

## ARTICLES

Marek BARWIŃSKI\*

### **POLISH INTERSTATE RELATIONS WITH UKRAINE, BELARUS AND LITHUANIA AFTER 1990 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SITUATION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** When we compare the contemporary ethnic structure and national policy of Poland and its eastern neighbours, we can see clear asymmetry in both quantitative and legal-institutional aspects. There is currently a markedly smaller population of Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians living in Poland than the Polish population in the territories of our eastern neighbours. At the same time, the national minorities in Poland enjoy wider rights and better conditions to operate than Poles living in Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania.

Additional complicating factor in bilateral relations between national minority and the home state is different political status of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine and different processes of transformation the consequence of which is differentiated state of political relations of Poland with its eastern neighbours. Lithuania, like Poland, is a member of EU, Ukraine, outside the structures of European integration, pursued a variable foreign policy, depending on the ruling options and the economic situation, and Belarus, because of internal policy which is unacceptable in the EU countries, is located on the political periphery of Europe.

**Key words:** national minorities, interstate relations, political transformation, Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the early 1990s, significant changes in the political and geopolitical situation in Central and Eastern Europe occurred: the collapse of communist rule, the unification of Germany, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of

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Czechoslovakia. The creation, over a short time, of a number of independent nation-states in the immediate vicinity of Poland had a vast influence on individual national minorities, especially those living near the borders. There were huge changes to the political and economic relations between democratic Poland and its newly independent neighbours and, to a large extent, between individual nations, now divided by borders. The process of expanding the area of European integration began, which led, after a dozen or so years, to the inclusion of some Central and Eastern European countries in the NATO and EU structures, while leaving some of those countries outside the zone of political, economic and military integration, thus creating new division lines in the new political and legal reality. Not only did it not mean the resolution of earlier problems, but it created new ones. At the same time, new opportunities to solve those problems emerged, and the national minorities were allowed to speak about their aspirations and problems openly.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the whole existence of the Polish People's Republic and the Soviet Union, the border between the two countries was primarily a barrier tightly separating Poles from the Russians, Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians living in the Soviet Union, but also effectively dividing the Lithuanian, Belarusian, Ukrainian and, of course, Polish populations living on both sides of the border. According to Eberhardt (1993):

[...] the Polish-Soviet border, established after the Second World War, was for several decades one of the cordons dividing the beats in the huge totalitarian camp, stretching from the Elbe to Kamchatka.

Although the border between Poland and the USSR, which was re-formed at the end of the Second World War, functioned for just forty-seven years (1944–1991), its impact on the area it divided turned out to be very durable. The demarcation of the border had a direct impact on the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people, led to the almost complete isolation of the two parts of the divided territory and resulted in its significant diversification, both in national-cultural and political-economic terms. The multi-cultural and multi-ethnic character of the borderland that was shaped for hundreds of years, was destroyed. Moreover,

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<sup>2</sup> The preparations for this article included interviews with the leaders of the most prominent minority organizations in Poland: Ukrainian (Ukrainian Association in Poland – Związek Ukraińców w Polsce, Ukrainian Association of Podlasie – Związek Ukraińców Podlasia, Ukrainian Society – Towarzystwo Ukraińskie), Belarusian (Belarusian Social and Cultural Society – Białoruskie Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne, the Programme Board of 'Niwa' weekly – Rada Programowa Tygodnika 'Niwa', the Belarusian Students' Association – Białoruskie Zrzeszenie Studentów) and Lithuanian (Lithuanian Association in Poland – Stowarzyszenie Litwinów w Polsce, the St. Casimir Lithuanian Society – Litewskie Towarzystwo Św. Kazimierza). One of the purposes of these interviews was to learn the opinion of the leaders of national organizations about the changes to the situation of individual minorities following the accession of Poland to the EU, as well as their relations with their kin-states abroad.

the insularity of the border contributed to the peripherization of the borderland, leading to its economic and social backwardness. In the early 1990s, Eberhardt (1993) stated that ‘it is the sacred duty of Ukrainians, Poles, Belarusians and Lithuanians to overcome this border by cultivating all traditions that prove their cultural and historical bonds’. This objective has been pursued for more than twenty years at the level of international relations (political, social and economic), administrative cooperation (especially in the Euroregions), as well as interpersonal relations (tourist, business, commercial). Due to political, ethnic and historical circumstances, its course and results are different in each of Poland’s eastern neighbours. These relations are shaped by the minorities living in the direct vicinity of the national borders, both the Polish minority living to the east of the border and the Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian minorities to the west. This is undoubtedly important in the analysis of international relations, but – according to Nijakowski (2000) – calling minorities ‘bridges’ in interstate relations has become a diplomatic canon and rhetorical figure of political correctness. In political practice, due to historical circumstances and the needs of the current internal politics or current geo-political interests, the role a given minority plays in the bilateral relations between the country of residence for such minority and their kin-state may be different, not always ‘bridge-like’.

## **2. UKRAINE**

The Polish-Soviet border was effective in hindering relations between the Poles and the Ukrainians and was destructive to the multicultural character of the borderland. On both sides, both the Polish and the Soviet communist regimes implemented a policy of assimilating minorities. As a result, over thirty years (1959–1989) the number of Polish people in Ukraine has decreased, according to official statistics, from 363.3 thousand, to 219.2 thousand. The number of ethnic Poles in the borderland Lvov region decreased by more than a half, from 59.1 thousand, to 26.9 thousand. As a result of displacement and dispersion of the ethnic Ukrainians in the northern and western parts of the country in 1947, the process of assimilation in Poland proceeded more rapidly, although there are no official statistics for the period.<sup>3</sup> The traces of culture and religion of individual minorities were also being destroyed.

<sup>3</sup> In the second half of the 20th century, no official statistics on ethnicity were held in Poland. According to latest census data there were approx. 30 thousand ethnic Ukrainians living in Poland in 2002 (figure 1), while the number of ethnic Ukrainians and people of Ukrainian descent has currently (in 2011) increased to approx. 49 thousand people. Due to the post-war resettlements, they are highly dispersed, mainly in northern and western Poland. The official data show that the number of ethnic Poles living in Ukraine has decreased over the consecutive twelve years (1989–2001) by over 75 thousand, to 144 thousand.

