

Belarusian-Lithuanian Border. Between Fear and Hope: a View from Both Sides

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Borders are symbols of cross-border identities. This article is an attempt to give an answer to the question: what are the consequences of the weakening factor of territorial belonging and how it in fact realizes in the Lithuanian-Belarusian borderland? Using a “boundary narrative” we analyze border as a marker of division which has different functions. Through a focus on the informal, everyday aspects of this, the article draws together existing knowledge and develops new understandings of the combined social and cultural elements of how these borders are experienced and thought of. “A view from both sides” on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border and borderland gives us possibility to look on this subject using different philosophical approaches. Both authors investigate the ontology and phenomenology of the borders using constructivist approach, descriptive, narrative analysis of studies. These approaches gave us possibility to analyse borderland inhabitants’ feelings that we named “between fear and hope”.

Keywords: borderland, border’ paradox, border’ perception, deterritorialization, feeling of border, identity.

Introduction

This article situates growing interest in eastern “borderlands” in a set of overlapping contemporary cultural and theoretical concerns. In the nowadays research literature we can find such definitions as “narrating space”, “mapping identities”, “the geography of identity”, “contradictory mapping of space”, “geographic or place-centered dramas of domination”, “sovereignty without territoriality”, “disappearance

and strengthening of borders” which are very close to the metaphor. All of them are connected with a problem of space, territoriality and border.

Through a focus on the informal, everyday aspects of this, the article draws together existing knowledge and develops new understandings of the combined social and cultural elements of how these borders are experienced and thought of. Its aim is to develop a new approach for studying changes in the Eastern periphery of Europe, through

exploring the process through which borders themselves become visible, strengthening, meaningful or disappearing, a simultaneous focus on what borders separate and what they bring together, a focus on remaking borders, which means studying understandings of possible futures as well as the past. The study of “border transgressions” gives us possibility to understand relations between state and territory, borderland community and other population. It also develops a new approach for understanding how borders appear or disappear, become significant, meaningful or meaningless.

15 years of the last century noted the growing interest in regional issues. Many researchers see it in a sort of antithesis to the regionalization of globalization and regard this trend as a kind of “printing era.” In this context, the focus of the research is a completely natural way to the diversity of local phenomena, including those in the modern sociology of culture referred to by the same order concepts such as “area,” “borderland,” “peripherals”, and “marginality”. The objective nature of mainstreaming regional problems associated primarily with the functioning of the phenomenon of “region” is a sociocultural phenomenon. There are other, more pragmatic interests in the circumstances of the regionalization, in particular border associated with both the experience of mutual tolerance, resulting from the multicultural composition of its population, and an increased risk of conflict caused by the same factor. The initial premise of the theoretical analysis of the ethno-cultural situation in the Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian border is the very notion of the borderland. This concept is

quite multidimensional and therefore can be considered in various aspects. “A view from both sides” on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border and borderland gives us possibility to look on this subject using different philosophical approaches.

At the same time both views on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border are based on rather different theoretical approaches. Both authors investigate the ontology and phenomenology of the borders using constructivist approach, descriptive, narrative study analysis. They use three main types of descriptive methods: observational methods, case-study methods and survey methods. At the same time, being different methodologically, the ontology and phenomenology of the borders are interrelated. The phenomenological analysis of how the borders are perceived and what they mean for border people is subdued to understanding of what the borders are, i. e. to their ontology. The case of the Belarusian-EU border explicates the necessity for the both approaches.

New European Border Discourse

The term border is extremely rich in significance. It is undergoing a profound change in meaning. The borders, as an attempt to preserve all functions of the sovereignty of the state, are no longer entirely situated at the outer limit of territories; they are dispersed a little everywhere. Both border theory and border studies, as a field, owe much of their cross-disciplinary origins and development to Eastern European scholars. There are many characteristics of border management, border life, and borderlands

that operate at borders everywhere, inform the comparative and analytical foundations of border theory. Eastern European borders are no exceptions. A border conflict become increasingly relevant to the future of governance in the EU as the Union enlarges, making it directly involved in the increasing number of border conflicts.

