

Faina Nakanekhnaya

fainanakonechnaya@gmail.com

Akademia Humanistyczno-Ekonomiczna w Łodzi

The meaning of borders in post-Soviet countries (Belarus and neighbouring countries)¹

Introduction

The problem of identity, including the cross-border identity of people, has become one of the central concerns of social scientists due to the collapse of the bipolar world and the emergence of organisations of regional governance. Border and regions that have borders with national states belonging to different cultures and civilisations feel the most powerful influence of the border in all respects. Cross-border cooperation, which builds its own sociocultural connections “on top of” formalised borders, exists in various forms, ranging from the simplest local border contacts to cross-border and cross-cultural interaction. Very often, cross-border cooperation occurs across international borders. Accordingly, international borders and cross-border regions are designated. The geographical position and the special status of the territory create a specific socio-economic, political and socio-cultural community. The study of cross-border regions is conducted in various aspects – in geopolitical, sociological, historical, demographic, and ecological meanings. Recently, other important components have emerged – sociocultural and historical, fixing the preservation of a cross-border region as an independent, self-sufficient phenomenon at the “junction” of interacting national cultures.

Belarus presents a concentration of various people. The Grodno region is an example of the socio-cultural transboundary nature of the Belarusian and Polish adjacent territories. The interaction of the Belarusian and Russian identity of people occurs in the Vitebsk

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region. In the Gomel region, Ukrainian and Belarusian identities predominate now. The cross-border interaction of Belarus with the neighbouring countries covers all the main spheres of the country's life. At the same time, trade and economic ties play a key role in cross-cultural cooperation, for they are most easily established between adjacent internal parts of different countries.

The foundation of transboundary interaction comprises historical traditions and experiences of interaction in the past. The current cross-border state of Belarus is, above all, an effective way to overcome many political, economic and sociocultural deadlocks left over from the Iron Curtain, distrust of the European Union by the central authorities and underestimation of the EU's role in the post-Soviet space. The cross-border region is the basis for a variety of development scenarios, due, on the one hand, to a tendency towards homogenisation and unification, on the other hand, to its heterogeneity, to the intensification of processes leading to diversity and versatility.

The existing controversy of the regional identification of Belarus, together with the state's establishment of a priority relationship with the history of the Soviet Union, makes it difficult for residents to identify themselves. Social and cultural development continues to take place in such forms that it actually divides the region into several territorial fragments, which form the cross-border "transition zones". At the same time, in Belarus there are good examples of the development of cross-border relations between neighbouring countries – these are Euroregions. However, the financial support of Belarusian projects by Russia or the European Union is of increasing importance in these regions. This affects the quality of the goals to be fulfilled and the possibilities for the development of further political and economic relations.

Transboundary issues are a condition for the formation of tolerant coexistence at the border of the national cultures of Belarus and neighbouring countries. The cross-border region is a "laboratory" of cross-cultural interaction. The problem of self-identification of people in the border areas near Belarus has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention.

The cultural identity of a person in the context of transboundary region culture

A transboundary region is defined as a potential region divided by the sovereignty of neighbouring states, possessing a complex of national, regional and zonal elements with their own characteristics, reflecting their historical and cultural identity, interacting with adjacent border regions for the preservation, management and development of their living space. Within the framework of a cross-border area, each person solves two major problems – he/she strives to preserve his/her cultural identity and at the same time joins the other. The manifestation of hybridity within a given region inevitably raises the question of where the boundary lies between the cultures that a person considers his/her own and other cultures. The answer is not as easy as it may seem at first glance. After all, the connection with our own culture is not guaranteed to anyone automatically only by virtue of blood or genes. This relationship is not established biologically and, therefore, has

a supra-biological origin. You can be Belarusian by blood and not be culturally Belarusian, and vice versa. At the same time, the knowledge of a person in one of the cultures does not coincide with the knowledge of a person in another culture.

Since each individual can be at the same time a member of several social and cultural communities, depending on the type of group affiliation, it is customary to distinguish different types of identity: professional, civil, ethnic, political, religious, and cultural.

