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Language, Religion, and Ethnicity-Making at Polish-language Schools in Lithuania

Abstract: The focus of this paper is the perceived relation of language (Polish) and religion (Catholicism) to the Polish identity and whether and how these dimensions of identity are employed in interpreting processes of social integration and mobility in Lithuanian society by research participants at schools where Polish is the language of instruction. This paper argues that the native language (Polish) is seen as an important dimension of ethnic (Polish) identity while both majority (Lithuanian) and minority languages are seen as helpful instruments in the process of social inclusion and social mobility since they are perceived as dependent on the social context. Polish-language schools reaffirm the interrelation of the Catholic religion and the Polish identity in discursive and practical ways (via various cultural means). Nevertheless, religion, an essential dimension of Polish identity, does not come to the forefront when discussing social integration or mobility.

Keywords: Lithuania, social integration, State language, minority language, schools with Polish language of instruction, Catholic religion

Introduction

This paper focuses on the ways *language* (Polish) and *religion* (Catholic) are seen as related to Polish identity and whether and how these dimensions of identity are employed in interpreting processes of social integration and mobility in Lithuanian society by research participants at schools where Polish is the language of instruction (further, these schools are referred to as Polish-language schools). I am interested to find out whether and how *language* and *religion* are understood as key markers in identity-making via ethnic boundary construction (cf. Barth 1969) and whether processes of integration and social mobility are seen as shaped by these aspects of identity. Identity, from this perspective, is defined as flexible, constructed via sociocultural interaction, gained during the process of socialization (Barth 1969; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Wimmer 2008, 2013; Čiubrinskas 2008; Fėjutė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Sasunkevich, Šliavaitė 2021; Šliavaitė 2022). In the social sciences, integration is seen as encompassing multidimensional processes and estimated by employing specific criteria to measure the success of this process in different contexts (employment, participation in the political sphere, civic activity, economy, etc.) (Beresnevičiūtė 2005; Beresnevičiūtė, Leončikas, Žibas 2009). I focus on bottom-up perspectives, i.e., the ways Polish research participants from the Polish language schools in Lithuania interpret language (Polish) and religion

(Catholic) as (non)related to their position in a society where the ethnic majority is Lithuanian and Catholics.

Considerable research has been conducted on the Polish ethnic identity and the ways language, religion or other cultural elements are used in the process of identity-building (see e.g. Savukynas 2003; Daukšas 2012; Geben 2010, 2013; Kazėnas et al. 2014; Korzeniewska 2013; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Šliavaitė, Šutinienė 2016; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Marcinkevičius, Šliavaitė 2022; Vyšniauskas 2022), majority-minority relations (e.g. Balžekienė et al. 2008; Kazėnas et al. 2014; Dambrauskas 2017, 2022; Janušauskienė 2021; Klumbytė and Šliavaitė 2021), and the role of institutions in identity formation (e.g. Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2016, 2022; Šliavaitė 2016, 2022; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Sasunkevich and Šliavaitė 2021). The researchers indicate that Catholicism (Savukynas 2003; Korzeniewska 2013; Kazėnas et al. 2014; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Šliavaitė, Šutinienė 2016; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Marcinkevičius, Šliavaitė 2022; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2022) and native language (Geben 2010, 2013; Kazėnas et al. 2014; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Šliavaitė, Šutinienė 2016; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2022) are key elements of Polish identity in Lithuania; analyze how native language and religion are employed for ethnicity making by Polish non-governmental organizations (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2016, 2022); analyze the state policy of education in regards to ethnic minorities (Petrušauskaitė and Pilinkaitė Sotirovič 2012; Janušauskienė 2021) and bottom-up responses to it (Dambrauskas 2017; Šliavaitė 2016, 2019). This paper is inspired by Rogers Brubaker's (2015a, b) insights that *language* and *religion* are key dimensions of identity that differentiate populations in modern societies and might lead to inequalities in different spheres and in different ways (Brubaker 2015a, b). The paper compares the ways *language* (Polish) and *religion* (Catholicism) are employed in ethnicity making and referred to in interpreting processes of social integration and mobility. I focus on these two aspects of identity as constructed among communities of Polish-language schools.