Territory or territoriality, has become an increasingly prevalent notion in the discourse of the European Union. We note two tendencies in the dialectical process of the borders: “territorialization” and “deterritorialization”. The territorialization mostly means the differentiation of space and construction of borders. Deterritorialization may mean taking control and order away from a land or place (territory) that is already established, which results in a weakening of tie between culture and place. This means the removal of cultural subjects and objects from a certain location in space and time^{*}. Deterritorialization emphasizes different point in the use of different terms, but we can understand the meaning of this word as the transformation between local culture and that of the global modernity. Space and time can however be regarded as one unit in absolute or relative terms. In the same time both processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization – are processes that are happening and developing not only on physical territory but on psychological territory which designate the status of the

relationship between groups or individuals. Processes of deterritorialization are differentiated by Felix Guattari into “relative” and “absolute” deterritorializations. The relative deterritorialization means for him the possibility of reterritorialization or returning to the past situation. The absolute deterritorializations are marked by the impossibility of being territorialized again¹. Now the process of deterritorialization and weakening of the importance of territorial belonging are the principal tendency for European Union. It is a possibility of going beyond the form of the nation. Europe in its actual phase of history is a new form of post-national construction. The original divide in the territorial boundaries between them have lost some authority, which is the main phenomenon of deterritorialization.

According to Etienne Balibar, Europe is a frontier. For him this representation of the border, essential as it is for the state institutions, is nevertheless profoundly inadequate for an account of the complexity of real situations. This topology is underlying the sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent mutual relations between the identities constitutive of European history. Balibar discovered and made the following list of some general features of European borders: territories in our political tradition are not only associated with the “invention” of the border, they are also inseparable from the institution of power as sovereignty. Borderlines are a power to attach populations to territories in a stable or regulated manner and to “administrate” the territory through

* The deterritorialization as definition in the end of 90th years start to be linked not only with physical space but with virtual and cyberspace, internet connection, satellite TV, home employment or distance learning (Batty, M. and Barr, B. 1994).

1 Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. *What is Philosophy?* London, New York: Verso, 1994, p. 110.

the control of the population. The borders are no longer entirely situated at the outer limit of territories; they are dispersed a little everywhere. Europe is multiple; it is always home to tensions between numerous religious, cultural, linguistic, and political affiliations, numerous readings of history, and modes of relations with the rest of the world. Border zones, countries, and cities – are not marginal to the constitution of a public sphere but rather are at the center. It starts to be a “transitional object”, and an object of permanent transgression. European citizenship is a „citizenship of borders“². At the same time, latest studies show that “border is everywhere, so the modern ideology of the borderland, frontier spirit of the modern need for continuous and daily basis so that the conditions are very existence”³.

Andzej Sadowski introduced three parameters of the borderland: it is a space where historically coexist two or more ethnic and cultural groups, as a result ethno-cultural frontier is a phenomenon of greater stability than the interstate borderlands; the notion of frontier associated with various forms of co-existence which is expressed most visible and stable forms. Development issues “borderland of metaphysics” is very essential

for better understanding of the humanitarian situation in the modern conditions of global and regional interactions.

Border Identity as “a Moving Target”

The borderlands present an ambiguous status: on one hand, it is a place where the state reinforces its presence in order to mark its sovereignty and to defend itself against external threats. On the other hand, borderlands develop their own culture, due to their peripheral position in relation to the center, and to the existence of ethnically mixed population often connected by economic, social ties to the populations beyond the borders. “Border people may demonstrate ambiguous identities because economic, cultural and linguistic factors pull them in two directions”. Some researchers argue that especially these contact zones, as the borders, are not perceived by the population inhabiting them as dividing lines between themselves, but as mere resources, and bridges linking them. The borderland associated with a special type of man, which defines belonging to several cultures. The borderland is a specific area where historically born particular type of the inhabitant with individual and group consciences, which is defined by an accessory to several cultures⁴. The peculiar features of the borderland’s inhabitant are local mobility, domination of local regional self-identification in comparison with the state identification. Specific type of people whose characteristic include simultaneously

2 Balibar, E. Europe as Borderland, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2009, 27 (2), p. 190–215, available at: http://www.envplan.com/fulltext_temp/o/d13008.pdf; *Borders, Educations, and Religions in Northern Europe*. Edited by Berglund, J., Lundén, Th., Strandbrink, P., in series: Religion and Society, No. 63, Boston/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2015.

