

## **Bilingualism in Lithuania: Current Changes and Challenges**

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Since the cessation of Soviet hegemony the Baltic republics have had to endure drastic changes in their political, economic, social and linguistic situation. The official reinstatement of the respective state languages has been a key feature in the establishment of their newly regained national independence. Consequently, large sections of the population have had to undergo language instruction in order to be able to function in the changed linguistic environment. For many members of the ethnic communities, this has involved a shift from a bilingualism with Russian to one with Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian. This paper will report on language-related developments and ensuing challenges in Lithuania.

Lithuania is more homogenous than elsewhere in the Baltic republics. Furthermore, Lithuania's ethnic composition differs from that of Latvia and Estonia in that its percentage of minorities is smaller and more equally split between Russian (6.31%) and Polish (6.74%) residents (Lithuanian Census 2001). The overall density of these two communities is high in Vilnius (and, for Russians, also in Klaipėda) and in South-Eastern Lithuania. There has already been a marked rise in the level of bilingualism with Lithuanian, which is prompted by a desire for integration amongst the overall population. Between 1989 and 2000, the total population who speak the titular language in Lithuania has risen to 94% from 85%. In this multilingual setting, many individuals possess several bilingualisms of varying degree with a fairly fluid boundary between languages where one language in the set of bilingualisms is widely shared.

Based on a newly acquired data from a major survey, this paper aims to explore how multiethnic communities in Lithuania have adapted to the changed language situation and to consider the role of currently prevailing attitudes in shaping stances towards the use of Lithuanian in minority settings.