The paper is based on data collected during several independent collective fieldwork projects at different time periods in locations where Poles constitute a substantial part of the population.[1] The first group of fieldwork data comes from a collective research project conducted in Šalčininkai, Eišiškės, and Pabradė, April 2013–June 2014. The localities of Eišiškės, Pabradė and Šalčininkai are relatively small, situated in the South-Eastern part of Lithuania, close to the border with Belarus. During this project, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews at Polish-language schools (with schoolteachers, members of administration, and parents of students; the majority of interviewees described themselves as Poles; for more information on interviews see Table 1). I asked questions related to the school community (school identity, mission, traditions, etc.), perceptions of the recently introduced requirements to increase the number of subjects taught in Lithuanian, equalization of the Lithuanian language final exam for all schools in Lithuania, and school graduates' expectations for further educational and professional paths. I refer to this data in the section on language and ethnicity. The transcripts of interviews

[1] In the localities where the research was conducted the Poles constitute substantial part of population: in Eišiškės—83 per cent of local population, in Pabradė—42 per cent, in Šalčininkai—71 per cent, in Vilnius—15 per cent (Official Statistics Portal 2021).

were studied thoroughly and coded (Saldana 2010), resulting in three main categories of analysis: the first category—"Ethnic identity and language" (codes: the Polish language, the Lithuanian language, the Russian language, local language, language choice in different situations/settings, the Polish language during the Soviet period, the Polish language in independent Lithuania); the second category—"School roles and challenges" (codes: reasons to select a school with Polish as the language of instruction, the ethnic background of families who choose schools with Polish as the language of instruction; language and educational process); the third category—"Majority-minority relations and language" (codes: state policy perceptions, social inclusion, social mobility). The data is structured by the three categories and presented in one of the further subchapters.

The second block of data comes from research conducted in 2019–2022 in multi-ethnic locations of Lithuania with numerous Polish populations such as Vilnius, Šalčininkai, Pabradė, and Švenčionėliai. The interviews were conducted at Polish-language schools, interviewees were members of the administration and teachers of religious education; majority of interviewees described themselves as Poles. Even though this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdowns were authorized as safety measures, these interviews were conducted face-to-face during periods when such communication was possible. The interviews focused on the ways research participants perceived the relation between religion (Catholicism) and ethnicity (Polish) and whether and how this connection is reaffirmed via everyday practices at schools where Polish is the language of instruction. During this research, I conducted 9 semi-structural or unstructured, in-depth interviews with members of Polish-language schools, i.e., teachers of religious education or ethics and members of administrations (for more information see Table 2). The transcripts of interviews were read numerous times and coded (Saldana 2010), resulting in three main categories: the first category—"Ethnic identity and religion" (codes—Catholic religion, Russian Orthodox religion, religious traditions in the Soviet period, religious traditions in the post-Soviet period); the second category—"The roles of a school" (codes: classes of religious education; classes of ethics; the religious identity of students' families, traditions preserved at school); the third category—"Classes of religious education in Polish and Lithuanian schools" (codes: number of students, challenges for teachers). I refer to this data in the section on religion and ethnicity. The interviews were transcribed word by word and anonymized, i.e., in the paper I do not use real names or other information that would allow identifying a research participant or the school he/she is from. Even though the two projects took place in different time periods, the issues that appeared as important during the earlier period of research resurfaced in the recent research phase as well.

I argue that both the Polish language and Catholicism are seen as important symbolic markers of Polishness by the members of communities of Polish language schools who participated at research. However, there are differences in what social and symbolic value is discursively given by research participants to these ethnic markers when discussing the processes of inclusion into Lithuanian society: language figures in the discourses of social inclusion and mobility while religion (Catholicism) is mainly related to cultural issues preserved at family or community.

Theoretical Notes

In social sciences, ethnicity is seen as a dimension of individual and collective identity, constructed via social contact with other groups when social and cultural boundaries are drawn based on presumed differences and similarities (Barth 1969; Eriksen 2010; Jenkins 2008; Stroup 2017; Wimmer 2008, 2013). Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper indicate that this process is closely related to the process of categorization conducted *in* and *by* institutional settings (e.g., state or school) in diverse ways that could be largely unnoticeable to participants (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 16; cf. Wimmer 2013, cf. Frėjutė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Sasunkevich, Šliavaitė 2021). In this perspective, a Polish-language school in Lithuania must be seen as an institution where Polish identity is constructed via practices and narratives that emphasize markers of cultural elements (e.g., language and religion). Additionally, language and religion are not only about cultural differences but could also be related to inequality in political, economic, cultural spheres, and informal social relations (Brubaker 2015b: 4–5).

In the social sciences, the topic of *language* is frequently framed in terms of the nation-state, equal opportunities, inclusion, and social mobility (May 2012). Rogers Brubaker emphasizes that the language of the ethnic majority is one of the key cultural elements protected by the "nationalizing state" (Brubaker 1996; Brubaker 2011: 1786). He refers to the Baltic states as "nationalizing states" where the state protects the culture of the ethnic majority and imposes the requirement of bilingualism (i.e., demonstrating competencies in the language of the majority) on minorities (Brubaker 2011: 1797). William Kymlicka notes that the legal requirement to use only the language of the majority in particular spheres and institutions of a nation-state is part of a process for creating a "single societal culture" (Kymlicka 2000: 185), which can unfold in either "liberal" or "illiberal" ways (Kymlicka 2000: 196). The inequality of statuses granted to the majority and minority languages mean "exclusive inclusion" for minorities who have to adapt to the requirements of linguistic policy that favours the language of the majority in the public sector (Klumbytė and Šliavaitė 2021). Even though competency in the state language is often viewed as a precondition for smooth integration, researchers say that state language is not the only instrument of social mobility and inclusion since it is shaped by social and structural contexts (May 2003). Equally important is the argument that minority language should not be perceived only as an element of national identity with no instrumental value, nor is it correct to perceive the language of the majority as a resource unrelated to ethnic identity (May 2003: 112).

