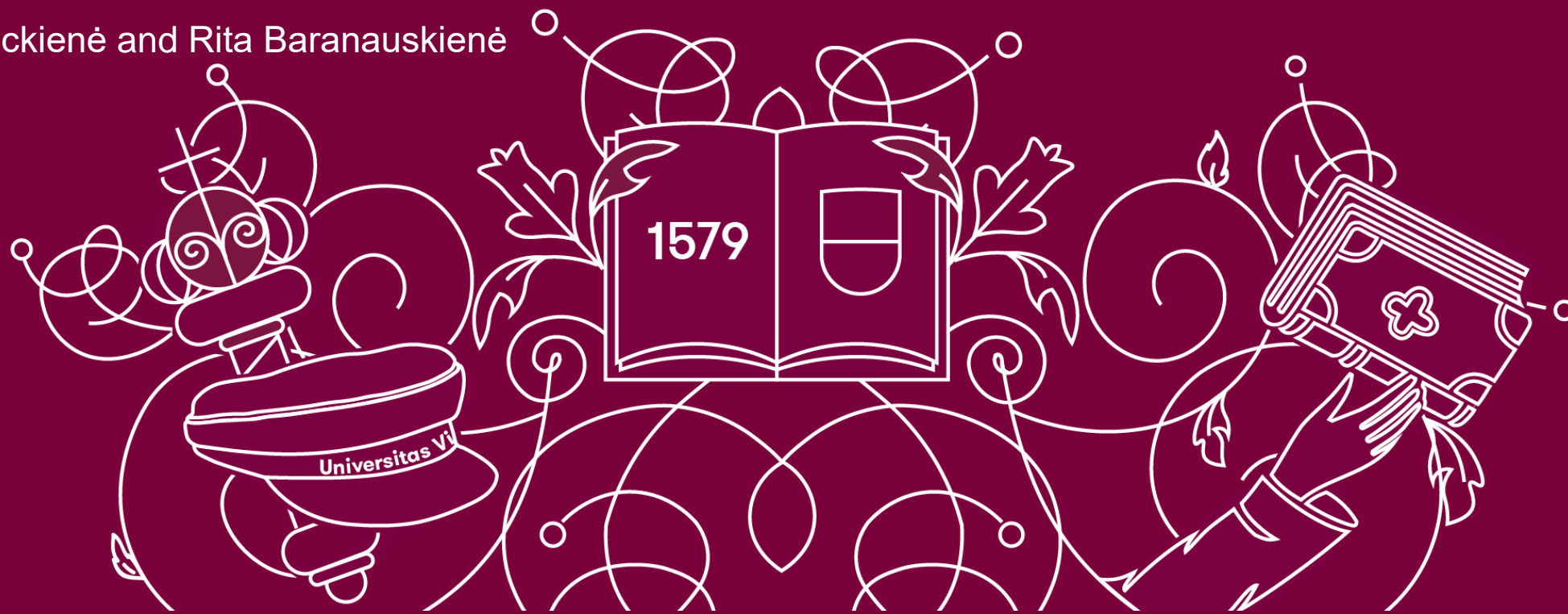


# The Standardization of Lithuania's Place Names Originating in Minority Languages



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**National minorities** are ethnically, culturally and linguistically distinct groups of people, different to the dominant majority of the country's population (VLE).

They are protected by the minority status granted to them by the authorities and aim to preserve their authenticity.

The rights of national minorities in Lithuania are set forth in the country's Constitution:

- 1) Articles 37 and 45 (LRK, 2019) guarantee the right to foster one's language, culture and customs,
- 2) while the principle of equality is set out in Article 29 (LRK, 2019).

The right to foster one's language, culture and customs was previously enshrined in the Ethnic Minorities Law, which was passed on 24 November 1989 (LRTMĮ, 1989).

It was the first legal act of this nature in Eastern and Central Europe.

This legislation expired in 2010 and since then the status of ethnic minorities in Lithuania has been regulated by international legislation.

Equal opportunities are also guaranteed by several further legal acts:

the Law on Equal Opportunities (LRLGĮ, 2003) and its subsequent revisions.

Institutionally, the above-mentioned policies are within the remit of two state bodies:

the Department of National Minorities Under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania and

the Department of Equal Opportunities within the Ministry of Social Security and Labour.

**The aim of this presentation** is to discuss the situation of Lithuania's national minorities as well as analysing some of the historical and contemporary aspects of standardising Lithuanian place names.

In Lithuania, the rights of national minorities to have and foster their language, culture and customs are enshrined in both national (VŽ, 1992; VŽ, 2000; VŽ, 2002; VŽ, 2003) and international legal acts.

