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LITHUANIAN CIVIC EMPOWERMENT IS GROWING, BUT REMAINS WEAK

Lithuanian society's and teachers' civic empowerment index 2009

A study of Lithuanian society's civic empowerment index was carried out for a third time in 2009, and the same study for teachers was carried out for a second time. The goal of the civic empowerment index is to determine changes in Lithuanian residents' and teachers' interest in public affairs, political and civic participation, potential for civic engagement, attitudes towards civic power, and the social climate for civic action. The annual survey reveals the development of Lithuanian civil society, and allows for the assessment of civic life, drawing attention to challenges in its development.

1. In 2009, Lithuanian society's civic empowerment was stronger than in 2007 or 2008

Lithuanians' civic empowerment index reached 35 points out of a possible 100 in 2009. Comparing these results with the 2007 value—32.7, and the 2008 value—33.2 points, we can conclude that this year's Lithuanian residents reported higher levels of civic empowerment than they did in previous years. This difference is primarily caused by an increase in residents' participation in certain civic activities and a change in attitudes regarding whether a civically active Lithuanian would be considered strange or assumed to be acting on selfish motives.

2. In 2009, more Lithuanians participated in community activities and protest campaigns

Over the past year, 7 out of 10 Lithuanian residents participated in at least one civic activity. The civic activities that attract most of the population remain the same as in 2007. Almost half of the population is involved in charitable activities and environmental clean-up. One third of Lithuanians take part in community activities. Various other civic activities—participating in non-governmental organizations, taking part in protest campaigns, and others—attract just a tenth of the population.

Comparing the 2008 and 2009 civic engagement rates by separate activities, we see that over the past year, significantly more people participated in community activities: 29% of respondents indicated cleaning up the environment in 2008, and 46% did in 2009; similarly, 18% participated in local community activities in 2008, and the percentage grew to 33% in 2009.

In 2009, the proportion of people participating in protest campaigns also increased: in 2008 only 3% of respondents answered that they had participated in demonstrations, rallies, or pickets, and in the 2009 study, the percentage of such people almost tripled (8%).

On the other hand, Lithuanian residents participated less in some civic activities in 2009. Even though participation in charities still remains one of the most common civic activities, the proportion of those who donate to charity fell from 50% to 45% over the year. In addition, results indicate that the proportion of people who report law violations to the authorities decreased (2008 – 16%, 2009—10%).

3. In 2009, there was a decrease in the proportion of the population to stay on the sidelines for local, economic, or political problems

The 2009 results regarding the potential of civic engagement reinforce the tendencies of the 2007 and 2008 studies. Most of the civic potential of Lithuanian society lies in local community action: almost a third (29%) of residents would start organizing to solve a problem of local concern, and another half (47%) would contribute to such activities. If society faced a serious economic or political problem, three times and seven times fewer people would start organizing to solve these problems, respectively, and about one third of the population would stay on the sidelines.

Although Lithuanian civic potential in 2009 remained similar to that measured in 2008, we see a positive trend: in 2009, there was a decrease in the proportion of residents who would choose to stay on the sidelines for a problem of local concern (in 2008—21%, in 2009—only 12%), a serious economic problem (2008—37%, 2009—24%), or a national political problem (2008—42%, 2009—32%). These reductions were matched by increases in responses that people are not sure how they would act in these situations. This shift can be interpreted as a precondition for the growth of civic potential.

4. Over the past year, there was no significant change in perceptions of civic efficacy, however, there was an increase in people's belief in the President's power to make important decisions for the whole of society or separate groups

In 2009, Lithuanians' views of ordinary citizens' or grassroots organizations' power did not change. The predominating belief remains: ordinary citizens and their organizations have little or no power over decision-making that is important for society as a whole or its individual groups. The 2009 average for respondents' sense of personal influence is only 2.5 points on a 10 point scale, where 1 is "has no influence," and 10 is "has a great influence." Ordinary citizens' power was ranked at 2.8 points, and non-governmental organizations' and communities' influence was 4.9 points.