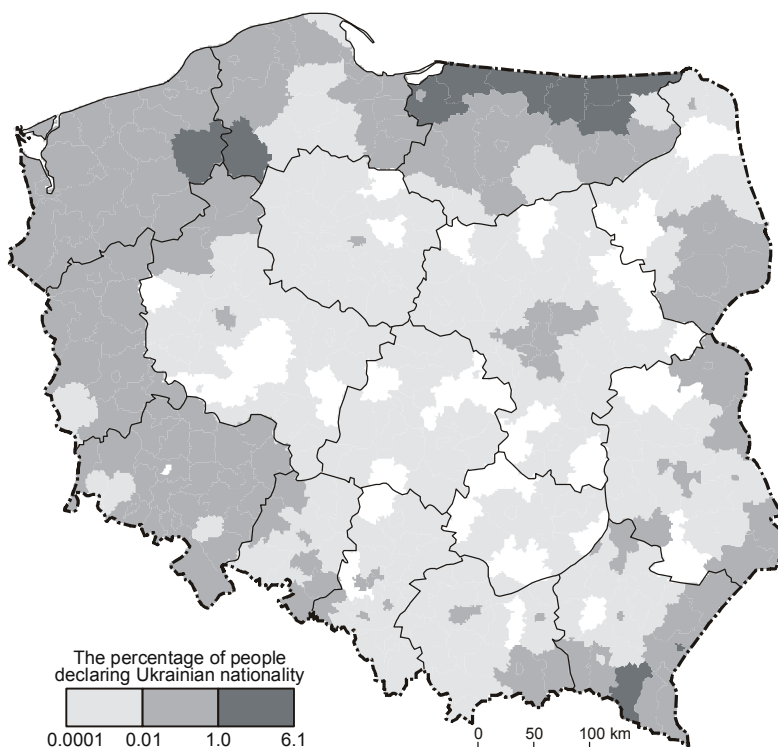


Fig. 1. The percentage of people declaring Ukrainian ethnicity (by districts) in the 2002 census

Source: own study based on data from the Central Statistical Office

The situation changed after the fall of communism in Poland, the dissolution of the USSR and the emergence of independent Ukraine in December 1991. Poland was the first country in the world to recognize the independence of Ukraine, the very next day after its formal announcement. The former border with the totalitarian Soviet Union became the border between two sovereign states. Crossing it was greatly facilitated. In addition to the existing border crossing in Medyka, which was the only one for decades, new ones, both road and railway ones, were created in Dorohusk, Hrebenne, Hrubieszów, Korczowa, Krościenko, Przemyśl, Werchrata and Zosin. The new political situation gave hope for a revival of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, which remained economically, socially and culturally dead throughout the communist times (Barwiński, 2009).

Since the early 1990s, Polish borderlands started trans-border cooperation within the Euroregions based on the existing European models. There are now two large Euroregions in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland: 'Carpathian' (since 1993, the second one in Poland), and 'Bug River' (since 1995). They include the whole

Polish-Ukrainian borderland. The main objectives of the Euroregions are to initiate and coordinate trans-border economic, scientific, cultural, educational, tourist and environmental cooperation, as well as to promote the region. The unique feature of both Euroregions, as opposed to the Euroregions near the western and southern borders, is the marginal participation by the local government in the creation and operation of the Euroregions, with a dominant role played by central and regional governments (Sobczyński, 2001).

The revival of the borderland can also be seen in the dynamics of cross-border traffic. A growth trend could be seen since mid-1990s, with a small slump in 1998. A dramatic increase in the number of people crossing the border, up to over 19 million people per year, occurred between 2005 and 2007 (figure 1). Six months earlier, in May 2004, another significant change in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland occurred, namely Polish accession to the European Union (EU). One of the consequences was the transformation of the Polish-Ukrainian border into the EU's external border, which came with many limitations, such as increased border control and the introduction of the visa requirement for citizens of countries outside the EU. The rapid increase in cross-border traffic in this period seems surprising, given the new formal requirements associated with crossing the border, mainly relating to the so-called EU visas.<sup>4</sup> It can be argued that it was the Polish accession to the EU that contributed to increasing cross-border traffic. As a member of the EU, Poland has become an attractive country for many foreigners from the east, and the interest in economy, trade and tourism has grown, both in Poland and Ukraine. Comparing the Ukrainian section of the border with other Polish fragments of the EU's external border (with Russia and Belarus), we can clearly see that the growth of cross-border traffic after 2004 only happened on the border with Ukraine, where the traffic became significantly higher than on the other two borders<sup>5</sup> (figure 2).

The situation changed dramatically with Polish accession to the Schengen Agreement in December 2007. The introduction of visa fees for Ukrainian citizens to all Schengen Area countries, including Poland, as well as the bureaucratization of the visa application procedures caused a slump in border traffic. In just two years (2008–2009), the number of people crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border fell from more than 19 million to just 11.7 million, and it still remains far lower than five–seven years ago, despite a growth tendency that could be seen over the last two years (figure 2).

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<sup>4</sup> Before Poland joined the EU, Ukrainian citizens also needed to have entry visas to Poland, though they were free, reusable and easy to obtain. After the Polish accession to the EU, the so called EU visas were introduced. They were harder to obtain, yet still free. Only after Poland joined the Schengen Area the visas became paid and the procedure became more bureaucratic and complicated. However, the Poles still do not require a visa to go to Ukraine.

<sup>5</sup> The traffic on the Polish-Belarusian border, both passenger and freight, mostly applies to the citizens of Russia, for whom Belarus is a transit country.

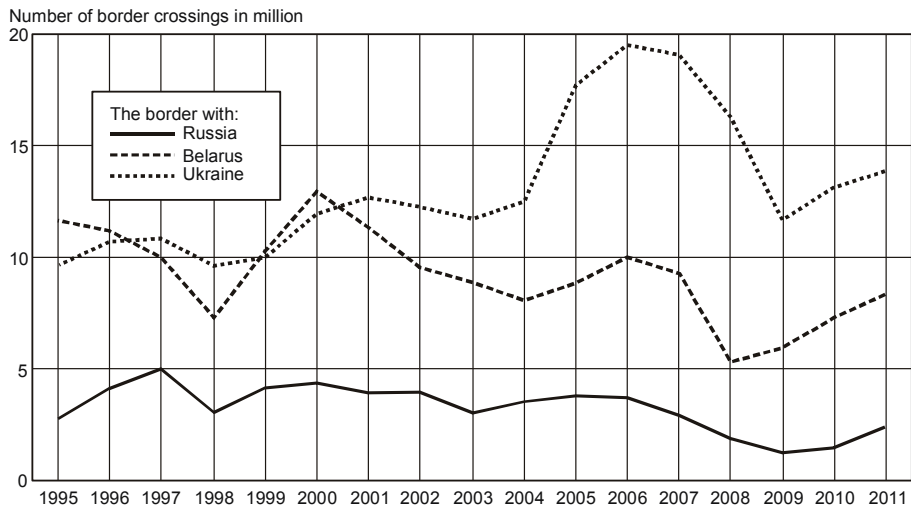


Fig. 2. Passenger border traffic on the Polish section of the external EU border (border with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine) in the years 1995–2011

Note: applies only to land border crossings, does not apply to traffic by air and sea

Source: own study based on [www.strazgraniczna.pl](http://www.strazgraniczna.pl)

A radical reduction in arrivals of Ukrainian citizens to Poland after 2007 led to the collapse of the borderland trade exchange, which has negative consequences for the inhabitants of the borderland. Since the early 1990s, good relationship between Poland and Ukraine directly translated into economic benefits, extremely important for the region. They resulted, among others, from the mobility and resourcefulness of the people who frequently cross the border in connection with the local trade, smuggling of alcohol and cigarettes, as well as looking for a job, but also for family reasons and tourism. One of the consequences of cross-border exchange were the frequent, sometimes regular contacts between the residents of the borderland with the people on the other side of the border, as well as with their language and culture. This had an impact on the perception of national minorities living in the borderland, both Polish and Ukrainian (Wojakowski, 1999, 2002). Sealing the border in preparation for Polish accession to the EU, as well as the increase in visa requirements in December 2007 have significantly limited these contacts.

