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Transmission of cultural heritage on the Polish and Belorussian borderland¹

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Two now independent countries – Poland and Belarus – have been part of one state organism for several centuries. The consequence of that single state has been the creation of space characterised by permanent diffusion of cultures. This is the place where eastern and western versions of Christianity meet, and where romantic archetypes of Polish and Belorussian national cultures have been established. Modern forms of Belorussian and Polish identity, conditioned by the strong pressure of Russian culture have been evolving for the last two centuries.

At the present time, with intensive transformations in politics and awareness taking place in Europe, the identity processes occurring in this part of the continent have become an important area of interest to social scientists. Systematic research on the educational conditions of identity formation has been carried out in Białystok for ten years now. A recently implemented project concerns national minorities' cultural heritage registration on both sides of the Polish-Belorussian border. Students and graduates of the University of Białystok living in Podlaskie Voivodeship (Poland) and Grodno Voivodeship (Belarus) are covered by the research.

The first task we set for ourselves was to establish the place which collectively analysed identifications in the regional/local, religious, national and European spheres hold in the respondents' social identities. This is a construct called an identifying profile. On both sides of the border the most common profile that appeared was the one that lacks any kind of dominance: all relevant spheres are equally valorised. Such profile has been called a balanced profile. It characterises 15.3% of the Poles we surveyed in Belarus. It appears over twice as often among the Belorussians living in the eastern part of Poland, covering almost one third of the examined group (32.1%). As regards frequency of appearance, in both groups the second profile was the one where only the identification with Europe was less valorised. The profile with the withdrawn European identification was recognised in a quarter of the Belorussians living in Poland (24.4%) but the same hardly referred to the Poles living in Belarus, where only one seventh are characterised by the profile of apparently lower than other spheres' evaluation of the identification with Europe (14.3%). The difference amounts to as much as 10 percent.

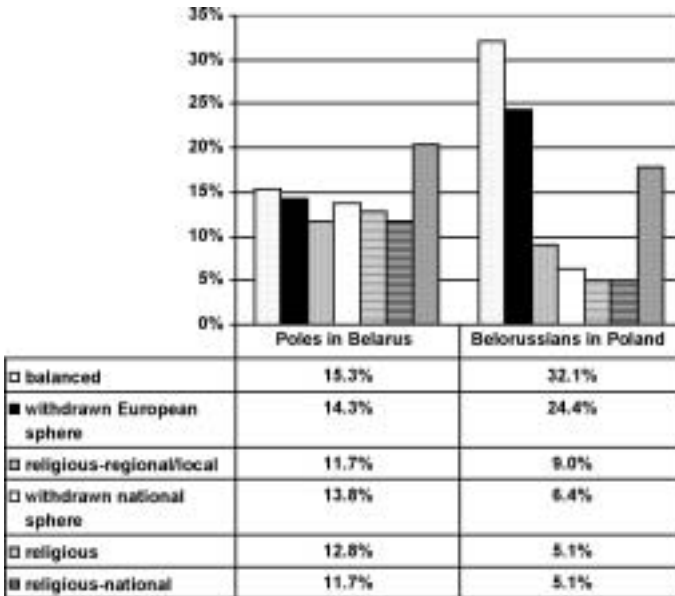
It should be emphasised that on the Polish side the two first profiles (the balanced and that of the withdrawn European sphere) group over half of the respondents (56.5%), whereas on the Belorussian side, despite the same hierarchy, it is difficult to talk about domination as the same profiles cover as little as one third of the respondents.

We assume that the reasons for this are mainly political. In Belarus – as opposed to Poland – an intensive campaign for more profound integration with Russia as well as the

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denigration of the European Union has been conducted in recent years. Propaganda influences and impact have been exercised mainly through the media, but also in schools, and are reflected in people's awareness. It should be noted that in the second half of the 1990s the subject called 'National Ideology' was introduced in Belorussian schools, which emphasised the importance of integration with Russia and removed the process of European integration, and this is key to the background of the study.

Diagram 1. The comparison of identifying profiles appearance frequency in two minority groups – Polish minority in Belarus and Belorussian minority in Poland



Other profiles analysed (apart from the first two in the hierarchy) appear more frequently among the Poles in Belarus than among the Belorussians in Poland. The diagram shows profiles with the withdrawn national sphere, religious and religious-national are more than twice as frequent. This suggests there is a much greater shared value of religion in the formation of identities among the Poles living in Belarus than among the representatives of the Belorussian minority in Poland. Among the Polish minority in Belarus the identity stereotype of a Pole-Catholic is still very significant, where national identification derives from faith/denomination. In the awareness of western Belarus inhabitants, belonging to a religious community, ie Catholic, is almost equivalent to being a member of the Polish ethnic group.