Religion, as an aspect of identity, might lead to marginalization or certain disadvantages (see e.g., Schröder 2012; Ališauskienė and Schröder 2014; Dikšaitė 2020). However, the roles of *language* and *religion* are not identical in structuring contemporary societies (Brubaker 2015a, b). Brubaker suggests that in contemporary societies, language is much more politicized than religion since "the state must privilege a particular language or set of languages, but it need not privilege a particular religion, at least not in the same way and not to the same degree" (Brubaker 2015a: 90). Brubaker concludes that disregarding religion is powerful and authoritative; however, it is not omnipresent and attributable only to certain sectors of modern societies (Brubaker 2015b: 23). In Lithuania, the Catholic religion is dominant, so doubts arise if it is still valid to ask about religion as a cultural

dimension which might be perceived as structuring the majority (Lithuanians)–minority (Poles) relations. On the other hand, historically, Catholicism (the language of church services) was a relevant site of struggle between Lithuanians and Poles (Staliūnas 2013), and there are linguistically and ethnically based traditions (Polish and Lithuanian) within the Catholic community nowadays as well (Schröder and Petrušauskaitė 2013; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2022). Moreover, religion and Christian values are explicitly employed by the political party Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania,[2] which positions itself as representing the Polish minority group in Lithuania; in this way, religion becomes a resource for political actors, too.

Policy of Language, Religion, and Schooling in Lithuania

The Lithuanian Republic was occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War and was one of the fifteen republics that went through the subsequent processes of sovietisation and russification (more on history see e.g. Kiaupa 2005). After the restoration of sovereignty in 1990, the newly re-established state had to develop the legal basis which structured the rights and statuses of ethnic communities in Lithuania (for more see e.g. Klumbytė and Šliavaitė 2021). Scholars have noted that since the late 1980s, the Lithuanian language has been seen as a cultural element to be protected by the Lithuanian state with appropriate regulations (Vainiūtė 2010; Vaicekauskienė 2016a, b; Vaicekauskienė and Šepetys 2016). The status of the Lithuanian language was one of the most important issues to be regulated by the legal norms of the newly re-established nation-state in the 1990s (Vainiūtė 2010; Petrušauskaitė and Pilinkaitė Sotirovič 2012; Vaicekauskienė 2016a, b; Klumbytė and Šliavaitė 2021, etc.). The statuses and hierarchies of languages in the newly re-established nation-state had to be addressed sensitively: for example, in 1990, to prevent any internal conflicts, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania (LR Aukščiausioji Taryba 1990) announced that only minimal competencies of the state language (Lithuanian) are required for the residents of multi-ethnic territories where resided mainly non-Lithuanian speakers (*kitakalbiai gyventojai*) (LR Aukščiausioji taryba 1990; see also Vainiūtė 2010).

The Constitution of Lithuania of 1992 granted the status of the state language to the Lithuanian language (LR Konstitucija 1992). The state language is required for all official written and oral communications: legal acts, at the state and municipal institutions, courts, and official events (LR Seimas 1995). The government established a dedicated institution to supervise the implementation of the laws regulating the usage of the state language—the National Language Inspection (LR valstybinės kalbos inspekcijos įstatymas 2001). In 1992 and later in 2003, the Government of Lithuania approved the system which prescribed certain levels/categories of the state language competencies for different groups of state employees (LR Vyriausybė 1992; LR Vyriausybė 2003).

The concept of the *native language* [gimtoji kalba] in legislation is used mostly in relation to national minorities. National minorities are granted the right to study and

[2] 'Parties cooperation in defence of true European values getting stronger,' http://www.awpl.lt/?p=23444&lang=en#more-23444

communicate in their native language and to foster their ethnic culture (LR Švietimo ir mokslo ministras 2004). The 1989 Law on National Minorities guaranteed the right of national minorities to pursue education, access mass media, acquire information, and participate in religious services in their native language (LR Aukščiausioji Taryba 1989). The right of national minorities to pursue education in their native language is repeated in subsequent laws on education, including the amendments to this law in 2011 (LR Seimas 2011). Apart from ensuring the right of national minorities to pursue school education in their native language, this legislation requires them to acquire competencies in the state language (Lithuanian) as after some transitional period all school graduates in Lithuania have to take the uniform final Lithuanian language exam which is obligatory to compete for state funded place at national universities (LR Seimas 2011). This is often estimated as an important measure to guarantee that members of minority groups acquire proper competencies in the state language to participate in Lithuanian society fully (see e.g. Janušauskienė 2021). On the other hand, these corrections to the Law on Education were met with protests and criticism by national minorities, who interpreted them as insensitive to the inherent ethnic and linguistic diversity of Lithuanian society (Šliavaitė 2016, 2018; Dambrauskas 2017).