Speaking of the Polish-Ukrainian border traffic, one has to remember the great role of Polish tourist trips, especially to western Ukraine, that have been becoming more and more popular over the last couple of years. They are mostly sentimental and historical in their nature and can be compared to German trips to Silesia or Masuria. Their economic significance for the Ukrainians, as well as for Poles in Ukraine, is growing every year. Moreover, they are one of the elements of getting to know each other and improving the Polish-Ukrainian relationships.

Despite the historical aspect of Polish accession to the EU, members of the Polish minority in Ukraine and the Ukrainian minority in Poland asked during the survey conducted in autumn 2007<sup>6</sup> about the positive and negative changes in Polish-Ukrainian relations after Polish accession to the EU mostly responded that they did not see any changes or saw more negative than positive changes. By far the most commonly reported negative change was the introduction of new visa regulations, that made life harder for the residents of the borderland on both sides of the border. Respondents also noticed positive changes in Polish-Ukrainian relations, although it is difficult to treat them as a direct result of EU expansion. Rather, they were the result of media reports that often mentioned Poland's involvement in Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO, as well as Poland's and Ukraine's shared efforts organizing Euro 2012. Changes most often reported by the respondents were political and came as a result of international agreements and treaties. Such agreements usually do not have any significant influence on the relations between the Poles and the Ukrainians, though their impact on the borderland and its inhabitants (e.g. visa regulations) is considerably larger. The negative effects of Polish accession to the EU were more noticeable because they related to cross-border traffic, with which a large portion of borderland residents has some personal experience. On the other hand, the positive aspects were less noticeable to the respondents, mostly because they did not have any direct impact on them or their everyday lives (Lis, 2008).

However, according to the leaders of Ukrainian organizations in Poland, most of whom have a positive opinion about Polish accession to the EU, its most important outcome for the Ukrainian community are the monitoring of the minorities' situation by European institutions, improved subjectivity of the minorities and the government's greater understanding for the demands of the minorities. Further down the list are the financial benefits, primarily resulting from the opportunity to indirectly obtain EU funding through grants from local governments or financing for renovations of Orthodox and Greek Orthodox temples.

Independent Ukraine is not very supportive for the Ukrainian minority in Poland. According to activists in Ukrainian organizations, this support was non-existent throughout the first dozen years of Ukraine's independence. The coming to power of President Viktor Yushchenko in 2005 marked the beginning of the ongoing cooperation between the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian minority organizations in Poland. It mostly includes partial funding (mainly by the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine) for major cultural events, festivals, conferences organized by Ukrainian associations, performances of Ukrainian folk groups in Poland, material support for schools teaching Ukrainian language (computers,

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<sup>6</sup> The study was carried out in Poland and Ukraine and included a population of 265 residents of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland (126 respondents in Poland and 139 in Ukraine). Respondents from Poland were members of the Ukrainian minority, while the respondents in Ukraine were members of the Polish minority (Lis, 2008).



books, newspapers) and the participation of Ukrainian politicians in various celebrations. In the opinion of all Ukrainian activists, this support is far from sufficient, especially after 2010, and the presidential election lost by Yushchenko. Cooperation was also started with Ukrainian organizations, such as the Ukrainian Educational Society, 'Cholmszczyna' Association, a number of Ukrainian non-governmental organizations, as well as with the Federation of Polish Organizations in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the large Polish community living in Ukraine<sup>8</sup> and a clear (unfavourable for the Poles) asymmetry in the rights of the Polish minority in Ukraine and the Ukrainian minority in Poland, the question of the situation of national minorities is not a key topic in the official international relations between Poland and Ukraine, especially compared to the relations with Belarus or Lithuania. The economic and geopolitical issues are much more important. There are, however, numerous NGOs such as 'Wspólnota Polska' Association and foundations such as Aid to Poles in the East Foundation actively working with dozens of Polish organizations in Ukraine. Assistance is also provided by the Polish local governments and partner cities. On the other hand, state authorities (especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage) support Polish schools in Ukraine, libraries, publications and cultural activities of Polish organizations by co-funding scientific conferences, as well as renovations of temples, graveyards and memorials. The scale of the needs is, of course, disproportionate with the support.

Official political relations between Poland and Ukraine since 1991 were appropriate, though not free from mutual prejudices and stereotypes. The turning point came with the so-called 'orange revolution' in Ukraine (21.11.2004–23.01.2005), during which Poland decidedly and effectively supported Ukrainian democratic parties calling for repeating falsified elections and making Ukraine fully independent from Russia. After President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko took office (2005–2010), Poland became one of the closest political partners of Ukraine, often serving as its 'advocate' at the EU and NATO. This role often has been hampered and restricted by disputes between fraction of President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Tymoshenko, and especially by the clear closing-up 'orange' authorities of Ukraine with extreme Ukrainian nationalists.<sup>9</sup> Mutual political relations were manifested both in symbolic acts of reconciliation (e.g. cemeteries in Lviv and Volhynia) and in joint actions in the international

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<sup>7</sup>Based on interviews with the leaders of the Association of Ukrainians in Poland, the Association of Ukrainians in Podlasie and the Ukrainian Society.

<sup>8</sup>According to the Ukrainian census of 2001, 144 thousand people, but according to various estimates by Polish organizations – from approx. 150 thousand to 900 thousand people.

<sup>9</sup>President Viktor Yushchenko, for the whole term of office, pursued a policy of glorification of UPA and OUN, for example he awarded the title 'Hero of Ukraine' to Stepan Bandera, which was repealed by a court decision in 2011.



arena, economic projects and sports events. Awarding the right to organize the European soccer championship in 2012 to Poland and Ukraine became yet another positive factor in activating Polish-Ukrainian cooperation. The policy of the Polish governments towards Ukraine, although not always consistent, sought to strengthen the democratic mechanisms and to link Ukraine as closely as possible to the structures of Western Europe, which is extremely important from the point of view of Polish geopolitical interests. The current complex internal political situation in Ukraine under President Viktor Yanukovich, as well as the turning of political and economic elites towards Russia makes the cooperation more difficult, and the political relations between the countries may once again be called, at best, appropriate.