Therefore, political, economic, social and cultural integration of national minorities takes place on three levels: micro (individual), mezzo (group), and macro (society) (TMD, 2022).

**Micro-level (individual) integration** concerns a person's legal status in the country, their participation and job-searching experiences in the local labour market. In Lithuania, all national minorities are guaranteed equal opportunities in the labour market.

**Mezzo-level (group) integration** is reflected in how well a particular minority group is established within the society.

**Macro-level (society) integration** is assessed from the perspective of the state and the society. According to the Department of National Minorities, 86% of people representing national minorities in Lithuania feel they are being viewed favourably by other citizens (Department of National Minorities Annual Report (TMD, 2022)).

The population and housing census conducted by Statistics Lithuania in 2021 (SD, 2021) showed the following national groups in the country:

183,421 Poles; 141,122 Russians; 28,183 Belarussians;  
14,168 Ukrainians; 2,256 Jews; 2,251 Roma; 2,142 Tatars; 1,977  
Germans; 1,572 Latvians; 1,125 Armenians;  
575 Azerbaijanis; 451 Moldavians; 333 Georgians;  
233 Estonians; 214 Kazakhs; 192 Karaites; 134 Greeks;  
126 Uzbeks,  
and people from other minorities (51,296 individuals did not  
indicate their nationality in the questionnaire).

A wave of Ukrainian refugees arrived in Lithuania after 24 February 2022 and, according to the data of 2024 conducted by Statistics Lithuania (2024-07-11), the registered number of Ukrainian refugees currently stands at 76,000.

The number of Uzbeks living in Lithuania reaches 10,200 (2024);  
the number of Tajiks – 7,000;  
the number of Belarusians over 62,000 people.



As shown by the most recent census, the largest national minority groups in Lithuania are all Slavic – Polish, Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian.

The territories populated by these nations belonged to the multicultural Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) since the 13th century and reached beyond the boundaries of ethnic Lithuania.

According to the data from 1430, at the time 23.8% of the Duchy's population were Lithuanian, 20.2% Belarussian, 18.1% Russian, 33.9% Ukrainian, 4.0% Tatar.

To compare, in the third decade of the 16th century, there were 29.6% Lithuanians, 23.5% Belarussians, 40.2% Ukrainians, and 6.7% Poles living in the country (VLE).

The largest national minority in Lithuania is the country's **Polish community** (**183,421** (2021)). It is thought that the first Polish settlers arrived in Lithuania during the 14th and 15th centuries.

Lithuania's second largest national minority group is **Russian** (**141,122** (2021)). The first Ruthenians moved to the current territory of Lithuania in the 14th century from Rusyn-inhabited lands within the GDL and the Grand Principality of Moscow. The number of Russians in Lithuania began increasing after the country was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1795.

Lithuania's **Ukrainian community** first settled in the current territory during the period of the GDL. **14,168** (2021), **76,000** (2024).

The fourth biggest national minority of Lithuania is the **Belarussians**. Most of them settled in Vilnius during the period of the GDL. **28,183** (2021), **62,000** (2024).

# The standardization of Lithuania's place names: past and present



Just like other EU countries, Lithuania continues in its effort to **preserve the country's national cultural heritage**. Place names are an important element of Lithuania's intangible cultural heritage (LEIP). An integral part of national toponymy, **place names** reflect the worldview and the thought patterns of those who created them.

The Lithuanian state has made a commitment to preserve **its ethnic place names** (their origins being very old and often dating back to ancient Baltic tribes) and the ethnic distinctiveness of its language by adopting the Law on the Principles of the State Protection of Ethnic Culture of the Republic of Lithuania (VŽ, 1999).

Lithuania has also ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (VŽ, 1999).

There are many causes for the disappearance or modification of place names.

During the 20th century most changes to Lithuania's place names were caused by landscape modifications due to mass collectivization, melioration, occupation and Sovietization (LEIP).

In 1959, a register of 25,143 rural locations was produced, followed by the 1989 data on 19,523 inhabited locations and 2 026 abandoned ones – a total of 21,549 names.

This account revealed the fact that during the 3 decades of Soviet rule around 5,600 rural communities were dismantled or came close to extinction, 3,600 had their names revoked by the order from the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian SSR (Kavoliutė, 2019).

Today the disappearance of place names is mostly linked to demographic changes in the country.

With many villages emptying and homesteads falling into decay, decisions are made to combine several settlements into one or abandon them altogether.

The data of the Lithuanian Centre of Registers shows that 240 villages have been deregistered in Lithuania over the last five years alone (LEIP).

