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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 13.07.2011 www.osw.waw.pl

Polish inscriptions to be removed in Vilnius Region

The Supreme Administrative Court of Lithuania on 11 July passed a non-appealable verdict in the dispute over information plates in Polish and Russian located in public places in the Vilnius Region. The local government of the Vilnius Region is to replace all Polish signs with Lithuanian ones within one month. This verdict, which formally closed the year-long dispute, is the effect of a consistent interpretation of the laws applicable in Lithuania. In turn, the Lithuanian parliament is not interested in amending the laws to meet the demands of national minorities.

The court's ruling was based mainly on the regulations of the state language act, which provides that public inscriptions must be made in the state language in Lithuania. Poles, who constitute a majority in the Vilnius Region, have referred to the Polish-Lithuanian Treaty and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Since both of these documents, which Lithuania has ratified, allow for the use of bilingual inscriptions in the places where large minority concentrations occur, ethnic Poles demonstrated their civil disobedience and refused to remove the signs despite financial penalties. The Lithuanian parliament, where the ruling political right predominates, which sees placing Polish signs as a manifestation of Polish nationalism, has blocked any legislative initiatives, including governmental, aimed at satisfying the demands of national minorities.

The dispute is likely to escalate further. The Lithuanian government supports the execution of the court's verdict although the Ministry of Culture has been working for several weeks on an amendment of the national minority act aimed at allowing bilingual inscriptions. However, this ethnic minority has no grounds to believe that the Lithuanian law will really be amended. The spokesperson for the Lithuanian government has confirmed that such changes are not to be expected soon. An introduction of regulations favourable to ethnic Poles requires reaching a consensus first of all in the Seimas. This would require a comprehensive amendment of Lithuanian legislation in order to avoid new disputes and complaints. Meanwhile, the increasing sense of injustice and impatience among the Polish minority may lead to new manifestations of civil disobedience and objection to the execution of the court's verdict. <jhyn>