Moreover, they are heavily burdened with historical circumstances, that have a special dimension in case of Polish-Ukrainian history. The general area of the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands has seen numerous bloody ethnic conflicts that are still alive in the collective consciousness of both Polish and Ukrainian nation. Historical legacy and national resentments are revealed, among others, in disputes surrounding the organization of various national or cultural events of various minorities on both sides of the border, monuments to honour the soldiers of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) or their victims, the two World Wars graveyards. History, including its contemporary evaluation and interpretation, is still far more divisive than uniting for Poles and Ukrainians in both countries, despite multiple gestures of reconciliation.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. BELARUS**

After the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Belarus in 1991 and the related dissolution of the USSR, the emancipation of the former republics within the Empire, and the ongoing process of democratization in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, there was a common hope for the development of friendly, partner neighbourly relations with all newly-created eastern neighbours of Poland. The Treaties of good neighbourship and friendly cooperation with Belarus and Ukraine were signed as early as 1992, but the consecutive years verified these expectations, especially in the case of Belarus.

In the mid-1990s, Poland attempted to commence trans-border cooperation within the Euroregions, many of which were being created around that time. In 1995, the 'Bug River' Euroregion was created in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, which was joined in 1998 by the Brest province in Belarus. In 1997, the 'Neman

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<sup>10</sup> This is confirmed by the results of various kinds of sociological research, including Babiński (1997) and Lis (2008).

River' Euroregion was created in cooperation with Lithuania and Belarus. However, the Euroregions in the Belarusian region are practically non-existent. This is due to distrust of the Belarusian authorities of Poland and the EU, the lack of active cooperation, legal differences, and the lack of legal and financial personality of the Belarusian local governments.

The coming to power of President Alexander Lukashenka in 1994 began the process of political integration with Russia and the re-sovietization of Belarus, which included the restoration of the flag and the national emblem from the Soviet era and once more equality of rights of Russian and Belarusian language in public life.<sup>11</sup> There has been a gradual reduction of democratic and national freedoms. In a few years, Lukashenka's government turned into an autocratic regime and the political system of Belarus became a dictatorship. The whole political, social and economic life has been under supervision of the state, or the president, who now wields absolute power. The persecution of the small opposition movement have been intensified, which significantly worsened the relations between Belarus and the Western-European countries, including Poland. The EU has repeatedly imposed various sanctions, but they have not brought significant changes in the political situation in Belarus. Brutal persecution of political opponents is still a fact, basic democratic freedoms are not provided, violations of human rights are widespread, and the political cooperation with Poland and other EU countries is not functioning. As a result of Lukashenka's policy, Belarus remains outside the area of European integration and does not function as a state of law.

In 2005, the Belarusian authorities led to the breakup of the unity of the Union of Poles in Belarus, at the time the largest independent social organization in Belarus. Currently, there are two Polish national organizations of the same name, one 'official', recognized by the Belarusian authorities, the other unrecognized, discriminated against, cooperating with the Belarusian opposition and acknowledged by the Polish authorities. The Polish minority in Belarus is divided and used for current political purposes. Part of it supports Lukashenka's dictatorship, expecting all kinds of privileges, some favour the opposition, hoping to improve the situation of Poles after the democratization of Belarus. According to the 2009 Belarusian census, 294.5 thousand people declared Polish nationality. This means a decrease in the number of Poles by over 100 thousand people in just ten years.<sup>12</sup>

The support for Belarusian opposition, non-governmental organizations and Polish minority in Belarus, co-organized and co-financed by the Polish government (mainly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), is one of the priorities of Polish policy

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<sup>11</sup> From 1991 to 1995 the only official language in Belarus was Belarusian. Based on the results of a nationwide referendum in 1995, two official languages were introduced: Russian and Belarusian. According to the 2009 Belarusian national census, only 2.2 million of 9.5 million citizens of Belarus use the Belarusian language in their households.

<sup>12</sup> Numerically speaking, Poles are the second biggest minority in Belarus, after the Russians, mainly living in the north-western region of the country, near the border with Poland and Lithuania.

in terms of international cooperation in favour of democracy and the development of citizen society. It is met with strong criticism and counteractions from the Belarusian government. One of the most spectacular manifestations of Polish authorities' commitment to promoting democracy in Belarus was the launch Radio Racja<sup>13</sup> and TV Belsat<sup>14</sup> in Poland. In September 2011, on the initiative of several non-governmental organizations, the Belarusian House was opened in Warsaw. It is supposed to become a place to unite the Belarusian diaspora, coordinate the activities of the Belarusian emigration democratic organizations and support the repressed activists of the Belarusian opposition, as well as a place for discussions among all the organizations fighting for democratic Belarus. It also serves as a centre to inform the Polish public about the events in Belarus.

Currently, the mutual relations between Poland and Belarus are the worst of all the neighbouring countries.<sup>15</sup> They are further aggravated by the character of the border between the countries. The Polish eastern borderland, especially the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian one, is often referred to as Latin-Byzantine 'frontier of civilization', as the border between the Western and the Eastern civilizations (Bański, 2008; Eberhardt, 2004; Huntington, 1997; Kowalski, 1999; Pawluczuk, 1999). Running roughly along the Polish border with Belarus and Ukraine, the cultural dividing line emerging on the basis of the western Christian tradition and the influence of Orthodox culture, is the most enduring divide of the European continent (Bański, 2008). Since 2004 it has also been 'strengthened' by serving as the external border of the EU, which means that the eastern borderland of Poland, both in cultural and in political sense, can be treated as the frontiers of Western Europe, while the external EU border serves as the main axis dividing Europe.

The contemporary Polish-Belarusian border serves as a barrier between completely different political, economic, legal, social and cultural realities. It clearly divides not only the Polish and Belarusian societies but also Belarusians living on both sides of the border<sup>16</sup> (figure 3). It differentiates them not only in

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<sup>13</sup> A non-public radio station broadcasting from Białystok and Biała Podlaska in the Belarusian language (also available online), intended for the Belarusian minority in Poland and the citizens of Belarus, funded by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, operating in 1999–2002 and again since 2006. The main objective of the station is to provide the Belarusian citizens with the access to independent information about events and the situation in Belarus, Poland and the world.

<sup>14</sup> A satellite TV channel broadcasting since 2007 in Belarusian, financed and legally owned by Polish Television. Many programmes, including news, are also available on the internet. The main objectives of the station are the same as the objectives of Radio Racja. It is the only independent Belarusian-speaking television station available in Belarus, which breaks the monopoly of information of the Belarusian authorities.

<sup>15</sup> Despite the attempts made by Poland to improve it, the course of the last presidential election in Belarus in December 2010, with suspicions of fraud and violently suppressed mass demonstrations of opposition in Minsk, dispelled hopes of improving Polish-Belarusian and EU-Belarusian relations.

