

Assimilation in contemporary Lithuanian society: choosing the language of education

SUMMARY

Introduction

When sociological discourse was dominated by modernisation theories assimilation was considered one of the main processes in modernising society (e.g. Gordon 1964; Deutsch 1969), but the wave of multiculturalism and rise of activism among ethnic minorities in many countries of the world in the second half of 20th c. established a critical perception of assimilation. Forced assimilation was part of policy in many 20th c. states, and there were grounds for giving assimilation negative meaning. But as a result assimilation began to be associated exceptionally with losses rather than with equal treatment and equal choices. Throughout the last few decades, a theoretical approach to the analysis of assimilation as a social process has been lacking. Different approaches emerged only when the search for bases of society and for forms of commonality reappeared in discourse of social science (Barry 2002; Brubaker 2001; Joppke 1999).

Most ethnicity and nationalism studies seek to explain how people that belong to a certain category begin to associate, agree on collective goals and act in solidarity (Brubaker 2000). The analysis of assimilation is part of this field of study, yet the focus is not on the identity construction that takes place at the centre of ethnic or racial groups, but on transgressing ethnic boundaries, i.e. the process through which ascribed identity and belonging changes.

Interest in this research on assimilation in contemporary Lithuania was prompted by the changing ethnic composition of the country as registered in the 2001 census, also, by data on the changing proportions of schoolchildren in the sectors of public education (there are sectors of the educational system in Lithuania that differ in the language of instruction – Lithuanian, Russian, or Polish). The census revealed that the share of those who identified themselves as Lithuanians increased from 80 perc. in 1979 and 1989 to 83 perc. in 2001, but there was a lack of clear data on the demographic structure within ethnic groups. Apart from that, information on the education system showed that a proportion of non-Lithuanian pupils opt for education in Lithuanian, at the same time, the reorganisation of education system (e.g. decreasing number of schools) were viewed as controversial, especially by the largest minority communities, the Polish and Russian.

Previous researches have identified the uneven social situation of Lithuanian ethnic groups and revealed that integration is not all-encompassing or the same for all groups. 2002–2003 statistics disclosed higher unemployment rates among ethnic minorities; other research has discovered that minority members self-evaluate their social status worse than Lithuanians do (Kasatkina, Leončikas 2003), and are not evenly represented in the public sector (Beršnevičiūtė 2005). This data encourages new questions about how the ethnic and social structure will affect identity changes and assimilation in particular. However, regardless of preconditions for assimilation discussed in ethnicity studies, social factors stimulating assimilation at the level of individual are not obvious and defined – this is what is needed for disclosing real contents of assimilation.

This research continues and complements that stream of ethnicity studies that focuses on changing ethnic structure and analyses the formation of different social segments within ethnic groups. This study relies on original empirical research and introduces new data with regard to uneven social positions of ethnic groups in Lithuania.

This study suggests a theoretical scheme of social factors that affect assimilation at the level of the individual. The study approaches assimilation as a process in social space rather than an issue of quantitative (im)balance between ethnic groups. In developing such an approach, the traditional perception of assimilation as a process taking place within an ethnic group is abandoned, and the role of majority society is emphasised. Therefore separate attention is devoted to the ethnic majority's attitudes and the empirical analysis of relationship of minority members to majority and to majority (Lithuanian) identity. For the first time there is an attempt to identify obstacles to assimilation as experienced by people of non-majority background in contemporary Lithuanian society. This publication provides detailed analysis of the main assimilation trend in Lithuania – i.e. assimilation into mainstream society but does not cover other specific assimilation scenarios such as segmented assimilation or reassimilation.

The major part of quantitative data used in statistical analysis comes from an original 2005 survey conducted for the purposes of this study. The research concentrated on a comparison between four categories of parents of first-graders: ethnic Lithuanians who chose schools with Lithuanian as a language of instruction for their children; people of non-Lithuanian background who chose schools with Lithuanian; those who chose schools with Polish; those who chose schools with Russian. The size of the entire sample was 829; it covered 12 Polish, 17 Russian, and 21 Lithuanian schools. Data collection took place in the areas that, overall, contain 80 percent of Lithuania's minority population.

For secondary analysis, official statistics, data from the Ministry of Education and Science and various applied researches, and 2001 census data were used. Qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with parents that chose different schools for their children and expert interview materials are presented. The document analysis of legal acts that regulate education and citizenship is also used. The work also relies on data from a study on adaptation of Lithuanian ethnic groups (Kasatkina, Leončikas 2003), 1990 and 1999 European Value Survey data, and data from surveys conducted by *Vilmorus* and RAIT.

1. Theoretical concepts of assimilation in sociology

A critical review of the main concepts of assimilation in sociology begins with a discussion of M. Gordon's (1964) scheme of sub-processes of assimilation. His study became a classic thanks to the elaboration of concepts that are continuously used in discussing assimilation; however, his scheme is not a theory since it does not formulate statements about causes of assimilation. Moreover, he does not distinguish clearly between individual and group levels of analysis. There is evidence that the role of the group in preserving ethnicity may be different than described by Gordon; structural assimilation (the sub-process that leads to all other kinds of assimilation according to Gordon) does not necessarily ensure full acceptance of minority individuals by majority. Alba and Nee (1997) have advocated an alternative view claiming that assimilation outcomes are related to existing ethnic stratification that manifests itself in the social distances between ethnic groups, therefore the exploration of the criteria of belonging to a society is essential for assimilation analysis. In addition to this, an important point for advancing sociological understanding of assimilation is reconciliation between pluralist and assimilationist approaches, i.e. recognition that both persisting diversity and assimilation continue to be part of life in contemporary society.

Lallukka's (1990) work on assimilation of autochthonous groups in the Soviet Union and Laitin's (1998) research of assimilation prospects in post-Soviet space are selected as example studies that highlight the broader context, which is important to the experience and formation of Lithuanian society. Lallukka introduces a concept of ethnic erosion for designating a situation where ethnicity gradually loses its significance in social life. Laitin provides ample empirical material about the accommodation of Russians in post-Soviet states, explaining the dynamics of assimilation and develops the argument that assimilation is a likely outcome in many contexts, especially in the Baltic states. Assimilation has received little theoretical consideration in the studies of Lithuanian society, however, the empirical researches on ethnically mixed families and on regional peculiarities are acknowledged.