3 Kuczyński, J. *Młodość Europy i wieczność Polski: Wstęp do uniwersalizmu*. Tom 2. Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1999, p. 100.

4 Sadowski, A. Zarys problematyki. *Pogranicze. Studia społeczne*. T. 1, 1992, p. 5–6.

in some cultures (knowledge of several languages – mostly neighbors languages, consequently much more openness to cultural diversity and as result to cultural innovations, perception of otherness as norm of daily life, higher level of tolerance.

The changes in national, cultural and religious identity often are described by such definitions as “weakening”, “disappearing” and so on. Nevertheless, changes in the national and religious identity mean the change, negative consequences of which represent only one side of this process. Roland Barthes in his work *The Pleasure of the Text* argues that the difference is not at all the means to disguise or embellish the conflict; the difference gets over the conflict, exists outside of it and in the same time is close to it. Identity is a broad term that describes the general aspects of an individual’s total personality: the establishment, assimilation, or integration of societal norms, values, beliefs, and standards. The theorization of identity from a poststructuralist view includes some important characteristics: identities are not simply given, but discursively constructed, identities can never be entirely fixed, dominant constructions are in themselves not stable but vary both synchronically and diachronically, identities are always constructed against the difference of the other⁵.

The Other is represented as something ontologically external and hostile. He is a unique way of my self-identification. A person starts searching for identity by looking for the Other within *himself* /

herself. According to Brian Greenhill “the recognition of the ‘other’ is essential to constituting the identity of the self” (Greenhill 2008). Some researchers (Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm) say that an identity is some “imaginary make-up”. Anderson claims that ethnos is an artefact generated by cultural and political leaders. For Zygmunt Bauman⁶, modernity has constructed the concept of identity, and post-modernity is occupied with its semantic destruction. He thinks that identity is still “a problem”, however, of a different character from the one within modernity.

Nevertheless, Eastern and Central Europe is so much based on ethnic communities that questioning their ethnicity seems irrelevant. For instance, after “regaining their independence, the Baltic States have been constructing their political identities in terms of the East / West opposition. They have been creating narratives of belonging to the West, with the East as their threatening *other*”⁷. The identity represents publicly expressed feeling of solidarity, the national, ethnic, and religious unity to which a person belongs and consciously identifies *himself* / *herself* with.

According to Barthes’ remark, we can find changes in the criteria and borders of identity. These changes can be defined as following: the weakening factor of territorial belonging, mass distribution of the people

5 Diez, Th. Europe’s Others and the Return of Geopolitics. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2004, Vol. 17, No. 2, July, p. 321.

6 Bauman, Z. Postmodern Religion? in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. by P. Heelas. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, p. 72.

7 Miniotaitė G. Convergent Geography and Divergent Identities: A Decade of Transformation in the Baltic States. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2003, Vol. 16, No. 2, p. 214.

living in diasporas analyzed as a postcolonial phenomenon, the demarcation of identity through the own racial and continental belonging.

Border: View from the Lithuanian side

On such small territory as Lithuanian-Polish-Belarusian borderland it is possible to investigate two opposite, reciprocal process: disappearances (the Lithuanian-Polish borderland) and strengthening of borders (the Lithuanian-Belarusian and Polish-Belarusian borderland). These contradictory processes of border's are the result of its separation into Schengen and non-Schengen zones in the same territory. In the nowadays Lithuanian-Polish-Belarusian borderland we can find all border functions which were named in boundary studies. On this borderland border mostly is perceived as a "wall," "fence," "lock," "barrier" and in the same time as a "bridge," "opportunity," "wet-nurse". It is possible from the reason that most of "positive" opinion about boundary functions belong to Lithuanian-Polish border's habitants and the opposite "negative" opinion to Lithuanian-Belarusian and Polish-Belarusian border's habitants which "feeling of border" as "feeling of a distance" is enough strong.