<sup>16</sup> The Podlasie region, situated in the Polish-Belarusian borderland, is a region with the most concentrated Belarusian minority. It is inhabited by approx. 45 thousand Belarusians (figure 3).

formal, but also in cultural, mental and economic sense, to a much larger extent than the Ukrainian border. It can surely be described as one of the strongest civilization barriers in modern Europe.

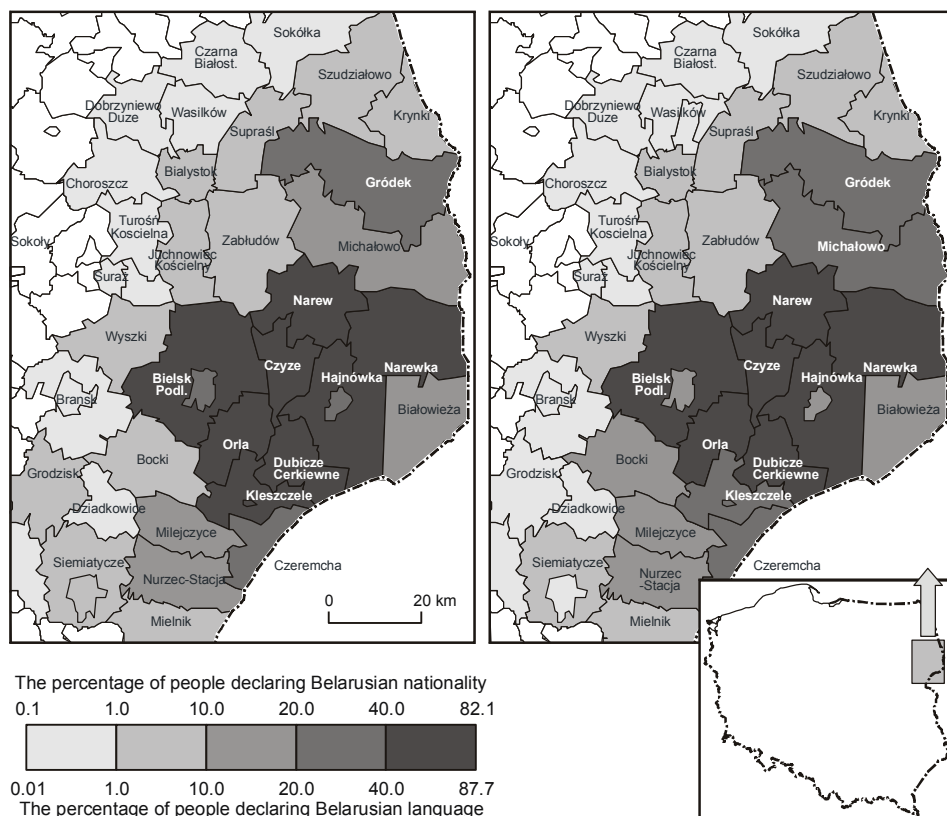


Fig. 3. The percentage of people declaring Belarusian ethnicity and using Belarusian language in the Polish-Belarusian borderland (by commune) in the 2002 census

Source: own study based on data from the Central Statistical Office

Paradoxically, as a consequence of the policy run by Lukashenka for over ten years aimed at denationalizing Belarusians by removing Belarusian national symbols, limiting the use of Belarusian language (especially in schools), the liquidation of independent Belarusian organizations and media, it is currently easier (and safer) to be an ethnic Belarusian in the Republic of Poland than in the Republic of Belarus.

Therefore, the Belarusian state is not as important as a point of reference for the ethnic Belarusians in Poland as their kin-state is for ethnic Lithuanians or Ukrainians. Sociological studies confirm that representatives of the Belarusian minority commonly view Poland, not Belarus, as their kin-state. They feel

a strong emotional, historical and political connection with the Polish state and they assess the Polish society much more positively than the Belarusian people living across the border. Therefore, they commonly assume the role of 'Polish citizens' not 'Belarusian minority' in external contacts (Sadowski, 1995). This has been confirmed by the research done by Bieńkowska-Ptasznik (2007) comparing Lithuanian and Belarusian minorities. She claims that Lithuanians identify their capital city with Vilnius, they feel a connection to the Lithuanian state and are more involved in what happens in Lithuania. On the other hand, the Belarusians identify their capital with Warsaw or Białystok, while their attitude towards the situation in Belarus, especially towards the policy of President Lukashenka, is predominantly critical. The negative assessment of the political situation in Belarus among the Belarusian minority in Poland is also confirmed by the research of Kępka (2009), even though his conclusions only relate to young and better-educated respondents that support the democratic opposition. Among older people, especially the rural population, the positive assessment of the political system in Belarus was dominant. The good and stable economic situation of the people of Belarus was emphasized, and President Lukashenka was seen as a 'good host'. The actions of the Belarusian opposition were criticised by the respondents for aiming to destabilise the political situation and leading to poverty and unemployment.<sup>17</sup> Such assessments stem, among others, from the positive view of the times of the People's Republic of Poland and the negative attitude towards the democratic transformations after 1989 in Poland, commonly held by the Belarusian community.

The diverse attitudes of the Belarusian minority toward Belarus are also apparent in the varied perception of the minority by the leaders of Belarusian organizations. Among the Ukrainian and Lithuanian minority organizations operating in Poland, there is hardly any difference and division concerning their relations with their kin-state, while among the Belarusian organizations, the attitude to the Republic of Belarus, its authorities and political system is one of the most contentious issues and the main (apart from the assessment of communist Poland) division and conflict line. Operating for several dozens of years, the Belarusian Social and Cultural Society (BTSK) is the biggest organization representing the Belarusian minority in Poland. Since its inception in 1956, it has been emphasizing its clearly left-wing character and keeping friendly reactions with the Belarusian authorities. This cooperation can be seen, among others, in the exchange of folk bands (partially financed by the Belarusian side), joint organization of cultural events, scientific conferences and publications. BTSK cooperates with the 'official' Union of Poles in Belarus recognized by the Belarusian authorities, which co-organizes annual scientific conferences and artistic events. BTSK activists go to Belarus, where

<sup>17</sup> The study was conducted in 2009, in the Polish-Belarusian borderland, in the towns of Bielsk Podlaski and Hajnówka and the municipalities of Czyże, Dubicze Cerkiewne, Hajnówka, Orla. It included 200 respondents (Kępka, 2009).

they often publicly declare their support for the policies of President Lukashenka. In return, Poland is visited by Belarusian officials and politicians invited by BTKS.