We now examine how identifying profiles differentiate the recognition of the issues chosen as important in the community life of minorities. We see here significant differences in the distribution of results. In the case of the Belorussian minority the picture seems more contrasted. People within the withdrawn European sphere find the preservation of the holiday and celebration traditions and speaking Belorussian (average

4.79) to be of the utmost importance in their identification, and equally clearly see knowledge of this part of Europe’s history (3.63) and belonging to ethnic organisations (3.74) to be of little importance. In the national-religious profile (Belorussian-Orthodox), language issues are the most crucial, both teaching children the minority language (5.00) and speaking it (5.00), while the low importance attributed to knowledge of the family past (3.50) is surprising. Perhaps people from rural backgrounds are not greatly interested in genealogical issues.

We notice an interesting picture among the ‘balanced’ profile. They find the preservation of holiday/celebration traditions (4.84) and knowledge of family background (4.60) to be most important. The Belorussians living in Poland representing the balanced profile find the issue of teaching children an ethnic language almost as important (4.48). This contrasts with the recognition of speaking Belorussian as important (3.96). It may be that we can perceive here an attitude that transfers hope connected with the greater activity of an ethnic environment into children. The parents’ generation believes in the possibility of improving the social status of an ethnic language in the future, thus they find teaching children Belorussian more important.

The results for the Polish minority show a less contrasting distribution, which indicates numerous similarities with the group representing the Belorussian minority. The hierarchy of the issues recognised as important in the balanced profile is almost identical. The same is true of opinion about language and communication. Analogies may prompt reflection. A somewhat different disposition is seen in the national–religious profile. The representatives of the Polish minority in Belarus, as opposed to the Belorussians living in Poland, do not find language issues as vital as the preservation of holiday and celebration traditions. This confirms the importance of religion in the formation of this group’s identity. What is interesting is that the group of Poles living in Belarus with the profile of the ‘withdrawn European identification’ finds an interest in this part of Europe and belonging to ethnic organisations to be of little importance as well.

Diagram 2: Issues considered as important for the Belorussians living in Poland depending on the identifying profile (opinions of the respondents belonging to Belorussian minority in Poland)

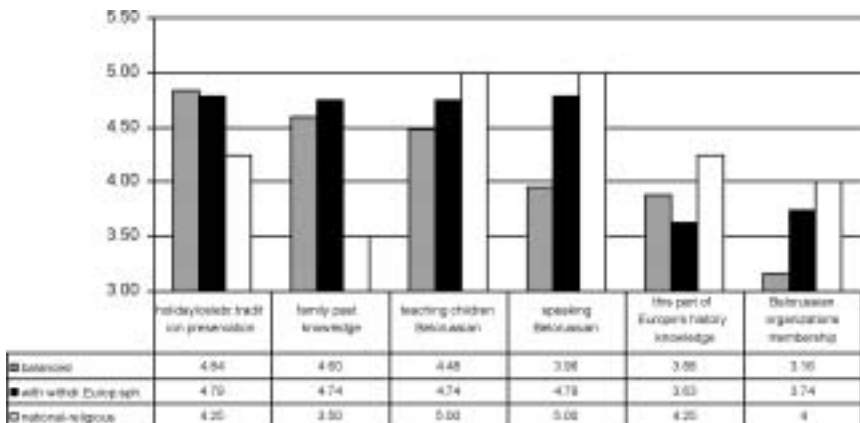
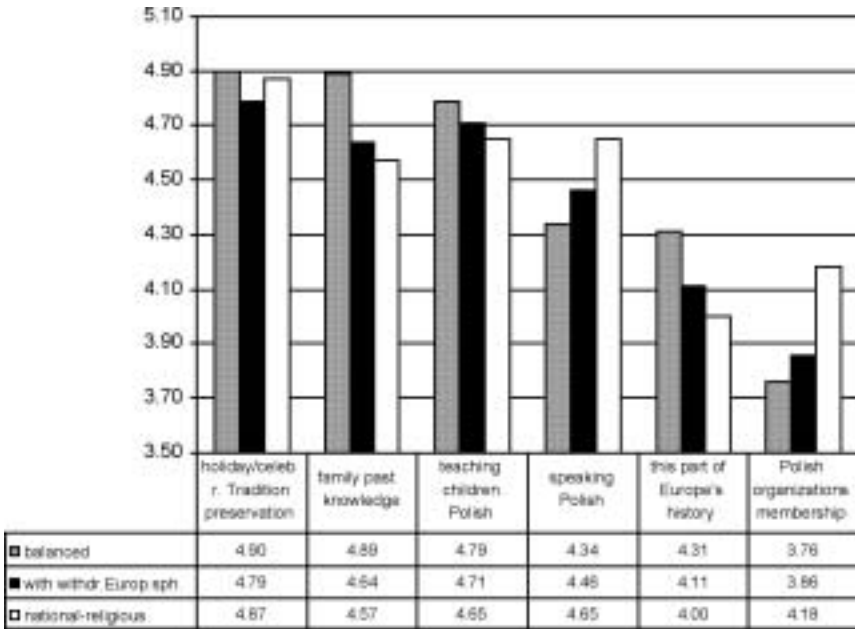