Borders in contemporary Europe are symbol of cross-border identities: sustained cross-border cooperation often contributes to a shared "we" feeling. A method of a free narration about a life and "we" feeling on a border will allow to create the generalized image of the inhabitant of a borderland and to reveal its peculiar features such as: local mobility, domination of local regional self-

identification in comparison with the state identification, specific type of people. "As institutions, borders are markers of identity, and have played a role in this century in making national identity the pre-eminent political identity of the modern state. This has made borders and their related narratives of frontiers, indispensable elements in the construction of national cultures"⁸.

We conducted an interview with some persons from Old Norviliskes village where today only five very old women stay permanently (twelve in the summer time). Their narrative stories are about past life, changes in borders and states, divided cemeteries, religious and language communities and families. We found that these women have of some peculiar features of the borderland's inhabitant: domination of local regional self-identification, simultaneously in some cultures, knowledge of neighbor's languages (Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Polish) and presence otherness as norm of daily life. They miss old border which gave different economic possibilities for Norviliskes inhabitanics (today it is only borderline). For them and many village families place, where people cross border was a "bridge," "opportunity," "wet-nurse" and place of job.

The interview shows how complicated a nowadays border life for them on both sides of the frontier is. A large part of the interview, Norviliskes village' inhabitants spoke about problems connected with religion (mixed Catholics and Orthodox population around border, divided parish,

8 Biaspamiatnych, M. Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian Borderlands: Phenomenological Analysis. *Limes: cultural regionalistics*, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 2, p. 100.

the problem of taking care of graves at the cemeteries on the both sides of frontier). The border is a real “wall” for them. The nearest boundary transition place for them is at more than 100 km distance. When somebody dies in Norviliskes and is wanted to be buried in the family tomb situated on the Belarusian side of the border there is no possibility to cross the border in this place. Family should make many bureaucratic papers, visas and go to the nearest boundary transition place more than 100 km. Same situation repeats each year on the All Saints day when they want to visit family tombs on the other side of the border. This tradition is one of the strongest and most popular in this part of Europe, it is a part of cultural and religious heritage of the Lithuanian-Polish-Belarusian borderland, which is equally important for Catholics and Orthodox Christians, Lithuanians, Poles and Belarusians. For borderlands inhabitants that stay on both sides of frontier the feeling of “separateness”, “remoteness”, “distinctness” is real. The boundary perception for these people is close to the images of the “wall,” “fence”, “lock” and “barrier”. They miss old border’ transition place which was some hundred meters from the village and gave different economic and social possibilities for Norviliskes inhabitants.

The music festival “Bezgether” was miracle for young people mostly from Belarusian side during seven years. The inhabitants of Lithuania and Belarus could be together without confinement, despite the differences of political systems in both countries. Bezgether was created under a slogan “Music Opens Borders”. Bezgether

was the largest annual music and arts festival in Baltic States. Established in 2007, it takes place in Norviliskes, Lithuania, just a few meters from the border with Belarus. During these years, attendance was estimated around 30000 participants.

The area is remote and is difficult to reach, as travel across border is restricted as Lithuania is a member of the European Union and Belarus is not. Belarusians could get the visas without a fee if they traveled with ticket to the festival. Due to festival’s proximity to the state border special security measures have to be undertaken to prevent people from inadvertently crossing the border. The festival is situated in the historic Vilnius region, inhabited by people of Lithuanian, Polish, Belarusian, Russian nationalities. The Renaissance Norviliskes Castle reminds the visitors of shared history under the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In addition to musical performances, the festival offers other activities, including craft studios, cinema in the open air, sport games, music and dance lessons, and a sculpture park. The children are offered daycare with their own activities. In addition, all the necessary facilities are provided for disabled persons.