Of all types of identity, we are primarily interested in the cultural, which can be defined as “an individual’s belonging to a culture or cultural group that forms a person’s value attitude to himself/herself, other people, society and the world as a whole²”. Thus, the essence of cultural identity lies in the conscious acceptance by the individual of relevant cultural norms and patterns of behaviour, value orientations and language, that is, in understanding one’s self from the standpoint of the characteristics adopted in a given society, in self-identification with its cultural patterns.

Cultural identities connect people, but at the same time, the consciousness and individual life experience of each person isolate and separate people from each other. At the same time, a person himself/herself can change his/her identity, identifying himself/herself with one or another group, which forms the openness of social life. The openness of social life involves the choice of life „style”, which is now becoming fundamental in the definition of cultural identity. Vadim Mezhuyev, a Russian scholar, notes that in its cultural being, a person is determined not only by external necessity, prescribing a certain cultural niche with the immutability of natural law (‘just as animal and vegetable organisms are distributed by nature according to classes and types’³), but also by his/her freedom. The border between “our own” and other cultures is established not only by circumstances beyond our control but also by our free choice.

British scholar Stuart Hall believes that we are faced with a set of different identities. Each one appeals to us or, to a greater degree, to various parts of our Self. “The personality, like a nation-state, is experiencing the breakdown of its borders⁴”. In this situation, the existence of the phenomenon of national identity becomes problematic, since the conventionally called state identity changes under the influence of globalisation. This process can lead to a power confrontation between ethnic groups, as well as to the strengthening of local identifications. Cultural “hybrids” of the trans-border area are more capable of assimilating various identities without asserting the primacy of any of them. Double standards of identification of a “hybrid” person are described by many scholars – Stonkvis, Park, Rushdie, Ganners. They all agree that hybridity is based on marginality and, therefore, at the same time is accountable to the values of different cultures. For example, in the periodic report, which was presented in Geneva

² J. Kuryshva, *The Boundaries of the Concepts of International Journalism*, “Vek informatsii” (online edition) 2, no. 4(5) (2018): 57, doi:10.33941/age-info.com24 (5)2018005, 23–24.

³ V.M. Mezhuyev, *The Idea of Culture. Essays on the Philosophy of Culture*, “ProgressTradition”, 2006, 351, 13.

⁴ E. Scheurle, *Stuart Hall (Hg.): Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi 2012, 400 pp., “Klassiker Der Sozialwissenschaften”, 2016, 37, DOI:10.1007/978-3-658-13213-2_94, 23.

on 1 December 2017 during the 94th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 112 organisations of citizens belonging to national minorities were registered in Belarus. About 140 nationalities live in Belarus. According to the 2009 census, 83.7 percent of the country's population are Belarusians, 13.9% are other nationalities, including Russians – 8.3%, Poles – 3.1%, Ukrainians – 1.7%, Jews – 0.1%. The number of representatives of other nationalities is about 70 thousand people, including 7079 people belonging to the Roma nationality⁵.

A cultural hybrid is not only a person with a wider horizon, more independent and rational views; or for example, a bicultural student, who always has a choice, achieved as a result of permanent acculturation. It is acculturation that presupposes biculturalism or multiculturalism, which is carried out as a result of the assimilation of a new culture in addition to the original one and is defined as the process of mutual influence of cultures, perception by one people, ethnic group (in whole or in part) of the culture of another. In this way, acculturation differs from assimilation, which allows for the loss of the cultural specificity of a nation or of an ethnic, religious or any other group. Acculturates are included in the bosom of another culture, complementing their primary cultural potential with new ones.

The reasons of migration of people from the Belarusian territories near the border

The 19th century was notable for the exceptional polysemy of the sociocultural process. Wars, revolutions, social upheavals forced many to doubt the universality of reason.

Industrialisation turned the mass into “many individual creatures with the capacity to develop, but from the very beginning subordinated to another structure – the law, for which the functioning of the machine serves as a model of behaviour⁶”. The contradiction between the personality and the man of the masses intensified. Increasingly, people had to change their location to find a new job. That's how the process of migration began in European territory. According to the definition of the International Organization for Migration, migration is “The movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State.”

During the revolutions, there were several reasons for the migration of Belarusians: 1. Labour migration, 2. Migration along ethnic lines (Jewish migration), 3. Forced migration (hunger, revolutions, wars, and the search for a new place of refuge), and 4. Mixed migration. For Belarusians who live in the border areas, from the very beginning of industrialisation and revolutions, labour migration has been the main reason for changing location. Since the mid-1990s, Belarus has had moderate external migration flows.