In Lithuania, Lithuanians make up 84 per cent of the population, Poles are the second group and constitute 7,71 per cent, and Russians, the third ethnic group in Lithuania, account for 5,9 per cent of the Lithuanian population (Official Statistics Portal 2021). Pre-school (kindergarten), primary, and secondary education in Lithuania are available in the Lithuanian, Polish or Russian languages. The public schooling sector(s) with the Lithuanian or national minority (Polish or Russian) languages of instruction are attended by pupils from Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, mixed or families with other ethnic background. Thus, the language of teaching should not be equated with the ethnic identity of students (Saugėnienė 2003; Leončikas 2007; Šliavaitė 2016, 2018, 2019). In 2021, there were 27 Russian-language, 45 Polish-language, 22 schools with multiple languages of instruction (e.g., Lithuanian and Polish, or Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian), and one Belarussian-language school (Jevsejevienė et al. 2021: 19–20). In total, 47,438 students attended these schools in 2021, of which 10,000 students went to Polish-language schools (Jevsejevienė et al. 2021: 21). The majority of schools that operate in Polish are located in regions densely populated by national minorities: Vilnius City and its district, Šalčininkai and Trakai districts (Jevsejevienė et al 2021: 18, 19–20). Since students of different ethnic identities attend these schools, often the choice of school is linked to the estimated prospects of social mobility or/and ethnic identity (Leončikas 2007; Šliavaitė 2016, 2018, 2019). It is also important to note that the funding of schools is directly related to the number of students attending them; therefore, competition among schools with different languages of instruction is also linked to competition for economic resources (Šliavaitė 2016).

In 2000, Lithuania signed the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and subscribed to the principles that regulate the coexistence of the ethnic majority and minorities inscribed in this document (Tautinių mažumų departamentas 2020). The Convention guarantees for national minorities certain linguistic and other rights (Council of Europe 1995). In the 2018 Opinion of the Advisory Committee on the

success of implementation of the Framework Convention in Lithuania, experts indicated a number of shortcomings in implementing language-related rights (Council of Europe 2018). Regarding the education sector, the committee concluded that the equalisation of the requirements of the Lithuanian language graduation exam for all graduates, despite the language of instruction at their schools, places minority youth at risk of exclusion (Council of Europe 2018: 1).

Schools also play a significant role in transmitting religious values and traditions (see e.g., Swain 2005; Dikšaitė 2020). In 1995, the Roman Catholic community was acknowledged as a traditional religious community in Lithuania along with eight other communities, such as Eastern Rite Catholics, Evangelical Lutherans, Evangelical Reformats, followers of the Russian Orthodox Church, Old Believers, Jews, Sunni Muslims and Karaites (LR Prezidentas 1995). The Law on Education (LR Seimas 2011) guarantees to pupils a right to study religion of some traditional religious communities. According to this legislation, students and their parents may choose attending ethics or religious studies classes (LR Seimas 2011). The curriculum of religious study classes has to be developed in close cooperation with the respective traditional religious community and approved by the heads of the religious community and the Minister of Education (LR Seimas 2011). Scholars indicate that members of small religious minority groups that are not considered to be traditional religious communities might experience stigma and social exclusion in a predominantly Catholic society (Ališauskienė and Schröder 2014). Even though scholars document Lithuanian and Polish linguistic traditions within the contemporary Catholic community in Lithuania, there is no evidence of severe ethnic tensions within the Catholic religious community (Schröder and Petrušauskaitė 2013; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Marcinkevičius, Šliavaitė 2022). Mass is held in Polish, Lithuanian, Russian and other languages and these rituals are open to people of different nationalities (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2022). Further in the text I will present analysis of fieldwork data.

Language, Identity and Negotiated Linguistic Hierarchies

This section focuses on the perceived relation of the Polish language to Polish identity and whether and how linguistic competencies (of the native and state languages) are seen as shaping the processes of social integration and mobility in Lithuanian society. The research data comes from interviews with members of Polish-language schools (school administration, teachers, and students' parents) in 2013–2014. The research was conducted after the 2011 amendments to the Law on Education equalized the requirement for school graduates to pass the Lithuanian language final exam despite the language of instruction at their school. In this context the questions of language, identity, social mobility, and the role of the school were relevant to the research participants; thus, the timing of the interviews proved to be successful. I will present the data by focusing on the three categories that came up in most of the interviews: language and ethnic identity, the role(s) of Polish-language schools, and perceptions of the role of language in the processes of integration and social mobility.