The main sources for Lithuania's place names are:

- 1) texts (both manuscripts and printed);
- 2) spoken (living) language.

The first written collections of place names come from various registers, indices, historical, ethnographic and similar document sets (church registers, manor inventories, etc.).

Two examples of such records are the list of residential locations of the Suwałki Governorate in 1901 and the register of residential locations within the Kaunas Governorate by Eduards Volters (Eduard Wolter) in 1892 (LVŽ, 2008).

Lithuanians and their ancestors have lived in the current territories for the last four millennia, while their active contacts with other nations start relatively late.



This allowed the preservation of authentic place names in the Lithuanian language. Therefore collecting place names **from spoken language** is so much important (cf. LVŽ, 2008).

The first person to start recording place names in spoken language was the Catholic priest and writer **Vaižgantas** (1869–1933), who published the first set of instructions on toponym collection in 1904 (Vaižgantas, 1904, 10). Later, the linguist **K. Būga** (1879–1924) who, within 20 years, accumulated (either alone or together with others) a catalogue of around 75,000 proper names.

This collection is currently stored at the Institute of the Lithuanian Language in Vilnius.

In the 1930s this task was taken over by **the State Archaeological Commission** under the Ministry of Education. During this time a decision was made **to start a systematic collection of place names** and to set the correct standard forms of these place names (PVKP, 1934, I).

The linguist **K. Alminauskis** (1904–1986) **published his instructions for place name recorders** in 1934 (Alminauskis, 1934), which was used by teachers, forest rangers, the researchers and the students to record various place names during the period of 1935–1937.

The completed forms (the surviving sheets contain round 150,000 names) were then returned to the State Archaeological Commission.



**The Commission of Surnames and Place Names** tried their best to organise the collected toponyms, to determine the authentic forms of the recorded names, tried to return non-Lithuanian place names to their original Lithuanian forms.

Previously Polonised names were returned to their original Lithuanian forms because **they had survived in the memory of and were still being used by local Lithuanian inhabitants.**

A draft dictionary *The Place Names of the Vilnius Region* was compiled by the Institute's researchers in 1940 but was never published.

It is the only compilation of authentic (Lithuanian) place names of South East Lithuania (Bilkis, 2021).

The work of recording place names was put on hold during WWII and did not resume until 1958 when **the Toponymy Group** was established within the Institute of the Lithuanian Language and Literature.

This group began organising expeditions in 1959 to compile Lithuania's onomastic catalogue.

A two-volume administrative-territorial directory was published (Vol. I in 1974; Vol. II in 1976), which provided standardised and correctly stressed names of all settlements in Lithuania, based on the files of the interwar **Commission of Surnames and Place Names**.

Today the catalogue is stored at **the Institute of the Lithuanian Language** and contains around 600,000 name cards from various places in Lithuania (LVŽ I, 2008).

The standardization of Lithuanian place names is presently coordinated on three levels: **international, national, and institutional**.



The international standardization of place names is coordinated by the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN).

Nationally and institutionally, this work is overseen by the State Commission of the Lithuanian Language which is responsible for:

- 1) determining the official gender of each Lithuanian place name and the rules for using foreign-language place names;
- 2) determining the traditional forms and adaptation rules applied to place names of neighbouring and other countries;
- 3) determining the traditional Lithuanian names and their forms to be used in ethnic territories;
- 4) considering any place name registers, dictionaries and directories of Lithuanian and foreign place names produced by other institutions.

The main principle of standardization is **to use the standard language spelling of a particular name** – not its dialectal form.

For example, the official name form of the village **Budìliai**, mentioned in the interwar and 1976 sources, has been reconstructed from the dialectal **Budzìliai** (**di** is pronounced as **dzi** in the Southern Aukštaitian dialect).

In this case standardization is entirely justified because regular phonetic features of dialects are conveyed in official forms through standard language equivalents (Bilkis, 2019).

With regards to accentuation, the most important principle used for place names is to stress their standard language forms the same way **as local people would accentuate them** (Vanagas, 1991, Issues 4–5).

The official, standardised forms of place names must be written **in Lithuania's state language** (see LRVKĮ, 1995, Article 14).

The Republic of Lithuania Law on the Territorial-Administrative Units and Their Boundaries (Articles 8–9 in VŽ, 1994) outlines that the names of Lithuania's counties, district centres and municipalities are determined, changed or revoked by the Lithuanian Parliament Seimas.

The proposed names of residential locations can be submitted to the Government by municipal councils. The Government in its turn assigns or modifies these names, taking into account the suggestions of local residents. All such decisions must be **coordinated with the Commission of the Lithuanian Language**.