Festival Bezgether gathers thousands of people together despite their nationality, citizenship, age or religious beliefs. What “*temporary broken border*” words mean for Belarusian participants? What “*eternal closed border*” means for them? Most of those whom we interviewed told us that for them Bezgether is only a possibility to feel Europeans, free travelers, to be cosmopolitan, to be the same as young Lithuanian people, enjoy common

emotions and music. From 47 recipients interviewed my me, the half said that they have a “negative” (divisive) attitude to Lithuanian-Belarusian and Polish-Belarusian borders. They feel “tension of border”, separation from European life and culture and perceive a border as a “wall,” “fence”, “lock”, “barrier”. We head many narratives about complicity to create a folio of bureaucratic papers and confirmation of financial stability. Their self-identification is high; they are good educated and are professionals but their self-identification as citizens and representatives of Belarusian nation is rather low. At the same time the Belarusian language is a contradicting issue for them which is viewed by them as rather a political instrument (used by the opposition movement) than a means of cultural self-expression. They feel that their national identity is not complete without the native Belarusian language. They envy Lithuanians for having native language as a most important part of national consciousness and cultural heritage.

The Belarusian-EU Border: From Political Lines to Social Constructs

The Belarusian vision of the Belarusian-EU (Belarusian-Polish and Belarusian-Lithuanian) border is based on two rather different theoretical approaches, adequate to the present-day geopolitical situation at the Belarusian borderlands and, consequently, their research goals. According to Henk van Houtum, the recent debates on the question of border in a broad frame of border studies contributed to differentiate the epistemology of borders as the existing

political units and their scientific and public vision as the territorial, social, cultural constructs. In other words, the two approaches to the border phenomenon are concentrated on its ontological essence and its phenomenology. H. van Houtum alongside with the other post-modernist orientated scholars (David Newman, Oliver Kramsch, and Anke Struver) argued the phenomenological turn as the fruitful mainstream in border studies: “The interest for studies of the border, in the meaning of the construction and representation of difference, could be considered as the offspring of the postmodern turn in social sciences. It has been put forward in this debate that borders are the product of our knowledge and interpretation and that they as such produce a disciplining lens through which we perceive and imagine the world”. In other words, border studies can now dominantly be characterised as the study of human practices that constitute and represent differences in space⁹.

This view through ontological approach is rather traditional one and is dating back to post-Ratzelian understanding of borders as the lines demarcating political space, the political dividers and national separators (Julian Mingi), the limits of the state sovereignty (James Prescott), the institutions as the essential elements of the political structure, the instruments of state policy (Malcolm Anderson), etc. In the frames of that approach, the border studies are focused upon “the study of power in and between nations and states, including the ways in

9 Houtum, H. van. The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries, *Geopolitics*, 2005, 10, p. 674.

which versions of that power are enhanced or growing, or diminished or declining, with particular reference to border cultures and identities”¹⁰.

The traditional understanding of border phenomena include “the border line”, “the border status”, “the border regime”, “the border zone” and some others concepts as the tools for its description and study. Of course, the present-day glance at the borders as the political lines has very few in common with the former geopolitical and environmental determinism. Nevertheless, the vivid realities of the post-Soviet state developments indicate that such an approach is still topical. The status of the political borders on the post-Soviet space has been crucially changed several times. From that point of view, the Western and Northern Belarusian borders are demonstrative enough. Precisely, the Belarusian-Lithuanian border converted from administrative in fact and transparent ‘bridge-type’ during Soviet times (up until 1990, when Lithuania broke with the USSR) to the political line, meeting the traditional ontological approach criteria. The key reason for such developments of the Belarusian-Lithuanian border status was the collapse of the USSR, the political independence of both neighboring countries and, what is more essential, the opposite political and geopolitical orientations of Belarus and Lithuania. The latter one has joined NATO, the EU (2004) and became member of the Schengen Agreement (2007), which, besides the other reasons, contributed to the strengthening of the border regime.

¹⁰ Donnan, H., Wilson, T. *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State at International Frontier*. Oxford: Berg, 1999, p. 3.

The evolution of the Belarusian-Polish border was different from the previous one, but the final logic of the changes of its border status happened to be similar. The transformation of the Belarusian-Polish border has passed from the closed ‘wall-type’ (the Soviet times) through the ‘bridge-type’ in 1990s to its present-day ‘door-type’ status and the adequate border regime. In fact, in 1990s one could enter Poland with the passport and ‘one dollar voucher’, a symbolic certificate available at every stand. The situation has changed after Poland had become member of NATO (1999), the EU (2004) and the Schengen Agreement (2007). Nowadays one can speak about the EU-Belarusian border including its Polish, Lithuanian (and Latvian as well) segments as a whole unite, explicitly different from transparent Belarusian-Russian border and Belarusian-Ukrainian border with undetermined and negotiated status.