On the other hand, the activists of Belarusian organizations created in the 1990s, standing in opposition to BTKS and nationalist in character, are decidedly negative in their assessment of the Belarusian government. They often stress, that they do not maintain any contact or cooperation with the 'official Belarus'. On the contrary – one of the Belarusian leaders in Poland, Eugeniusz Wappa, has been banned from coming to Belarus by the authorities in Minsk, while the main Belarusian-speaking periodical ('Niwa' weekly) is officially banned there. This does not mean that these organizations do not maintain any contacts with Belarus. They cooperate with the opposition, some journalists and NGOs. They are also involved in the activities of Radio Racja and Belsat Television. However, the newly formed associations do not have a wide support among the Belarusian community in Poland, and their activity is usually limited to a few intellectual urban communities.

There is a clear correlation between the opinions concerning the situation in Belarus voiced by the leaders of the leftist BTKS and the main base of this organization, i.e. the older generation of rural Orthodox community, and the opinions voiced by the Belarusian nationalist organizations and the young, educated generation supporting these organizations.

Just as the activists of Belarusian organizations differ in their assessment of the political reality in Belarus, they also differ in their assessment of the situation of the Belarusian minority in Poland after the Polish accession in the EU. The president of BTKS believes that Polish EU accession did not change anything in the circumstances of the Belarusian minority, while the activists of organizations standing in opposition to BTKS emphasize the positive role of European legal standards in protecting the rights of minorities and better protection of minorities following the accession.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4. LITHUANIA**

Over the past several decades, the Polish-Lithuanian relations went through several very different stages – from overt hostility, through 'socialist friendship', early 1990s mistrust, cooperation and strategic partnership within NATO and the EU at the beginning of the 21st century, to the clear cooling down of mutual relations. How they will look in the future largely depends on the situation of Polish and Lithuanian minorities in both countries.

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<sup>18</sup> Based on interviews with BTKS activists, the Programme Board of 'Niwa' weekly and the Belarusian Students' Association.



In the communist period, the issues of the Lithuanians minority were not a part of the relations with the USSR or the authorities of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. This changed in the new geopolitical circumstances. At the turn of the 1980s, the newly independent Lithuania regained widespread sympathies among Poles,<sup>19</sup> so it was expected, that the Polish-Lithuanian relations will become model. Despite this, it was Lithuania whose relations with Poland in the early 1990s were the worst among all neighbours. This exacerbation was influenced by the conduct of the Polish minority in Lithuania,<sup>20</sup> but also by the nationalistic slogans by the 'Sajūdis' party that took power in Lithuania and, to a large extent historically motivated, the dislike and distrust of the Lithuanians towards Poles.

After the conflicts of the early 1990s, the interstate relations between Poland and Lithuania, constantly dominated by the issues of minorities, especially the Polish minority in Lithuania, the relations improved. In April 1994, after months of negotiations, the Treaty on the good neighbourly relations and friendly cooperation was signed. By signing the Treaty, both parties committed to observe all international regulations concerning national minorities, that have been guaranteed, among others, the right to freely use their national language

<sup>19</sup> This applied to Poles living in Poland (including Polish politicians coming from the Solidarity movement), who supported Lithuania's struggle for independence as part of the wave of anti-Soviet sentiments of the early 1990s. On the other hand, the majority of Poles in Lithuania had a negative attitude towards Lithuanian independence, fearing the rise of nationalism among the Lithuanians and the persecution of discrimination of the Polish minority.

<sup>20</sup> During the regaining of Lithuania's independence, the attitude of two Polish members of the High Council of the Lithuanian Socialist Soviet Republic was met with very negative reaction when they abstained from voting during the works on the declaration of independence of the Republic of Lithuania on 11th March 1990. Despite the fact that their votes did not influence the outcome of the vote, their decision took on a symbolic meaning. At the same time some of the Polish minority activists, especially coming from the Communist Party, voted in favour of Lithuania remaining in the USSR. In May 1990, the National Council of the Šalčininkai Region, then dominated by Poles, adopted a resolution claiming allegiance of this region to the USSR. On the other hand, the members of the Union of Poles in Lithuania (ZPL) supported the independence of the Lithuanian Republic, while emphasizing the tough circumstances of the Poles in the Vilnius region and how it was discriminated by the Lithuanian authorities. In September 1990, the Polish deputies in the Local Government Councils of the Vilnius Region, with ZPL's support, created the Polish National-Territorial Region with wide autonomy for the Polish minority within the Republic of Lithuania, while in September 1991, the Polish deputies in Vilnius accepted a draft statute of the Vilnius-Polish National-Territorial Region. Decisions relating to the autonomy made by the representatives of the Polish minority were not recognized by the authorities of Lithuania (the Polish authorities were also opposed to the autonomy), and have been met with unequivocally negative assessment from the Lithuanian society. Eventually, the Lithuanian authorities have suspended the Vilnius and Šalčininkai district councils and introduced appointed administrators, which effectively halted any autonomist aspirations. During the referendum on the independence of Lithuania in February 1991, the turnout in the region Šalčininkai was only 30%, with only 64% of voters in favour of independence (with 84% and 90%, respectively in the whole Lithuania), which clearly showed the very limited support for Lithuanian independence among Polish minority. However, a month later, during the Soviet referendum on the future of the USSR boycotted by the Lithuanians, the Šalčininkai region saw a turnout of 76% (Kurcz, 2005).



in public and private life, use their names and surnames in the original form of the minority, set up institutions, participate in the public life on equal terms with other citizens and to protect their national identity.<sup>21</sup> The scale of the problems has been illustrated by the fact that Lithuania was the last of the new neighbours, with whom the Polish government signed an agreement of this type. A few months later the Lithuanian consulate was opened in Sejny in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland, and the Lithuanian government started financing the construction of the 'Lithuanian House' for the Lithuanian minority in Poland.

In the 1990s the border crossings in Ogrodniki and Budzisko were opened. These were the first Polish-Lithuanian border crossings after the Second World War. After Poland and Lithuania joined the EU in 2004, and both countries joined the Schengen Area in 2007, all limitations to crossing the border were lifted. This is an especially favourable situation for the Lithuanian minority living in the Suwałki region (figure 4), and a change which was hard to imagine not so long ago, given that throughout the period of communism, the government has effectively prevented Lithuanians living in Poland from contacting the Soviet Lithuania, including their families.

The Polish-Lithuanian cooperation which was established at the state government level led to the creation of common institutions, including: the Consultative Committee for the Presidents of Poland and Lithuania, the Assembly of Deputies of the Polish and Lithuanian Sejm (1997), the Council for Cooperation Between the Governments of the Republics of Poland and Lithuania (1997), the Polish-Lithuanian International Commission for Cross-Border Cooperation (1996), the Polish-Lithuanian Local Government Forum (1998). In addition, the Polish-Lithuanian cooperation at the regional level has led to the creation of: 'Pogranicze' (Borderland) Foundation in Sejny (1990), Polish-Lithuanian Chamber of Commerce (1993), the Lithuanian-Polish-Russian Committee for Border Regions (1997), the Association of the Local Governments of the Sejny Region, and the Polish-Lithuanian Forum of Non-governmental Organizations. The cross-border cooperation was also developing dynamically and diversely, resulting, among other, in the creation of the 'Neman River' Euroregion in 1997, the cooperation between Polish and Lithuanian borderland municipalities and their twin cities, the cooperation of cultural institutions and schools, joint organization of commercial missions and international fairs (Rykała, 2008). These activities, along with other economic agreements, led at the end of the 20th century to the transformation of the Polish-Lithuanian relations, often called 'the best in history' at the time, into a strategic partnership. Effective cooperation concerning the membership of both countries in the EU and NATO has been started, and the shared aspiration have brought Warsaw and Vilnius closer to each other.