Language and Ethnic Identity

Participants of this research explicitly referred to Polish language as an important marker of ethnic identity (cf. Geben 2010, 2013; Kazėnas et al. 2014; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Šliavaitė, Šutinienė 2016; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2022; Vyšniauskas 2022):

> Q [question]: What is important then to consider oneselve a Pole? A [answer]: Well, language. Traditions are traditions for everyone (…), this does not make a person a Pole (Table 1, interview no. 10).

> Language is very important. Important, yes. Of course the more languages you know the better it is, but you have to know your own language. Our kids must know it and we must know [Polish language]. This is sacred, something like this (Table 1, interview no. 7).

Research participants admitted that some people who identify themselves as Polish might not speak Polish properly. Most commonly, a lack of proficiency in the Polish language is interpreted as a consequence of russification experienced during the Soviet period:

> I often ask my mother why she chose a kindergarten in Russian lanugage for me while there were in Polish and Lithuanian. My mother said that it was different authorities back then [in 1980s]. At that time it was Soviet Union and I remember that there were very numerous groups [of kids] in Russian language [at kindergarten]. Then I went to a Russian school and after graduation started to work. Then I met my husband. He is a Pole. And we returned to the Polish language (…) I remember from childhood some situation when some kids in Vilnius were saying "czy my pojedziemy do sklepu, czy dojedziemy do sklepu." I was thinking back then—what did they planned to do in that basement. Then I understood that "sklep" in Russian is a basemen and in our [Polish] language it is a shop (Table 1, interview no. 12).

This research was conducted in multi-ethnic and multi-lingual localities, i.e., local people easily move between the Polish, Russian and Lithuanian languages and the Russian language is often used as a means of communication in multi-linguistic situations (cf. Kalnius 1998; Hogan-Brun and Ramonienė 2005; Balžekienė et al. 2008; Daukšas 2012; Geben 2010, 2013; Kazėnas et al. 2014; Šliavaitė 2015; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Šliavaitė, Šutinienė 2016). Research participants acknowledged the need to communicate in different local languages (Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian) and considered their competencies in numerous languages to be an advantage and important competencies:

> A pupil can hear some language and gain competencies and he/she starts to speak in one or another language. For example, among my own relatives—a father is a Pole, a mother is a Lithuanian and kids were attending school in Russian language and now they think of Lithuanian [school]. But kids speak perfectly in all languages (…) this is a very big plus if somebody can speak in all languages (Table 1, interview no. 9).

Most research participants saw the Polish language as a meaningful marker of ethnic identity; however, they indicated that several local languages might be used to communicate in their environments, even in families. The importance of competencies in local languages was commonly emphasized by research participants in the localities populated by people of different ethnic backgrounds.

The Perceived Role(s) of Polish-language Schools

A school where Polish is the language of instruction was seen as an important institution to maintain ethnic (Polish) identity, i.e., the choice of school with a particular language of instruction is related to the ethnic identity of the family or a pupil:

My daughter was born in 2001 and I somehow let her to the kindergarten with Lithuanian language (…) She went to the Lithuanian kindergarten, she spoke fluently in Lithuanian and in Polish, but somehow she spoke more often in Lithuanian. But when it was time to go to some school, I thought that it were better if she knew her native language better. Plus, my mother in law expressed her opinion. She said that a kid should go to the Polish school since in this way she will learn perfectly Lithuanian, Polish and some foreign language (Table 1, interview no. 12).

I think that if I were able to choose a school for my child then it would be the school with Polish language of instruction. Since it is our native language and the [Polish] mentality is different and I think that those pupils who chose school with Lithuanian language of instruction but who are from Polish families, I doubt whether they are aware who they are [in ethnic sense] (Table 1, interview no. 9).

Students who attend Polish-language schools typically were identified by interlocutors as coming from Polish or mixed families; thus, their presumed ethnic background was seen as standing out as the primary reason behind their school choice. However, some research participants indicated that students of other ethnic backgrounds, not only Polish, can also choose Polish-language schools. This choice was related to the language of instruction in the previous educational institution, which confirms that school choice is closely connected to identity-making:

Q: Maybe you could tell me a bit about pupils and their families who choose your school? What is their ethnicity, what is native language? A: Now most pupils come from Polish families. (…) They are Poles by ethnicity. Those who came into the school last year, somehow many of them speak in Russian. Q: In their family? A: Yes. But they completed kindergarten in Polish language, their parents understand Polish. But I can hear that when they speak with parents, very often they do in Russian. Q: Why? A: I do not know, maybe they are used to it. Maybe their parents completed Russian schools at their time (Table 1, interview no. 7).