⁵ “В Беларуси живут представители 140 национальностей” (Representatives of 140 nationalities live in Belarus), Новости Беларуси | Euroradio.fm, December 03, 2017, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/v-belarusi-zhivut-predstaviteli-140-nacionalnostey>.

⁶ E. Deutsch, *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1991, p. 15.

However, despite the rather low level of emigration of Belarusians, even a relatively small negative migration balance (several thousand people per year), together with the natural population decline (decreased from 10.2 million people in 1993 to 9.5 million in 2013) and the constant growth of the demographic burden since 2008, pose a serious challenge to the country.

Migration contributes to an unfavourable change in the age structure of the population, and leads to a loss of human capital. Because of the increased temporary labour migration due to the macroeconomic crisis of 2011, a shortage of specialists arose in a number of sectors of the economy. However, temporary labour migration reduces unemployment and is a source of remittances. Since the Independence of Belarus, some states like: Russia, Poland, and Lithuania, have become increasingly attractive for Belarusians. Moreover, both Poland and Russia have recently simplified the procedures for obtaining their citizenship for certain categories of Belarusians. Poland, in particular, adopted legislation that allows holders of a “Polish card” (“Karta Polaka”) to receive a permanent residence permit, and in subsequent years – Polish citizenship. According to the amendments to the Russian Law “On Citizenship”, if “Belarusians or their ancestors lived in the territory of modern Russia, the territory of the RSFSR within the USSR or in the territory belonging to the Russian empire, they can apply for Russian citizenship and receive it within a few months⁷.” Since part of the Belarusian population living in the border areas has a weak national Belarusian identity, and the Belarusian economy is no longer able to achieve high GDP growth, Belarus is threatened with an outflow of valuable human capital to neighbouring states.

The National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus⁸ argues that, since independence, Belarus has had a positive migration balance: allegedly, more people arrived in the country for permanent residence than left. This claim is refuted by various academic studies that take into account population census data, migration, and the natural movement of the population. The data of countries that maintain clearer and more robust records indicate that the Belarusian data is inaccurate and that there has been a chronic undercount of people leaving for permanent residence, especially in Western countries.

Belarus is not a country with a positive migration balance. It is negative by more than 200 thousand people. In the last 2–3 years, Belarusian labour migrants have been reorienting from East to West. First of all – from Russia to Poland. It can be seen in the number of registered declarations of invitations for Belarusians to work – documents that employers submit to the Polish authorities. In 2014 there were only 4,000 of them, in 2016 – 23,000, and for the first half of 2017 – about 25,000. Over the past three years, there has been a rise of between eight and ten times.

⁷ *Изменения в ФЗ о гражданстве РФ и отдельные законодательные акты* (Federal Law of April 20, 2014 N 71-FZ “On Amendments to the Federal Law” On Citizenship of the Russian Federation “and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation”), “Российская газета,” April 23, 2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/04/23/grazhdanstvo-dok.html>.

⁸ *Миграция населения (Migration)*, Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь (National Statistics Committee of Belarus), 2005, <http://www.belstat.gov.by/informatsiya-dlya-respondenta/perepis-naseleniya/perepis-naseleniya-2009-goda/vyhodnye-reglamentnye-tablitsy/migratsiya-naseleniya/>.

The situation of the Russian labour market is an important factor that determines the desire of Belarusians to work in other countries. In 2018, Belarus will remain in the political and economic orbit of Russia, although the behaviour of Minsk irritates Moscow. Russia and Belarus are formally considered the closest allies (the leaders of the two countries do not get tired of talking about it). Nevertheless, there are problems in relations between Moscow and Minsk. Some Belarusian experts predict that 2018 will be conflict-free in Belarusian–Russian relations. Now Belarus buys gas at \$127 per thousand cubic meters, and in 2018 will pay \$129⁹. This causes some dissatisfaction with officials in Minsk, who wants to receive gas at Russian domestic prices, (now the coefficient is 2.08, that is, twice as much).

