

We visited the beautiful, about 100 km. long peninsula Neringa (Kurische Nehrung), where the nature reminded us to the Frisian Islands. A German living in the main village of Nida, has set up a tourist bureau (Balt Tours), which is organising attractive vacation trips for people from Western Europe⁷. He showed us around and informed us about the local situation and the symbols of German culture (such as the house of Thomas Mann). Due to the similarity with the nature and other aspects of Fryslân, we discussed possibilities for an exchange program with tourist organisations there.

Samogitia is the region in North-West Lithuania, which can be considered as one of the most ethnically pure regions in the country, with an ethnic Lithuanian population of more than 95% in some districts. It is characterized by an own cultural identity because of its own history and a rather different dialect. Many local people consider this as the Samogitian language which is different from standard Lithuanian. They also have an own flag and other symbols of their special identity.

⁵ This multimedia CD project for the endangered Turkic language Karaim in Lithuania can be found at www3.ua.tufs.ac.jp/~djn/karaim/karaimCD.htm.

⁶ For more information see www.judaicvilnius.com.

⁷ The further details can be found at www.balttours.lt.

We met with representatives of the Samogitian community in the central town of the area, Telšiai, where they showed us the local ethnographic museum. In the university town of Šiauliai we met the vice rector, who is also the author of a book on the Samogitian language and developed a special writing system for the language. He and his colleagues should like to learn about the bilingual situation in Fryslân in order to use this for a further emancipation of Samogitian, which at the moment it not taught at school.

Some topics for future joint activities

Here we should like to give some suggestions for a future follow-up of our visit and possible new activities with colleagues in Lithuania:

- New regional dossiers for Mercator Education can be produced by representatives of the bilingual schools in Lithuania, such as the Polish school in Vilnius and the German school in Klaipėda. The possibility of a regional dossier on Yiddish in Lithuania will also be studied;
- These schools can become partners in the Network of Schools and exchange information with more than 60 similar schools in other countries of the European Union;
- On the level of a research institute (like Vilnius Pedagogical University) problems of bi- and trilingual education could be studied together and information can be exchanged with similar institutions in Fryslân (like the AFÛK);
- In Samogitia, more information can be provided about the bilingual situation in Fryslân and the work of the Frisian Academy. Like in the case of Kashubian in Poland this will help to obtain the recognition and emancipation of the local language and culture in this part of Lithuania;
- Together we should like to support research and teaching activities for the documentation and revitalisation of endangered languages, such as Karaim;
- In Lithuania there will be interest to participate in a new Centre for the study of multilingualism as has been proposed for Fryslân and the Frisian Academy. Together with new partners in Lithuania the Frisian Academy and the Mercator Project will contribute to a network of institutes which can apply for new European grants;
- Specialists from the Frisian Academy and the Mercator Project will be invited to take part in special seminars and conferences in Lithuania, in particular related to bilingual education;
- In academic fields there will be co-operation in the field of lexicography (the preparation of dictionaries) and dialectology (such as the study of Low German loanwords in Lithuanian dialects);
- The sound archives of language material will get further information about the existing project on Endangered Archives which Tjeerd de Graaf has initiated with the archives in St.Petersburg and Vienna (financially supported by the British Library);
- Lithuanian scholars will be invited to conferences in Fryslân, such as in 2008 the one on Endangered Languages at the Frisian Academy;

- The Vilnius Yiddish Institute will send information about new courses and literature on Yiddish, which may be useful for the Fuchs collection of Yiddish books at Tresoar, the provincial library of Fryslân;

- The Frisian Academy will be informed about and receive literature on languages, history and culture in the Baltic area;

- Tourist organisations in Fryslân might be interested in possibilities in Lithuania (tourism to the Kurische Nehrung) and vice versa.

Conclusion and acknowledgements

Our short stay in Lithuania has been very interesting and useful and we really hope that it will trigger new activities in the future where both parts of the European Union in West and East can further exchange ideas and profit from each others' experience and from this co-operation. Finally we should like to thank all colleagues in Lithuania for their assistance and hospitality. In particular we highly appreciate the help by Markus Roduner during the preparation of all our visits and the successful completion of our plans.

Paterswolde, November 2006