The selection of a school where Polish is the language of instruction is closely related to the affirmation of ethnic identity and the perceived role of the school—preservation of this identity. At the same time, studying in the native language was seen as enabling a proper educational process as well as the involvement of parents in the education process. Education in the native language (Polish) is seen as advantageous when studying other disciplines, i.e., studying in the native language are interpreted as allowing for success in other school subjects:

Because a pupil has to, how to say, be able to use language [in Polish—operować slowem]. What means—to be able to speak, to understand language. A pupil studies in a language which he/she understands, in her native language. (…) And we can write in Russian, in Polish, in Lithuanian. This is only a plus (Table 1, interview no. 1).

If I gave my kids to the Lithuanian school, I were not able to help them. (…) If you let your kid to Lithuanian school, then you have to communicate in Lithuanian at home. Since if you choose Lithuanian school, but communicate in Polish, then there is no help [at home] (Table 1, interview no. 6).

Perceptions of the Role of Language(s) in the Processes of Integration and Social Mobility

Scholars demonstrate that the Lithuanian-language schools community members often define the state language as the main instrument to enable social mobility and pursue a professional career in Lithuania (Šliavaitė 2016, 2019; Vaicekauskienė 2016b). In such context a choice of a school that operates in a minority language is seen as a barrier to smooth integration (Šliavaitė 2019; see also Leončikas 2007). Contrary to this, research participants of Polish background perceived the competencies of local languages (Polish,

Russian, Lithuanian) as an important means of communication in multi-ethnic areas in Lithuania, which, therefore, ensures social inclusion and social mobility in such regions:

For example, my father is a Lithuanian, my mother—a Pole. So Russian, Polish and Lithuanian was always used in the family. My relatives from father's side were very astonished to see that I could communicate easily in Polish, Russian and Lithuanian. We cannot otherwise. I live in Eišiškės and I was considering whether it is not a mistake to choose for my kids a Lithuanian lanugage school since they might not be able to speak in Russian or Polish (Table 1, interview no. 6).

Polish-language schools were seen as providing competencies of the Lithuanian and the Polish languages; both languages were perceived as important instruments for professional mobility. Lithuanian language was estimated as the language needed for all citizens of Lithuania and for enrolment at Lithuanian universities. Additionally, graduating from a school where Polish is the language of instruction was seen as opening the possibility of studying in universities in Poland.

Q: Could you please tell a bit of tendencies of admission to the universities. A: No problems. I am very interested to hear that our kids have any problems. No. First of all, we teach Lithuanian language very responsibly. It is the state language and we pay big attention to grammar. And our kids, those who are motivated, they enter universities (Table 1, interview no. 15).

The research participants perceive inclusion and social mobility as dependant on numerous causes such as linguistic competencies, contexts (multi-lingual areas require knowledge of several languages), and other variables (e.g. general inclusiveness of Lithuanian society). In this way, the role of the Lithuanian language is not denied, but it is not seen as the single, universal instrument enabling social integration and mobility in all social contexts.

Religion, Identity, and Ethnic Boundaries Making

This part of the paper aims to explain how the presumed relatedness of religion and ethnicity is constructed in the education sector, whether religious identity is seen as framing the processes of social inclusion. The data is presented according to the three categories that came up in the majority of interviews: religion (Catholicism) and ethnic identity, the role(s) of Polish-language schools in religious identity-making, and perceptions of the role of religion in constructing social-cultural boundaries with the ethnic majority.

Religion (Catholic) and Ethnic Identity

The interviewees at Polish-language schools emphasized the link between Polishness and Catholicism during both research projects, in 2013–2014 and 2019–2021.

Religion is connected with culture, with history, and for a person it is important who he/she is—culture, nationality. If he/she knows who he/she is, then he/she knows this in front of the Lord as well. You cannot separate religion from nationality, from who you feel you are (Table 2, Interview no. 1).

You know, I think that for Poles the most important is religion, really. You see, we follow all religious festivals. Many people, our relatives, come to have these festivals together. (…) And traditions, always Boże Narodzenie,

always Wielkanoc, these two festivals when we all meet at our place, and then in regards to kids—Christening, Pierwsza Komunia, Bierzmowanie, all these religious festivals (Table 1, interview no. 7).

As these quotations demonstrate, religion is seen as connected with ethnicity (Polish) (cf. Savukynas 2003; Daukšas 2012; Geben 2010, 2013; Kazėnas et al. 2014; Korzeniewska 2013; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Šliavaitė, Šutinienė 2016; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Marcinkevičius, Šliavaitė 2022; Vyšniauskas 2022). Polish-language schools are thought to be primarily selected by local families with Polish ethnic roots, so this implies that school might be seen as having important role in maintaining religious traditions.