The current forms of Lithuanian place names are based on the following accepted **standardization principles** created by the Lithuanian linguists K. Būga, J. Balčikonis, A. Salys, B. Savukynas, A. Vanagas and V. Vitkauskas:

- 1) Adherence to standard publications Directory of River and Lake Names in the Lithuanian SSR (Savukynas, 1963) and Administrative–Territorial Structure of the Lithuanian SSR (Stravinskas, 1976) as well as the recommendations of linguistic journals The Culture of Language, Native Language (and Our Language);
- 2) Adherence to the lists of place names approved by the Commission of the Lithuanian Language;

The current forms of Lithuanian place names are based on the following accepted **standardization principles**:

- 3) Authenticity: cross-referencing the usage of place names with the Catalogue of Place Names (Institute of the Lithuanian Language) and dialects;
- 4) If certain norms require changes or clarification through other variants, to provide, alongside the main, officially-used genders, additional, potential norm variants which would not be considered erroneous (see VŽI, 2007).

In 2014 a catalogue of Lithuanian place names was created by the National Land Service under the Ministry of Agriculture in line with the norms of geodesy, cartography and georeferencing databases, as well as the technical regulations and specifications meeting the international standards.

The Place Names of Lithuania (GV\_DRLT) is available online and is free to access via the website of the Spatial Information Portal of Lithuania (<https://www.geoportal.lt/>).

The Institute of the Lithuanian Language has developed for public use the Geoinformational Database of Lithuanian Place Names (LVGDB, 2022), which includes some of the place names of the original Lithuanian Land Names questionnaire.

Historical Lithuanian place names are published in the Historical Place Name Database (IVDB 2013).



The Research Centre of Baltic Languages and Onomastics (Institute of the Lithuanian Language) has also published a four-volume **Dictionary of Lithuanian Place Names** (LVŽ, I, II, III, IV), which so far includes entries from A to J.

Some Lithuania's place names are on the brink of extinction, therefore, **recording these names is as relevant today** as it has been in the past.

New efforts to collect toponyms could provide information on composition methods, lexical diversity and the creative potential of local residents, while also offering opportunities to compare these new place names to those recorded previously.

# The standardization of Lithuanian and foreign-origin place names



It is important to analyse the origin of place names in minority-populated territories of Lithuania because 'place names originate and are used in a specific language and are not translated into other tongues. They should therefore be studied according to the language they come from, which is why we differentiate between the place names of Lithuania and those from other lands (countries).

Hence, the requirements applied to their codification and usage are different, too' (Pupkis, 2005).

Not all national minorities of Lithuania have settled into defined territories.

The Ukrainian, Jewish, Roma and other smaller communities are spread across the entire country.

The opposite is true with Poles, Russians and Belarussians, most of whom are concentrated in East and South East Lithuania, allowing researchers to study the impact of their respective languages on local place names.

Both Polish and Russian are spoken in and around Vilnius and Šalčininkai, with bilingual place names and personal names being used.

Despite the tendency for minority-language speakers to phonetically adapt place names to their languages, researches show that **most of these names have Lithuanian origins.**

The oldest toponyms in Lithuania are the names of rivers, lakes and swamps which date back thousands of years and have equivalents in other Indo-European languages.

The stems **al-**, **ab-**, **am-** found in river names (**Alanta**, **Abista**, **Amata**) are also typical of most Indo-European river names (Bilkis, 2019).

Around 20–30 archaic hydronyms in Lithuania are linked to the old Indo-European word stems:

**Amata, Anykšta, Barys, Birva, Birvėta, Danė, Deimė, Ditva, Dovinė, Ersla, Gabys, Gaimynas, Gamė, Įstras, Jiesia, Kamė, Lauja, Lavysas, Liminas, Matara, Mera, Nieda, Niedus, Nova, Penta, Sarajai, Seina, Seira, Svaigė, Tovė, Vaiguva** (Bilkis, 2021).

Lithuania's place names (oikonyms) came into use later than hydronyms; their age can be determined from their first mention in historical sources.

The earliest Lithuanian settlement (and its name) mentioned in historical records is the castle of Apuolė (853–854) (Bilkis, 2019, 2021).

There are **two types of criteria** for determining the origin of a place name: **lexical and morphological**.

Whether a place name originates in Lithuania or not depends on the **lexical meaning of its etymon**.

Some examples of place names with non-Lithuanian etymology:  
**Gorkos** (village) from the Belarussian word **ропка** ('a little hillock');  
**Novina** (village) from the Polish word **nowina** ('virgin soil').

