

Double citizenship is dividing Lithuania again

Lithuania's Seimas amended the citizenship act on 4 November. The new law grants individuals of Lithuanian background the right to hold double citizenship. Double citizenship is allowed on condition that one of the person's parents is a Lithuanian and the person declares in writing that he/she is an ethnic Lithuanian. The right to hold double citizenship does not cover ethnic minorities living in Lithuania, i.e. approximately 17% of the country's citizens (mainly of Polish and Russian backgrounds). The amendment is discriminative and deepens ethnic divides in society. For these reasons its critics believe it should be deemed unconstitutional.

This is the second time the Seimas wants to offer the right to double citizenship to Lithuanians who live abroad. The first attempt was quashed in 2006 by the Constitutional Court, which deemed that changing citizenship regulations would require an amendment of the constitution.

The idea behind this new act was to offer the privilege of holding two passports to ethnic Lithuanian émigrés (the emigration wave after 1944) or to political expellees from Soviet Lithuania and their descendants as well as to those who emigrated with the new wave after 1990, who live abroad and seek citizenship in the country they are living in, provided that it is a member state of the EU or NATO. The latter group of emigrants consists of almost 500,000 people (Lithuania's population totals 3.329 million at present). Citizenship offers voting rights. The right-wing government hopes to enlarge its electorate by pushing through the new regulations and thus demonstrating its concern for its compatriots. The reservations brought against the bill by ethnic minorities are supported mainly by left-leaning politicians, who have promised to bring a motion to the Constitutional Court for considering the constitutionality of the law and have expressed the hope that President Dalia Grybauskaitė would veto the amendment. <jhyn>