The Role(s) of Polish-language schools in religious identity-making

The educational system in Lithuania allows students to choose between religious studies or ethics classes, starting from the first grade and continuing until graduation (LR Seimas 2011). Research participants stated that at school they only have religious (Catholic) studies classes since there is no demand for ethics classes among the students due to their ethnic (Polish) background:

since one hundred of our pupils choose classes of faith so there are no classes of ethics at all (…) there are two kids who have one parent Catholic and other Russian Orthodox. But they attend classes of Catholic religion as all other kids and have no objections. Most probably it is important for parents that kids gain sacraments of Communion and others (Table 2, interview no. 9).

Q: Do you teach classes of ethics? A: No. We have only religion. There are no cases that somebody says I do not go to religion, I will go to ethics. If there are any such cases, we would teach ethics as well. Q: Was it like this always? A: Yes, always since we have started to teach religion. (…) Maybe because our town is not big, also this is related to traditions. Maybe you cannot separate this from the fact that you are a Pole. This is as it has to be (Table 2, interview no. 8).

The school is seen as an institution that socializes students into some religious (Catholic) tradition and, with the help of the Church, enables them to take part in rituals, such as first communion and confirmation. In this way, religious traditions are preserved along the boundaries of the community. At the same time, religious studies classes are seen as passing certain virtues even to those few participants coming from other cultural backgrounds:

Q: Can you please tell whether all your pupils are of Polish identity? A: There are few from mixed families who speak in Russian, but most are from Catholic families. There are some from other religions, but they try to adapt. Anyway there is only one Lord for everyone (Table 2, interview no. 6).

In interviews, all respondents from Polish-language schools mentioned the same key holidays and celebrations related to Catholicism that schools held: the 1st of September or the start of the school year is commemorated with a communal prayer at a Catholic church, including the blessing of first grade students and their backpacks; collectively visiting cemeteries and caring for graves on the Day of All Saints and Day of All Souls; preservation of Advent traditions (via school decorations, preparations); Christmas festival called Jasełka; Easter; the end of academic year celebrated at Church together with other school community members:

It is such a blessing that we have religion at school (…) And of course we follow liturgical year as much as possible. We start from the first of September. October—a month of rosary. We attend church with pupils, pray for Saint Mary. Not numerous group, those who wish, we go together after classes. (…) We educate about the dates of All Saints and All Souls. (…) Advent. We prepare. You can see decorations now as well. (…) we lit one candle each week. (…) And we celebrate Christmas in the classes with teachers and parents (…) Then the great fasting (…) Then there is preparation for the First Communion in the third grade (Table 2, interview no. 1).

Via preservation of these traditions, the link between ethnic (Polish) and religious (Catholic) identities is reaffirmed at Polish-language schools via school traditions and practices. Daniele Harvieu-Léger introduces the term "ethnic religions" explaining that, in some cases, these two elements (ethnicity and religion) "establish a social bond on the basis of an assumed genealogy, on the one hand, a naturalized genealogy (because related to soil and to blood), and a symbolized genealogy (because constituted through belief in and reference to a myth and a source), on the other" (Harvieu-Léger 2000: 157). The relation between Polishness and Catholicism was seen as self-evident during interviews with members of Polish-language schools; research participants (teachers of religious studies and school administrators) discursively constructed an unbreakable symbolic bond between Polish identity and Catholicism.

Does Religion Matter for Inclusion or Social Mobility?

Presumed religiosity serves to construct the ethnic boundaries between Lithuanians and Poles: Poles are defined as more religious than Lithuanians, which is considered to be evident from the number of people attending mass in some church and students choosing religious studies (cf. Savukynas 2003; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Marcinkevičius, Šliavaitė 2022; Vyšniauskas 2022):

In the Lithuanian schools the major difference [in comparison with Polish schools] (…) I think that religion is a bit a fashion (…) faith is not expressed in Lithuanian schools. (…) For example, in our [Polish language] school pupils might express their position based on faith at other classes as well (Table 2, interview no. 3).

I work there for 20 years and there is a tendency that all Polish classes attend classes of religion (…) I do not know how to express properly, but I think that Poles Catholics, that their faith comes from family. They are more religious, faith is more close to them. It was more difficult for me in Lithuanian school. Not everything was interesting for them. (…) If you visit Mass in Church on some Sunday, then you will see that difference in number of people at Mass in Polish and Mass in Lithuanian is tremendous (Table 2, interview no. 9).

Both Poles and Lithuanians are predominantly Catholic, so religion was not perceived as related to some inter-ethnic tensions or hierarchies between the two groups (about similar processes in the broader society see Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Marcinkevičius, Šliavaitė 2022). Neither was religion referred to as a factor related to issues of social inclusion or mobility. Religion was explicitly linked with certain human values, ethnic identity, and community.