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<sup>21</sup> Some of the provisions of the Treaty (such as the spelling of names and surnames, and bilingual names) have still not been implemented by the Lithuanian authorities.

However, in the first decade of the 21st century, after Lithuanian independence ‘settled down’ and Lithuania joined NATO and the EU, the mutual relations got worse. Lithuania started experiencing the old resentments and fears of the small country faced with a much bigger and populous neighbour, who dominated Lithuania politically for many centuries and now had the largest national minority. In the relations between Poland and Lithuania, the small Lithuanian minority in Poland has become a tool the authorities in Vilnius used in talks with the Polish government. When Polish authorities demanded respect for the rights of Poles in Lithuania, the Lithuanian government did not hesitate to raise the issue of discrimination of Lithuanians in Poland. Following the legal changes introduced in both countries in recent years (which are favourable for the minorities in Poland, while often being unfavourable in Lithuania), especially after adapting the Polish law to the EU regulations and the adoption of the Act on national, ethnic minorities and regional language by the Polish parliament, the situation of the Lithuanian minority in Poland is much better than the situation of the Polish minority in Lithuania.

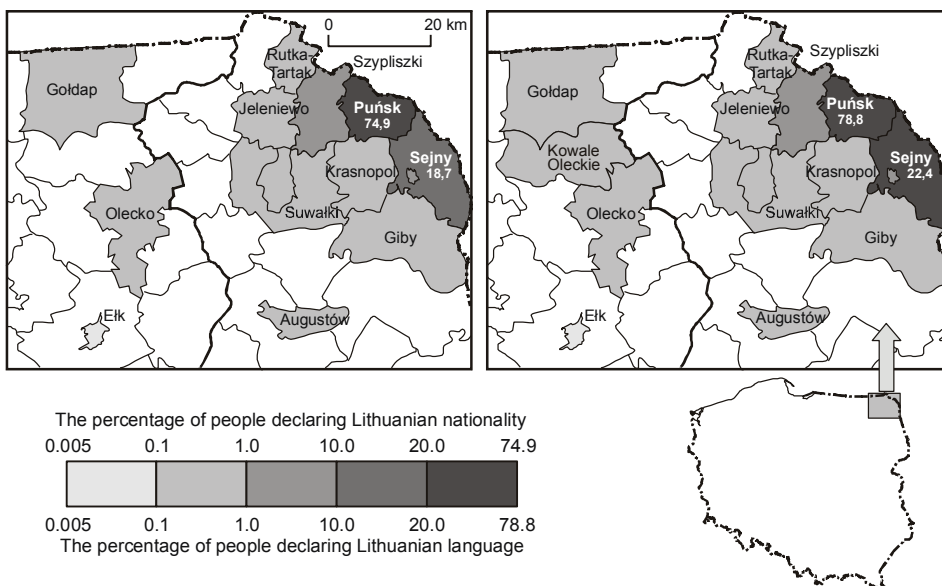


Fig. 4. The percentage of people declaring Lithuanian ethnicity and the use of the Lithuanian language in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland (by commune), based on the 2002 census

Source: own study based on data from the Central Statistical Office

That is why the most important issue in the relations between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Lithuania is the treatment of Polish national minority in Lithuania. The Lithuanian authorities have introduced a number of provisions

limiting the rights (especially concerning language and education) of the minorities. The still unresolved issues include Polish spelling of the names in the identification cards and bilingual spelling of street names and places. According to Lithuanian law, only the Lithuanian spelling rules can be used in the Republic of Lithuania and no bilingual place names are allowed, even in areas where Poles (or other minorities) are a vast majority of residents.

In 2011, the Lithuanian authorities have adopted the educational law that, according to the Lithuanian Poles, discriminates Polish schools in Lithuania.<sup>22</sup> Its adoption led to mass demonstrations in Vilnius, and the intervention of the Polish authorities. Protests of Poles did not have any effect, and the new education law became the new honed of Polish-Lithuanian conflict. Another unsolved problem relates to the return of Polish property seized after the Second World War by the Soviet authorities and the current Lithuanian authorities, who are their legal heirs. In addition to problems of social and historical nature, there are also economic issues, exemplified by the refinery in Mažeikiai, the biggest foreign investment of PKN Orlen, which has been causing problems far exceeding the so called 'market mechanisms' since its purchase by the Polish company.

Despite the many sensitive issues in the relations between the Lithuanian state and the Polish minority, Polish organizations and institutions have freedom to operate and a real opportunity to influence the local Polish communities. In the Vilnius and Šalčininkai regions, a large part of the local administration is dominated by the Polish minority, there are representatives of the Electoral Action of Poles in the Lithuanian parliament, Polish schools function (though with numerous problems), also at university level. After Poland and Lithuania joined the EU and the tendency to remove the administrative and economic barriers between the two countries became more prominent, as well as a result of the progressing Lithuanization of Vilnius, even the Lithuanian circles resentful of the Polish minority seem to realise, that it does not pose any threat to the territorial integrity of the Lithuanian state. However, the lack of support for Polish territorial autonomy, the issues of accepting the demands concerning the spelling of Polish names or bilingual signs and the regulations included in the new educational law show, that the Lithuanians are still afraid of Polish separatism and they treat many of the initiatives from the Polish minority as acts against Lithuanian sovereignty (Kowalski, 2008).

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<sup>22</sup> The most criticized provisions of the new education law are the standardization, since 2013, of the mandatory maturity exams in Lithuanian language in minority and Lithuanian schools (despite existing differences in their curriculum), increasing the number of Lithuanian language classes, the introduction, since September 2011, of Lithuanian history and geography classes in Lithuanian, as well as the 'basics of patriotism', also in Lithuanian in minority schools (where all subjects used to be taught in minority languages). The law also makes it easier for the local governments to close small, rural non-Lithuanian schools, which will surely decrease the number of Polish schools. For comparison, according to the Polish educational law, all Polish history and geography classes are obligatorily taught in all types of schools, and the compulsory maturity exam in Polish language is also standardized.