The EU-Belarusian border (1250 km, nearly one third of the Belarusian state’s total borders length) is still semi-closed and belongs to the ‘door-type’ frontier. The crossing-border practices from both sides are strictly submitted to visas regime and custom control. The new version of the law on state borders has recently come in force in Belarus (2015). The main changes affected the border zones and their security, as well as the state security in general. Over the last two years, the border crossing points located at the Belarusian side have been renovated and supplied with the modern technical equipment. A border wire fences, watchtowers and border policemen with the dogs are still visual symbols of border security, as well

as the lines at the crossing points are the symbols of cross-bordering practices. The negotiations with Poland and Lithuania to weaken the existing regulations of crossing borders for the local citizens have been frozen. Taken as a whole, the present situation at the borders, alongside with the official statements on that issue¹¹, indicate that the strengthening of the Belarusian-EU border is in the mainstream of Belarusian state politics. Nevertheless that border is vital for joint business, academic partnership, international tourism, human contacts, shopping, etc.

Having taken into account the brief description of the evolution of the EU-Belarusian border and its present-day status, we can pass to its analysis in phenomenological categories. The phenomenological approach to the borders is based upon the assumption, that social reality is constructed. According to H. van Houtum, “by claiming that all borders are human-made the present debate logically focuses on the construction of borders, in other words, *how* borders are made in terms of its symbols, signs, identifications, representations, performances and stories. This has had a tremendous effect on border studies and possibly is, in our time of post-modernisation of science, one of the explanations of the mushrooming of study centres, conferences and articles on borders. Hence, what we have seen the last decade or so is an immense growth of the focus of

the representation of borders and national identities”¹².

The quoted passage helps to reveal the key phenomenological categories of border studies necessary as the tools to discuss the Belarusian-EU border. These are the ‘border people’ and ‘border conscious’, ‘border paradox’, ‘cross-border practices’ (or *habitus*), the ‘border identity’, the ‘border story’ (or narrative). Taken as a whole, these concepts are expected to help to better understanding, in which way the Belarusian-EU border is represented and reflected by the inhabitants of the adjacent area, i.e. the Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian borderlands.

The Border Fear and Hope: a View from the Belarusian Side

In present-day Belarus, the set of questions concerning its state borders is beyond the social and political public discourse. The only way to learn about the significance of the borders in everyday life of borderlands’ population is to ask people what they think about that issue. The present case study is based upon the written reports (border narratives) collected from various social, ethnic, religious and age groups of the Belarusian-Polish and Lithuanian borderlands. The narratives have been collected from the inhabitants of Grodno as regional center and some other bordering towns and villages of Grodno Region. The study is based upon the narrative analysis revealing the vision of the border from inside the inter-subjective “border consciousness”

11 Alexander Lukashenko approves decision on protection of Belarus' state border in 2015. – [Electronic resource]. Available at: <http://www.ctv.by/en/state-border-committee> 19.01.2015 [Last access 2015.06.20].

12 Houtum, H. van, The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries. *Geopolitics*, 2005, 10, p. 675.

and providing the results comparable to the similar studies on Poland's borderlands, Finnish-Russian border, etc.

The scholar has to take into account, that there has always been a tension between the fixed, durable and inflexible requirements of national boundaries and the unstable, transient and flexible requirements of people (H. Donnan, T. Wilson)¹³. Thus, the reflection upon the Belarusian-EU border is contextual and pluralistic, depending on age, ethnicity, life experience, education, origin and life strategies and expectations of the border people. Ethnicity, ethnic identity and memory seem to be crucial factors influencing upon the Belarusian-EU border image and evaluation. The border conscious of Grodno Region inhabitants is rather controversial. For that reason, we apply to the concept of "border paradox" which seems to be adequate in the case study. In the course of the research work, the next border paradoxes have been revealed.