Another important mobility tool is ‘small border traffic’¹⁰. This is a type of agreement that allows residents of the border area to visit another border area of a neighbouring country without a visa. It was signed between Belarus and Latvia in 2012. Now it includes Belarus – Lithuania, and Belarus – Poland. Instead of using the tools that the European Union offers to Belarusians, the Belarusian authorities unilaterally imposed a visa-free regime for citizens of European countries in Belovezhskaya Pushcha, Grodno, and for five days for those Europeans who enter the country through the airport.

At the same time, for example, “the Belarusians abroad law”¹¹, only adopted in 2014, does not give Belarusian emigrants the possibility of obtaining free visas to enter the country. In the meantime, most citizens of Belarusian border cities choose Russia and Poland as markets where they can earn extra money. The typical guest worker from Belarus for many years looks similar: male, aged 26–40, who works in the transport or construction sectors. More than 80% of temporary labour migrants are men. Over the past six months, as many Belarusians have gone to work abroad as for the whole of 2014. According to statistics from the Department of Citizenship and Migration, since 2010 the number of such migrants has doubled. In 2017, over 80,000 Belarusians temporarily worked abroad. A year earlier – about 60,000, and in 2015 – almost 40,000. In addition, every year hundreds of thousands of people, who are not taken into account by official statistics, leave Belarus for work. A study by the Warsaw think tank EAST¹² shows that even though the Russian labour market is still in the lead, Poland is increasingly attractive to Belarusian migrant workers.

Recently, more and more Belarusian workers are looking to the EU labour market. The social networks (already working friends, relatives) are not as developed as they are in Russia. Moreover, searching the Internet is more difficult for language reasons. Because of

⁹ “Information Based on the Interactive Information Analytical System for Distribution of Official Statistical Data”, Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь (National Statistics Committee of Belarus), April/May 2019, <http://dataportal.belstat.gov.by/AggregatedDb>.

¹⁰ “Small Border Traffic (Малое приграничное движение)”, Малое приграничное движение – Migrant RU, http://www.migrant.info.pl/Малое_приграничное_движение.html.

¹¹ “Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus for Belarusians Abroad, Law of the Republic of Belarus of June 16, 2014 No. 162-Z “On Belarusians Abroad”,” Белорусы зарубежья – Министерство иностранных дел Республики Беларусь, September 2014, <http://mfa.gov.by/multilateral/diaspora/>.

¹² A. Yeliseyev, *Migration between Belarus and Poland: Current Trends and Prospects*, Eurasian States in Transition, March 2018, 1–15.

that more Belarusians began to apply for work in Poland and other EU countries through employment companies. The interest in Poland was also influenced by the simplified procedure of employment when a work permit is not required for workers up to 6 months. It is enough to have an invitation and a working visa or the ‘Polish card’.

According to the forecasts of an international research project implemented in 2013–2014: “By 2050, from 380 to 600 thousand Belarusians will live in the European Union¹³.” That is the number of residence permits in the EU, excluding temporary labour migrants who can work not on the basis of a residence permit, but on the basis of a seasonal work visa. Consequently, with a high degree of probability, this is the number of Belarusians who will irrevocably leave the country and move to the EU. An interesting situation is emerging in the countries of Central Europe. Natives from Poland, Slovakia and other countries return from Western Europe to their homeland after 10–15 years of emigration. They bring the skills they have gained in the West. This can happen with Belarusian migrants if Belarus becomes more promising and attractive for them in the future. In the meantime, there are good opportunities in comparison with abroad, except in the IT sphere and related industries. It is less likely that Belarusians, who want to be involved in that industry, will return to their homeland. Firstly, the industry itself is going through difficult times, and secondly, it is difficult to achieve success where you have to compete with state-owned enterprises in Belarus. The situation in science and medicine is almost as difficult for good specialists. Representatives of these industries are faced with a choice to work at home for a small salary and modest prospects or to leave to earn money in developed countries. For example, in 1996–2010, “scientists and university professors left Belarus on a mass scale. They moved mainly to Germany, Russia, the United States and Israel¹⁴.” From 2001 to 2013, the organisations of the Academy of Sciences lost 109 researchers who are now working in the USA, Canada, and the EU countries. Half of them had a degree. It is possible to keep Belarusians in their native country by carrying out reforms in the social sphere, education and the labour market, which will lead to an increase in the quality of life of the population.