Lithuanian-origin names include

**Šiauliai** from the plural form of the personal name **Šiaulys**;

**Tabarai** (plot of tilled land) from the personal name **Tābaras**.

The origin of a place name can also be identified from its **morphological features** – Lithuanian or Slavic suffixes.

Lithuanian-origin **Avižieniškis** (village) is composed from the personal name **Avižiēnis** and the suffix **-iškis**;

**Andriejauka**, a Slavic-origin village name, is derived from the personal name **Andriėjus** and the Slavic suffix **-auka**;

**Benderkā** (forest) is made from the German personal name **Beñder** and the Slavic suffix **-ka**.

Quite a few place names containing the Slavic suffix **-čizna** can be found in the Vilnius region, such as **Baikovščizna** (solitary farm), made from the personal name **Baikòvskas/ Baikòvski** or **Ivkovščizna** (keeper's cottage) which is linked to the Russian personal name **ИВКОВ** and can also be compared to the Polish **Iwko** or **Iwkowicz**.



When place names containing non-Lithuanian suffixes undergo standardization, these suffixes are not modified or Lithuanianised.

Interestingly, some Lithuanian place names are of mixed origin, i.e. a Lithuanian etymon is combined with a non-Lithuanian (mostly Slavic) affix: **Barkušké** is a derivative of the Slavic suffix **-ušké** and the Lithuanian personal name **Barkus**.

The opposite is also possible – a Lithuanian affix may be added to a non-Lithuanian etymon: **Baraboliškė** (village) is most likely a derivative of the Polish personal name **Barabola** and the Lithuanian suffix **-iškė**.

Lithuanian **place names** were formed either from **proper names** or **appellatives**.

Place names derived from **proper names** can be divided into two further categories:

1. Place names originating from **personal names** are derived from the names of the people who previously lived in the settlement and shared the same name: **Butrimonys** (town) from the personal name **Butrimonis**; **Šakiai** (town) from **Šakys**. Some place names were derived from the names of prominent personalities who have lived in the area: **Radvil-iškis** (town) from **Rādvila** (Radziwiłłowie in Polish), the surname of a famous noble family during the period of the GDL.

2. Place names originating **from toponyms** are derived from hydronyms and other minor toponyms.

**Pa-svalys** (town) comes from the name of the river **Svalia**;

**Kup-iškis** (town) from the name of the river **Kupa**.

Interestingly, some Lithuanian place names were derived from the names of globally-known locations:

**Egiptas** (various arable plots, village sections, servants' cottages, bushes, fields, meadows, solitary homesteads; from 'Egypt');

**Emerikas** (meadow; from 'America'); **Golgota** (hill; from 'Golgotha');

**Londonas, Paryžius, Šveicarija, Venecija** (various settlements; from 'London', 'Paris', 'Switzerland', 'Venice'); **Berlynas, Jeruzalė** (various places; from 'Berlin', 'Jerusalem') (Bilkis, 2011).

Place names of **appellative origin** are derived from geographical terms and the names of plants, crafts or nations.

The origin of these place names can be determined from the language their etymons come from:

**Borovka** (solitary homestead) originates in the Belarussian word **бop** ('a neat, old pine forest'), the Polish **bór** ('heath, wood'), or the Russian **бop** ('heath, wood'). On the other hand, these names could be the translated (Slavicised) forms of the Lithuanian **Šilinė** (from **šilas** 'a sandy forested area covered with tall, straight coniferous trees, usually pines').

When standardising Lithuanian place names, it is also important to consider the relationship between Lithuanian and other languages, which, despite being minority languages in Lithuania, are indeed the languages of large nations with well-established tongues.

The historic and more recent ethnic diversity as well as the changing societal structure could potentially make the future efforts to properly systemise, regulate, and standardise the place names used by national minorities more difficult.

# Conclusions



In present-day Lithuania, the rights of ethnic minorities to foster their culture, language and customs are defined by national and international legislation.

Lithuania's national minority groups have preserved their languages and continue to use them within their communities.

Political, economic, social and cultural integration of national minorities is conducted on three levels: micro, mezzo, and macro.

Lithuania's place names are derived from both Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian etymons: proper names (personal or toponymical) or appellatives.

Place names are standardised in Lithuania, with their official forms in Standard Lithuanian approved by the authorities. The official, standardised forms of place names are written in Lithuania's state language.

Place names convey collective information about a nation and its individual members, helping to preserve that nation's history.

It is important to analyse the place names recorded in historical documents in order to understand the origin and the historical context of every settlement.



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