First, the paradox of the inversion of distance. The three-fold changes of the Belarusian-EU border status briefly described above played a phenomenological trick with the border consciousness of the inhabitants of Grodno Region. The border inversions, which took place during one generation life crucially, influenced upon the feeling and perception of distance and location of border people. The representatives of the elder generation still remember how "close" Lithuania to Grodno was: they visited Lithuanian capital Vilnius for shopping, for tourist purposes and often arrived in

Druskininkai (the bordering Lithuanian town and popular resort) just "to drink a cup of good coffee". Needless to say, that over the last decades nothing has changed in the objective geographical location in that area. The changes took place in the perception of Lithuania, which became "distant", "closed", "unknown" country. Very few representatives of younger generation managed to visit Lithuania, and the rest feel sorry about that situation as "abnormal". Highly educated and nationally oriented Belarusians would like to be "closer" to Vilnius as European centre of culture, reach in places of interest and one of historical centres of Belarusian literacy and education. So, the core of the paradox of the inversion of distance is in the shifting of perception: for the border people of Grodno Region Vilnius (165 km from Grodno) became more "distant" than, for example, Moscow (1000 km from Grodno), which is much "closer" nowadays. What concerns Druskininkai (37 km from Grodno), for the informers it is almost terra incognita.

The scenario of the development of perception of Poland is quite different from the Lithuania's case. "Closed" and "distant" Poland in Soviet times became "open" in 1990s. Bordering Polish city Bialystok converted into Mecca for shopping. Though the border situation has changed over last 15 years, Bialystok is still popular among Grodno merchants. They "feel home", "don't feel abroad" in that city. Their self-feeling in Polish cultural space depends neither on their identity, nor on cultural differences. In that case, the scholar comes across another version of discussed border paradox, with economic reasons this time. The differences of prices in the bordering countries

¹³ Donnan, H., Wilson, T. *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State at International Frontier*. Oxford: Berg, 1999, p. 3, p. xiii.

contributed to the flourishing of cross-border business, both legal and illegal. For that relatively small category of the informers the border status and visa regime are not the obstacles to get to Poland. They perceive this country pragmatically as the “closest” place with low prices and opportunities to make money.

Second, the paradox of pride and shame. The core of that type of border paradox is centred in the contradictions of local and sub-local identities of the border people. In the other words, the scholar comes across a very peculiar and specific for Grodno Region three-level modes of the construction of self. The majority of the narratives’ authors identify themselves as local “border people”. Each of them is well oriented in the local political environment, and the judgments like “we live close to the borders with Poland and Lithuania”, “we live in the bordering area”, “Grodno is bordering town” etc. are typical enough. For the local population of Grodno Region being “the border people” is just formal, derived from their geographical knowledge, and self-feeling. Only few of the narrative authors tried to interpret their identification in cultural terms: “We are influenced by all cultural innovations coming from Poland”, “Our young people wear stylish dress”, “We are better oriented in fashionable brands”, etc. Such judgments are largely focused upon the appearance and visual habits of local people. In the other judgments, the cultural diversity of Grodno is emphasised: “For me Grodno is the bordering city and I enjoy living here. Here one can meet people of other nationalities and cultures and learn more about cultural differences”, “Grodno

region is very peculiar and different from the rest of Belarus”. For the newcomers “people in Grodno feel and behave like the Poles: they are more mobile, more open for communication, more open and oriented to the West”. At the same time for the border people “living at the border” is closely connected with difficulties of the border regime. In the narratives, we come across the impressive and negative descriptions of the very procedure of border-crossing: “The border is the face of the state. It’s a shameful face” because of numerous and strange Belarusian custom regulations, which are seen as “the humiliation”, “the shame”, “disrespect”, etc. The paradox is that “to get to Poland is not a problem. The problem is to return back home”: “The Belarusian customs officers do their work very carefully, they check every bag, and often it takes several hours to pass all the formalities”. Such is the “face” of the Belarusian-EU border seen by the insiders from the outside.

The third, the paradox of “being here”: fear, nostalgia and adjustment. That paradox is centred in historical memory of the local ethnic groups and reflects the existed contradictions of their attitude towards the border. In the narrative texts the ethnic identities of their authors (the Belarusians, the Poles, the Russians, etc.) are expressed in an open and doubtless way. To some extent that aspect of identity seems to be influential, predominantly among the representatives of the elder generation. The old-aged Russians and some of the Belarusians remembering the post-war times expressed their feelings of “being here” in the negative terms.

