

Street name plates in Polish only on private properties or as a tourist information

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The first and the only street name plate with the name of Warszawska Street in Polish disappeared unexpectedly from the vicinity of Rasos Cemetery in Vilnius. Only two months ago, in the beginning of September, the name plate was hung next to the information board with the name of the street in Lithuanian (Varšuvos g.). It was solemnly unveiled by the Mayor of Vilnius Remigijus Šimašius, accompanied by hateful shouts of a group of several nationalists claiming that it was a “Shame!”. The Mayor underlined that “The unveiling of the street name plates in Polish shows that we become more and more tolerant.”

Before, the Mayor had unveiled a name plate in Icelandic with the name of Icelandic Street, the Russian Street name plate in Russian and a symbolic name plate of Tatar Street in Tatar language. At the Washington Square in Vilnius appeared a street plate with the name in English and also the Jewish Street name with inscriptions in Hebrew and Yiddish. In October, Remigijus Šimašius hung in Vilnius a name plate with the name “Deutsche Straße” in German and he placed a name plate in Karaim language in Žvėrynas.

A representative of the Government of the Vilnius District, Vilda Vaičiūnienė, demanded the removal of the bilingual name plates, using the argument that they interfere with the Lithuanian legal acts.

– Unfortunately, we have a gap in the legislation on that matter, the Lithuanian law does not specify the right of the national minorities to place bilingual topographic symbols, including bilingual street names. The Parliament was planning to discuss the question of the Act on National Minorities that would regulate these issues, but the debate had not started yet – said Elżbieta Kuzborska, Doctor of Juridical Science, in an interview with “Kurier Wileński”.

On the other hand, the Mayor of Vilnius explains that street name plates with names in non-official languages should be treated only as a decorative element.

– Mayor Šimašius has not violated any law within his competence, because the Lithuanian law allows the use of languages other than Lithuanian in the public sphere, including the nomenclature for tourist purposes. There are many examples of tourist information in Vilnius, in Lithuanian resorts, indicated in Lithuanian and in English or in Russian. I do not consider it as a violation of regulations – said Dr. Elżbieta Kuzborska.

In Lithuania, according to the applicable law, names of streets are written only in Lithuanian. Poles in Lithuania fought for the right to put bilingual names on street plates. In Vilnius, Poles constitute about 18% of population, in Soleczniki up to 80%.

– Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities obliges states to establish a proper internal regulation which would allow the placement of topographic information in two languages in towns inhabited by a fairly large groups of minorities. To be able to implement the Framework Convention, we have to adopt appropriate laws at the national level. In Lithuania, there is no such regulation – said Dr. Elżbieta Kuzborska in an interview with “Kurier Wileński”.

The owner of the most famous Polish name plate with a name of the street was the Deputy Minister of Energy, now



Currently, the street name plates in Lithuanian are placed on poles next to the private properties Fot. Marian Paluszkiwicz

a member of Vilnius City Council – Renata Cytacka. She says that although she was constantly accused of offending the law in the media, she was never presented with the charges.

– We hung the name plate in Polish a couple of years ago, once we bought a house in Jaši ūnai. We paid for the plate with our own money and hung it on our own wall. At a certain point, it became a cause of constant attacks from the media. We were continuously persecuted and harassed – sometimes up to 5 TV stations were coming, every other day we were haunted by a team of journalists. It was outrageous, because no one has ever accused us of anything in particular. We have not violated any law. In accordance with the principles of street naming, the mayor of the municipality is responsible for placing a street name plate at the beginning or at the end of the street or at the crossroads. The mayor places the plates in the official language and pays with the state money. As an owner of a private house, I have the right to put signs in any other language on my property – said Renata.

In order to demonstrate the bizarreness of the situation, during the struggle for the plate, the Cytacki family made a complaint to the Commission of the Lithuanian Language – the advisory body throughout the judicial process concerning the plate.

– The Commission of the Lithuanian Language responded that what we were doing was wrong and the person that would have to bear the consequences of our violation is... the Director of the Administration. For me, as a lawyer, the situation is ridiculous. Why an innocent director would be responsible for our “violation”? It is as if a person had to pay the penalty for a neighbor’s dog that has bitten someone – said Cytacka, full of irony.

The fight of the Lithuanian authorities with the bilingual street name plates lasted several years. Several courts issued a decision that the Director of the Administration of Vilnius district Bolesław Daszkiewicz, then his successor Józef Rybak had to pay approximately 50 000 LTL for not removing the bilingual name plates – Lucyna Kotłowska, the Director of the Administration of Vilnius district.

International organisations strongly condemned the decision of the Lithuanian authorities. As a compromise, signs with the names in Lithuanian were placed nearby. The Polish name plates remained on the buildings, but for some reason they stopped being problematic. This means that in fact it was never a problem – said Renata Cytacka angrily.

The problem arousing emotions for many years, has now been solved. The authorities place the name plates in Lithuanian and the name plates in Polish are hung on private properties.

– At the moment, the problem of the street name plates has been resolved and forgotten. The Administration Office is responsible for placing the name plates in the official language. The process is happening gradually, village by village. However, the citizens are allowed to place on their private properties the name plates with inscriptions in any other language. There is no official statistic available, but the citizens that removed the name plates in Polish, are replacing them – informed the Director of the Administration, Józef Rybak, in an interview with “Kurier Wileński”.

– The trick of the Mayor with the bilingual street name plates in Vilnius is a pure advertisement. If he really cared about other cultures and the tolerance, he would have acted differently, for example in the matter of education. When the fate of Polish schools was about to be sealed, he was the person who led to damage of the education of national minorities in Vilnius – said Cytacka.

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