The resolution of bilateral problems is surely hindered not only because of the lack of good will, but also because of the disproportionate nationality structure in both countries. Lithuanians in Poland are a marginal nationality, both in numbers and territory. Tight groups of Lithuanians live in the north-eastern end of Poland, along the border with Lithuania (figure 4), but they are a majority only in Puńsk municipality. According to the 2011 census, there is only approx. 8 thousand ethnic Lithuanians and people of Lithuanian origin in Poland. However, Poles in Lithuania are the largest ethnic minority (about 213 thousand of 3.2 million people), significantly shaping the history of Lithuania (both in the old days in and in the 20th century). There also is a large number of ethnic Poles living in Vilnius and they dominate in numbers and in political influence around the Lithuanian capital.<sup>23</sup> Of course, this does not justify the asymmetry in the relationship towards minorities. The Government of the Republic of Lithuania, regardless of the changing political options, consistently fails to comply with all the provisions of the Treaty of 1994 with Poland and discriminates Poles. In view of such national and political relations between friendly, fully democratic states, members of the EU and NATO, the state of relations with Belarus or Ukraine should not come as a surprise.

By limiting the rights of national minorities in their territory, the Lithuanian authorities at the same time give various forms of support, financial, organizational, and political, to ethnic Lithuanians living broad, including those in Poland. This commitment is expressed, among others, in significant expenses on minority operations. The Lithuanian government funded the construction of the 'Lithuanian House' in Sejny (which houses, among other things, the Consulate of the Republic of Lithuania, the boards of Lithuanian associations, bands, choirs, folk groups), as well as the buildings of the School Complex with Lithuanian language of instruction 'Žiburys'. In Puńsk, the Lithuanian government co-financed and enabled the construction of the 'House of Lithuanian Culture'. It also subsidizes schools, the operation of Lithuanian minority organizations and the 'Aušra' publishing house. The president of the Association of Lithuanians in Poland emphasizes the significance of multi-faceted support from the Lithuanian authorities and institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Institute of Lithuanian Language and Lithuanian schools. At the same time, Lithuanian activists agree that the Polish-Lithuanian relations have a very negative impact on the situation of the Lithuanian and Polish perceptions, as well as on the reception and opinions of the Lithuanians held by Poles in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland. According to them, the Lithuanian minority is 'a hostage of the foreign policy of Poland and Lithuania', and any deterioration in relations between Warsaw and Vilnius has a bearing on the situation in Puńsk

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<sup>23</sup> According to the 2011 census, there are approx. 200 thousand Poles living in Lithuania (a drop of over 30 thousand within ten years), representing 6.6% of the total population, about 88 thousand Poles living in Vilnius constitute 16.5% of the total population, while Poles in the Vilnius region constitute 60% and in the Šalčininkai region – 80%.

and Sejny. They consider this relationship to be very unfavourable, unjust, or even dangerous. They find a direct relationship between the political situation in Lithuania and the painting over of the bilingual town names in Puńsk municipality in August 2011, which was, according to them, inspired from the outside.

They do, however, have a very positive assessment of the consequences of Poland and Lithuania joining the EU for the Lithuanian minority, especially valuing the right to freely cross the border between the countries, which is surely of fundamental importance for the people living for decades in the borderland, in direct vicinity of their kin-state (figure 4). Particularly considering the fact, that this geographic proximity did not mean the freedom of mutual contacts long before the communist era, practically from the beginning of the 1920s. For dozens of years, the Polish-Lithuanian border was a very tight barrier that prevented not only normal cross-border cooperation, but even visiting family member living a few or a dozen kilometres away. That is why the most important aspect of European integration for the Lithuanians living in Poland is, literally and practically, the integration of the Polish-Lithuanian border. It should also be noted that the Lithuanian Association in Poland was the only national organization in the study, whose authorities have admitted to using EU funds in their statutory operations.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

One consequence of the contemporary processes of political, economic and military integration of the European continent is the strengthening of its division into the Western Europe (in its widest meaning) and the Eastern Europe (not included in the integration process). At the Polish border with Belarus and Ukraine, the line of the modern division, strengthened in the literal (technical measures to protect the borders) and legal sense (visa regulations) overlaps with the civilization, cultural and religious division line that has been shaped over the ages. Despite the claims from the government in Warsaw of ‘Polish eastern policy’, we can see a clear turn towards ‘western policy’. In political, military and economic sense, Poland is clearly facing west, which results in turning away from its eastern neighbours, which is particularly disadvantageous for political and geopolitical reasons. Despite spectacular attempts by various governments to revive the cooperation, especially with Ukraine and Lithuania, Poland does not currently have any arguments, especially economic or financial ones, to conduct an effective, pragmatic eastern policy, and not a policy based on historical sentiments.

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<sup>24</sup> Based on interviews with activists of the Lithuanian Association in Poland and the St. Casimir Lithuanian Society.

When we compare the contemporary ethnic structure and national policy of Poland and its eastern neighbours, we can see clear asymmetry in both quantitative and legal-institutional aspects. There is currently a markedly smaller population of Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians living in Poland than the Polish population in the territories of our eastern neighbours. At the same time, the national minorities in Poland enjoy wider rights and better conditions to operate than Poles living in Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania.

The improvement of the legal situation of ethnic minorities in Poland is related, among others, to Poland accession into the EU, which is recognized and appreciated by the leaders of national organizations, who stress that the main consequences of Poland's membership in the EU for the communities they represents are not the potential financial benefits, but an improvement in legal standards concerning the protection of ethnic minorities. This is a universally held opinion, very strongly rooted in the consciousness of the leaders of national organizations, even though it is not exactly applicable to EU legislation. The EU law does not include any regulations concerning the rights of ethnic minorities, even though the EU requires its members to respect the standards of international law concerning minorities. The EU legislation only protects the so called less-used languages, which may mean, in practice, some of the languages used by ethnic minorities, but it does not introduce a common national policy. As a result, each country regulates the legal issues of ethnic minorities on its own. The EU legislation clearly prohibits discrimination due to gender, race, religion, ethnic and social origin and the colour of one's skin, yet no EU documents directly mentions ethnic minorities. There are also no special programmes for financial supports of minorities. Thus, they can only apply for financing for their projects as part of general EU initiatives (structural and cohesion funds). The legislation of the European Council concerning the legal protection of ethnic minorities is much more extensive (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2010).

In discussing the interstate relations concerning national minorities, the 'rule of reciprocity' in bilateral relations is often discussed. This discussion, but also the actions of both sides of it, very often see the struggle between, as Nijakowski (2000) put it, the 'old testament' version, which demands that you give rights to a given minority according to the rule of: we will treat 'your people' as badly (give them as few rights) as 'our people' are treated by you, and the 'new testament' version, which uses the rule of: 'look how good your people have it with us'. One has to hope that the latter version will become more and more prominent. As Nijakowski says when discussing the relations between Poland and the foreign kin-states of 'Polish' minorities, it should be a model, while the first is neither ethically admissible, nor politically beneficial.



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