

School-leaving exam as a divisive point in Lithuania

 icelds.org/2019/02/04/school-leaving-exam-as-a-divisive-point-in-lithuania

On 8 January 2019, the Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities published its Fourth Opinion on Lithuania together with the government comments. Among other things, the Advisory Committee emphasized that the introduction of a unified curriculum and state exam generated “significant difficulties for minority children.”

What is the view of Lithuania’s authorities?

In its comments on the Advisory Committee’s Opinion, the Government of Lithuania “accepts the Advisory Committee’s regret that the introduction of the exams in 2013 has led to significant disadvantages for students at minority language schools” (para. 95). The government further acknowledges that the proficiency in the state language in national minority schools is below the expected results. This situation is a matter of concern for Lithuania’s authorities.

Lithuania is a party to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM). It means that the FCNM provisions are legally binding for this Baltic state. However, the Opinions of the Advisory Committee are generally non-binding, although the state commits itself to be a part of country-specific monitoring and accept the Opinions of the Advisory Committee. Therefore, the Opinions of the Advisory Committee are an important tool to evaluate the content and consistency of minority policies in a specific country.

In the view of Ewelina Dobrowolska from the Vilnius-based European Foundation of Human Rights (EFHR), “it’s worth paying attention to the fact that some of the Advisory Committee’s comments are repeated from the previous Opinions. We can make a conclusion that Lithuania has not introduced properly governed legal mechanisms in all minority-related domains to ensure the correct implementation of its international commitments.”

What’s wrong with the state exam?

According to Dobrowolska, the current form of the Lithuanian language and literature exam is criticized both by ethnic Lithuanians and minority representatives. Already in 2013, specialists of Lithuania’s Ministry of Education emphasized that students in minority schools had less lessons of the Lithuanian language. During all 12 years of study, this figure is 818 academic hours less than in the schools with the Lithuanian language of instruction. Even today, the number of Lithuanian classes in Lithuanian and minority schools differ. The Lithuanian language textbooks for students in minority schools are not adopted to the specific needs of the children, whose Lithuanian vocabulary is not always as rich as that of ethnic Lithuanian children of the same age.

According to the data compiled by the EFHR, in 2018 23.5 percent of the minority school graduates failed to pass the Lithuanian language exam. Among the graduates of the schools with the Lithuanian language of instruction this figure was as high as 7.8 percent. In 2017, these figures were 19.3 percent among the minority school graduates and 10.5 percent among the graduates of Lithuanian schools. Hence, one can observe a negative development trend among the graduates of minority schools in contrast to positive dynamics among the graduates of schools with the Lithuanian language of instruction.

Another compilation by the EFHR reveals the dynamics from 2008 to 2013. The analysis demonstrates that the introduction of a unified state exam produced a decrease of the examination scores both in Lithuanian and minority schools. For example, in 2012, 49.5 percent of the graduates from Lithuanian schools and 49.9 percent of the minority school graduates managed to score more than 50 percent of possible points. In 2013, this result was reached by 41.1 percent of the graduates of Lithuanian schools and only by 25.1 percent of the minority school graduates. Nevertheless, the 2013 results are not as dramatic as they were in 2008. In 2013, only 11.4 percent of the minority school graduates failed to pass the unified Lithuanian language exam, while in 2008 this figure was as high as 21.9 percent. Among the graduates of the schools with the Lithuanian language of instruction these figures were 9.5 and 12.7 percent respectively.

Saulė Vingelienė, director of the National Examination Center, argues that the results of the school-leaving exams before and after 2013 should not be compared because of the change of assessment standards. Until 2013, one percent of those who took the exam had to receive a 100 point score, as the then system required. Hence, actual results were changing every year. For example, to receive 100 points at the exam in 2012 students required to score at least 86 percent. In 2011, this figure was 88 percent, while in 2010 – 89 percent. After the introduction of the unified assessment criteria in 2013, the exact static criteria were implemented: one should receive at least 30 percent to pass the exam, while 100 points were awarded to those who received at least 93 percent.

Based on the results of the unified state exam, the National Examination Center argues that the students of minority schools often receive undeservedly higher grades than their fellow colleagues in schools with the Lithuanian language of instruction. For instance, this data suggests that 40 percent of the graduates of the Lithuanian schools typically have grade five, while their colleagues from minority schools receive either seven or eight, although they all pursue the same program.

Tougher criteria for the graduates from minority schools are explained by the increase of the number of lessons of the Lithuanian language. One should also bear in mind that since 2021 all graduates will have to take the state exam on equal terms.

The lack of the state status for the exams in the mother tongues of national minorities is another important problem in the view of Ewelina Dobrowolska because the actual knowledge of a native language is controlled only by the school exam. Because of its

optional status, the results of this exam cannot be included in the competitive points during the university admission process. Hence, it puts the graduates of minority schools in a somewhat unequal positions comparing to the graduates of Lithuanian schools.

A unified exam on equal terms?

Saulė Vingelienė emphasizes that the introduction of the unified exam in the Lithuanian language in 2013 was a logical decision, because since 2011 all students in Lithuania pursue the same school programme in Lithuanian language and literature. This approach is interpreted by the authorities as an advantageous for everyone. Vingelienė underlines that “a unified exam for all students in Lithuania will allow everyone to compete on equal terms at the time of admission to the university”. She stresses that a graduate can choose between the state and the school types of exam. She also argues that at the state exam the minority school graduates are assessed based on more liberal criteria than the graduates of Lithuanian schools.

Vingelienė claims that there was a long preparation to renew the study program of the Lithuanian language and literature. The idea to introduce a unified content for the Lithuanian language exam in the general education schools of Lithuania was approved in 2002. In the same year, the Ministers of Education of Poland and Lithuania signed a document which confirmed Lithuania’s commitments on education policies. One of them was to specify a transition period for the introduction of a monolingual Lithuanian language exam for all students who complete the secondary education programs.

The 2004-08 program of the Ministry of Education contained plans to introduce a unified exam in the Lithuanian language in the second quarter of 2007. A similar provision can be found in the Strategy on the Education Development of the Lithuania’s Polish Minority adopted in May 2005. It foresaw the transition period until 2008.

While speaking about the alleged discriminatory practices, the authorities refer to the decision of the Supreme Administrative Court of Lithuania of 18 June 2013. The Court ruled that the concessions for the students of minority schools shall not be more numerous than those foreseen by the Lithuanian language and literature exam program; otherwise they violate Article 29 of Lithuania’s Constitution which ensures the equality of persons before the law, courts, state institutions and officials.

Note: This text was prepared in cooperation with *InBaltic*.