Decent job opportunities will be an incentive to return for those who have moved abroad for the sake of career growth, good earnings, and opportunities to realise their potential.

Conclusions

The border, being a sociocultural project of state building, in modern conditions stimulates the creation of new cross-border structures and a new identity in the border areas. The paradox of the border of a cross-border region is manifested in the “duality” of this

¹³ *Migration Forecast Between the EU, the Visegrad Four Countries and Eastern Europe: Implications for the Abolition of Visa Requirements* (Прогноз міграції між ЄС, країнами Вишеградської четвірки та Східною Європою: наслідки скасування візового режиму), June 2014, 1–21.

¹⁴ M. Artyukhin, *Белорусская наука в условиях модернизации: социологический анализ* (Belarusian Science in Terms of Modernization: A Sociological Analysis, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus), National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, Minsk 2015, 1–15.

construct: on the one hand, the cross-border region is a mental construction with difficult-to-define dynamic borders destroying the usual concept of “state-nation-territory”. On the other hand, a cross-border region is a historical-geographical or political-administrative reality, marked by a state border. The border identity nature of the geographic location of the cross-border region in cultural development acquires the semantics of life “at the border”. The localisation of globalisation processes within the sociocultural space of Belarus in modern times has led to an increase in the role of state borders between Belarus and neighbouring states (Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania), resulting in the strengthening of sociocultural ties „across” national borders, leading to the formation of cross-border regional structures, integration of interacting cultures in the local space. Representing the sociocultural unity of regional border cultures, a cross-border region, as an open type system, has a complex structure and a multiplicity of connections between its parts, which determines its originality and uniqueness, and which is explained in terms of homeostasis and self-reference.

Cross-border identity marks the territorial „otherness” of the border area itself and is understood as the „identity” of a part of the border area. Those at the crossroads of two or more worlds at the same time have the following characteristics: emergence, polymorphism, tolerance, lability, “cultural hybridity”, biculturalism, self-awareness and self-identification, transit, that is, the ability to transfer experience between cultures, thereby sifting information through coarse or subtle “sieves” of acceptance and opposition from recipient cultures. The essence of a cross-border region lies in the disappearance of the rigid structuring of a regional “society” into “groups” with single and defined “life worlds” and in the formation of a multidimensional differentiated social reality with conditional and blurred intergroup boundaries.

Cross-border identity does not contradict the Belarusian national and regional identity. On the contrary, it plays the role of a double counterbalance: on the one hand, it coexists with a stable national identity, on the other – it creates „border” on the local territory, expanding regional identity. Cross-border identity marks the connection that a resident of a particular region feels to his place of life, and forms a “border person” determined by the features of a natural landscape, historical, social, industrial, economic, and socio-cultural development of a specific territory.

What options for a new social contract in Belarus are the most realistic?

Option one – slow reforms to improve the quality of social services and increase the satisfaction and loyalty of the population. This option implies a very slow and cautious transformation of public life at the local level, without any changes at the central political level, as well as the abolition of the „vertical of power”. The core of the reforms could be the creation of mechanisms for civic participation and feedback from the population, which would provide the central and local levels of government with relevant information on the needs of citizens and the quality of state social services on the ground. Such tools could be: civic participation budgets and grants from local authorities, social ser-

vices outsourcing; local referendums, public debates, electronic petitions with special status – in general, everything that allows people to let off steam and participate in local decision-making, and the authorities quickly responding to rising social tensions without clubs and tanks.

Option two – inertial. This option implies the absence of real improvement in the quality of state social services, with the continuation of the propaganda campaign “State for the People” and broadcasts of the show “public separation of officials by the President” through state media. This option is dangerous for the current president’s state by critically reducing the support and trust of the people. State dissatisfaction will increasingly have to be suppressed by force and targeted concessions. Citizens, in turn, will respond with an increase in labour migration. There will be an increase of the role of family, friends and the community. Civil society organisations and activists will become alternative sources of social support in a difficult life situation. The second scenario is most likely – the current president has repeatedly expressed a negative opinion about reforms. This means that the current government in Belarus will slowly die and give way to civil society.

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