Lithuanians believe that the President, Parliament members, and political officials have the most influence in making decisions that are important for the country. These three groups were ranked with the highest power in 2007 and 2008 as well. However, one change stands out in the 2009 results: people's belief in the President's power increased (the 2008 average for the President's influence was 7.2, and 2009—8.6). Previously, people attributed more influence to Parliament members and officials. Lithuanian residents rated businessmen, media representatives, and local authorities (municipal councils and mayors) as having less influence than national authorities. Still, the influence of these groups is substantial.

5. In 2009, the public began to perceive active engagement in civic activities as somewhat less threatening

As in earlier civic empowerment studies, the 2009 results indicate that the majority of the population associates civic engagement with political and social risks. Over half of Lithuanian residents believe that it is very likely or likely that a person initiating or actively participating in civic activities can lose a job, receive death threats, be publically attacked or slandered, and be thought to

be acting for selfish reasons. 4 out of 10 respondents think that it is very likely or likely that such a person will be considered strange.

Nevertheless, this dimension of civic empowerment had a positive development: a decrease in the number of people who think that it is very likely or likely that a civically active person can be considered strange in Lithuanian society (in 2008 59% thought so, but in 2009 only 43%), or be thought to be acting for selfish reasons (in 2008 68% thought so, but in 2009 only 59%). Optimistically interpreting these results, we can hope that the image of a civically active person in passive Lithuanian society as an individual violating social norms is beginning to gradually change towards an image of an active citizen engaging in ordinary civic life.

6. In 2009, as in 2008, teachers were more civically empowered than the average Lithuanian citizen

Although in the past year teachers' civic empowerment index had no significant change (the 2008 index was 48.6, and in 2009—47.8), some dimensions of teachers' empowerment did change.

The proportion of teachers engaging in civic activities in 2009 was significantly greater than the proportion of civically active people in the overall population. In the last year, 97% of teachers participated in at least one civic activity. For the most part, Lithuanian teachers participated in the same types of activities as the majority of residents: charitable organizations, environmental clean-up, local community activities. The difference is that the proportion of teachers participating in these activities is about two times greater than the proportion of average citizens participating. Teachers' civic engagement in various activities remained the same in 2009 as in 2008, with one exception: in 2009, half as many teachers (14.5%) participated in strikes compared to 2008 (28%).

In 2009, as in 2008, teachers had higher civic potential than society's average. This civic potential is stronger in local communities than at the national level, and a greater percentage of teachers would start organizing activities to solve a problem of local concern than the percentage of Lithuanian residents (38% and 29%, respectively). However, if a serious economic or national political problem arose, teachers are no more likely to organize than the rest of Lithuanian society. On the other hand, in such an event, a greater proportion of teachers would contribute to activities that someone else organizes. Teachers' civic potential remained fundamentally unchanged over the past year.

In 2009, teachers' opinions of civic efficacy matched the rest of the Lithuanian population: national representatives, including Parliament members and the President, have the most power in making decisions that are important for the nation. However, unlike the average resident, the average teacher believes more in his own, the average citizens' and non-governmental organizations' power. Still, teachers' overall ratings of civic influence remained unchanged.

As in 2008, in 2009 teachers were more likely than other residents to perceive risks associated with civic engagement: a greater proportion of teachers think that it is very likely or likely that a person initiating or actively participating in civic activities can lose a job, be publically attacked or slandered, be assumed to be acting selfishly, receive death threats, or be considered strange. Comparing the 2009 civic empowerment data with the 2008 data, the same trends emerge for teachers as for Lithuanian society as a whole: the proportion of teachers who think that a civically active person can be considered strange or assumed to be acting on selfish motives decreased.

The Civil Society Institute hired the research center "Vilmorus" to conduct the survey.