Discussion

Linguistic rights, statuses, and hierarchies were central identity-related legislative questions in the newly re-established Lithuanian nation-state of the early 1990s (Vainiūtė 2010;

Table 1

Research participants during I fieldwork

Number of interview	Location	Interview length (min)	Information about research participant	Date
1.	South-Eastern Lithuania	35	School personnel, a teacher	2013-11-13
2.	South-Eastern Lithuania	35	School personnel, a teacher	2013-12-04
3.	South-Eastern Lithuania	40	School personnel, a member of administration	2013-10-16
4.	South-Eastern Lithuania	20	A parent of a school pupil	2013-11-03
5.	South-Eastern Lithuania	20	A parent of a school pupil	2013-12-03
6.	South-Eastern Lithuania	59	Two mothers of school pupils	2013-11-14
7.	South-Eastern Lithuania	50	School personnel, a teacher	2014-04-29
8.	South-Eastern Lithuania	41	School personnel, a teacher	2014-04-29
9.	South-Eastern Lithuania	45	School personnel, a member of administration	2013-06-26
10.	South-Eastern Lithuania	54	Two mothers of school pupils	2014-04-29
11.	South-Eastern Lithuania	74	A parent of school pupil	2014-04-29
12.	South-Eastern Lithuania	57	A parent of a school pupil and a teacher	2014-05-06
13.	South-Eastern Lithuania	60	A parent of a school pupil	2014-05-06
14.	South-Eastern Lithuania	50	A parent of a school pupil	2014-04-29
15.	South-Eastern Lithuania	38	School personnel, a member of administration	2013-05-21

Table 2

Research participants during II fieldwork

Number of interview	Location	Interview length (min)	Information about research participant	Date
1.	Vilnius	45	School personnel, a teacher of religious classes at a school	2019-12-05
2.	Vilnius	20	School personnel, two members of administration	2019-12-23
3.	Vilnius	59	School personnel, a teacher of religious classes at a school	2019-12-30
4.	Vilnius	27	School personnel, a teacher of religious classes at a school	2020-02-13
5.	Vilnius	69	School personnel, a former teacher of religious classes at a school	2020-10-25
6.	South-Eastern Lithuania	43	School personnel, a member of administration	2021-08-23
7.	South-Eastern Lithuania	47	School personnel, a teacher of religious classes at a school	2021-09-13
8.	South-Eastern Lithuania	57	School personnel, a teacher of religious classes at a school	2021-09-14
9.	South-Eastern Lithuania	45	School personnel, a teacher of religious classes at a school	2021-08-11

Petrušauskaitė and Pilinkaitė Sotirovič 2012; Vaicekauskienė 2016a, b; Klumbytė and Šliavaitė 2021, etc.). The state language (Lithuanian) became a right and an obligation of every citizen—a requirement for communication in the official public sphere, while minority languages are seen as a right of national minorities to preserve their culture and identity (Vainiūtė 2010; Petrušauskaitė and Pilinkaitė Sotirovič 2012; Vaicekauskienė

2016a, b; Klumbytė and Šliavaitė 2021, etc.). Lithuania went through the process of nation-state building, typical for different regions and societies when some form of a unifying culture has to be created (Kymlicka 2000; cf. Klumbytė and Šliavaitė 2021). In this process, language gained a vital role, while religion did not: the Roman Catholic community was acknowledged as one of nine religious communities that attained the status of the so-called "traditional religious communities" (LR Prezidentas 1995).

Research participants at the Polish language schools perceived native language (Polish) as a marker of ethnic identity and, consequently, the choice of a Polish-language school is closely related to the affirmation of this ethnic identity (cf. Šliavaitė 2016, 2019). Proficiency in the Polish language as the native language is seen as an instrument that enables success in studying various subjects, facilitates communication in multi-ethnic communities, and paves the way for pursuing higher education in Poland. Research participants recognize the importance of competencies in the state language (Lithuanian); it is perceived as one of the instruments for inclusion and social mobility in Lithuanian society. However, competencies in the state language are not seen as the single instrument shaping one's integration and social mobility. Instead, integration is perceived as a "multidimensional" process that unfolds in different social spheres and might require different instruments (on a multidimensional understanding of integration see e.g., Beresnevičiūtė 2005).

In interviews with members of Polish-language public schools' communities, the relation between Polishness and Catholicism was seen as self-evident. Research participants (teachers of religion/ethics and school administrators) discursively constructed an unbreakable symbolic connection between the Polish identity and Catholicism. Various practices and traditions carried out by the school communities throughout the academic year reaffirm this relation. However, unlike with issues of linguistics, religion is not at the forefront when discussing issues of social mobility or integration into the Lithuanian society. On the one hand, this is because a major part of Lithuanian society also refers to themselves as Roman Catholics, on the other hand, this relates to Brubaker's (2015b: 23) argument that religion is considerably less politicized in modern societies since it is less pervasive and more related with certain segments of population than language.

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