Living at the border seemed for them to be “dangerous”. They felt “fear”, because they were “afraid of war” and experienced “the hostile, unfriendly surrounding”. They constantly felt the threat and perceived the borderlands as an unsecure area, where the war started. In the other words, “being here” was a hard experience. Being at home, i.e. in their country, they didn’t feel at home. On the contrary, some of the old-aged Poles nostalgically argued, that before the 2nd World War “it was Poland here” and that they had to get adjusted to the after-war “unfair” borders as well as to the citizenship in non-Polish state. Therefore, “being here” for that rapidly diminishing group had turned into the post-war “hard” acceptance of the new border and new political circumstances. In the post-war decades, “being the Pole was unsecure”. As a result, rather typical for the bordering areas in general, “being here” for the old Polish generation happened to be rather controversial and tragic: being at home and out of home at the same time. For the younger generation irrespective of ethnic identity “being here” is to live in the Northern-Western part of Belarus, to be different from the rest of the Belarusians (and to be proud of that) and to use the opportunities of being border people. They would like “to go abroad as the tourists”, “to visit famous historical places”, “to learn other cultures”. The hopes of the only few are connected with the serious life strategies, academic perspectives, studying abroad or to use other opportunities of “being there”. Needless to say, that the impressions of “being here” as a danger as well as the ethnic nostalgia have

been fading out, and the legitimacy of the existing border and its status is no longer questionable to the border people. Their present-day attitude towards the Belarusian-EU border is pragmatic and deprived of the evidences of concern about “the state security”.

The fourth paradox: the uncertainty of Europe. There is another aspect of identity of the border people, which is beyond locality and ethnicity – the geopolitical aspect. The construction of self-identity in the geopolitical space reveals its European/non-European duality. “Who are we?” seems to be contradictory question in the context of the European space. The matter is, that Grodno Region is close enough to geographically determined centre of Europe (not far from Vilnius, about 200 km from Grodno). “We live in the heart of Europe” is the common phrase in President A. Lukashenko’s speeches. Consciously or unconsciously, the idea of the “local Belarusian Europeism” helps to reject, at least by the Western Belarusians, widely circulating Russian “Euro-Asian” ideologema. Worth to add, that the Russian tourists are eager to estimate Belarus and Grodno particularly as “the West” and “Europe”. At the same time, phenomenological vision of Europe, reflected in the border narratives, is quite different. “To visit Europe”, “to come from Europe”, “to live like the Europeans”, “to organize a tour to a European country” are the typical phrases, widely and unconsciously used by the border people. We would describe that phenomenon as “the paradox of uncertainty of Europe”: the border people of Grodno Region identify themselves as the Europeans beyond

Europe. In such a case, where is Europe? For Z. Bauman, Europe is an unfinished adventure. For the local border people, it is an uncertain phenomenon starting over the Polish and Lithuanian borders. So, the Belarusian-EU border is still perceived as the border of civilizations.

Conclusions

1. Different nationalities and generations perceive their Lithuanian-Belarusian border differently. There are generational differences: for young people who did not remember earlier close ties between Lithuania and Belorussia, the border is relatively irrelevant and is not perceived as a wall at all.

2. A view of the Belarusian-EU border from the Belarusian side is that border is no longer a source of fear, but rather a place of hope. Dividing Belarus and the neighbouring states, that border divides different and distant worlds, connecting at

the same time the periphery areas of those worlds, which turn out to be mutually close. In the attitude towards that border the pragmatic adjustment dominates. Generally, the border people of Grodno Region are eager to accept the status quo because of the pessimistic vision of any change of border regime and optimistic vision of their opportunities to overcome the existing barriers.

3. All bordering procedures develop intensification of national identity and show what state you belong to and what state you do not belong to. In our case, Lithuanian and Polish citizens during the bordering procedures feel their belonging to European Union and to its citizenship; European identity and national identity grow in parallel. Belarusian citizens feel isolated from European integration process. The Lithuanian-Belarusian border perception makes their own national identity self-defining through negative attributes.

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