Diagram 3: Issues considered as important for the Poles living in Belarus depending on the identifying profile (opinions of the respondents belonging to Polish minority in Belarus)

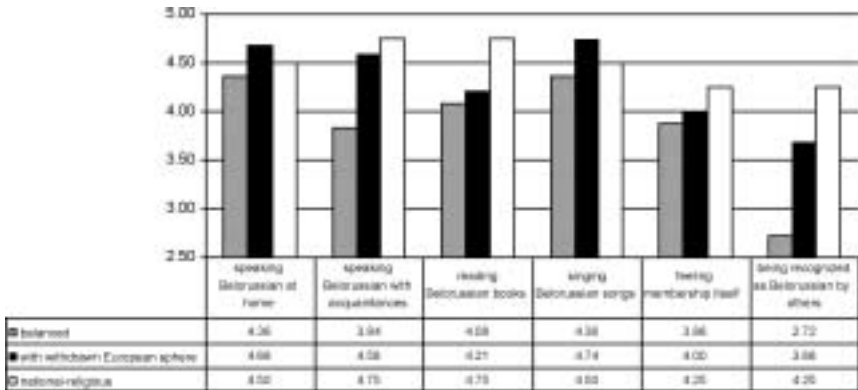


Another significant issue was the conditions of national identity formation. In our analysis of collected opinions we note three types of conditions:

- connected with the language of communication
- connected with the contact with the national group culture
- connected with the identification activated in inter-personal contacts.

The diagrams below illustrate this. In the Belorussian group the greatest importance was attributed to speaking Belorussian at home and singing Belorussian songs. The respondents with the profile of the withdrawn European sphere expressed both criteria strongly, whereas those of the balanced profile showed a much weaker preference.

Diagram 4: Issues considered as important in building national identity of the Belorussians in Poland according to the examined representatives of the Belorussian minority

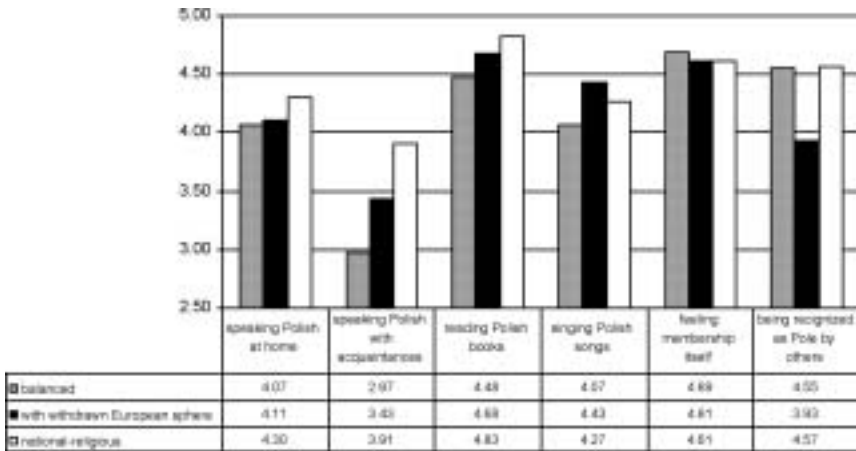


Of the other criteria taken into consideration, respondents attributed the greatest importance to national-religious profile. The biggest differences relate to ‘being recognised as Belorussian by others’. This was given by the majority of respondents of the balanced profile as ‘rather unimportant’, whereas respondents of the national-religious profile mostly declared it as ‘rather important’ or ‘very important’. The difference in the average intensity of attributed importance was high, at 1.53. It seems that ‘feeling membership itself’, i.e. evoking the sense of belonging to a national-ethnic group in the individual’s awareness, least differentiates the respondents. In all three analysed profiles this criterion is most often recognised as ‘rather important’. The discrepancy of group average intensity of attributed importance is the smallest here and amounts to as little as 0.37.

Identical criteria were applied in the case of Poles living in Belarus, and the distribution of results distribution is rather different. Less importance is attributed to language communication. The importance attributed to ‘speaking Polish at home’ in absolute terms gives way to that obtained in the Belorussian group. The respondents of the national-religious profile value this criterion the highest. Speaking Polish with acquaintances, however, is recognised by the representatives of Polish minority living in Belarus as definitely less important than by the Belorussians living in Poland. This criterion is also differentiated the most by the identifying profile. The discrepancy of the group average intensity of the attributed importance amounts to 0.94 here.

It is worth noting that both of the criteria about language communication are less than other criteria for the Poles living in Belarus. This may be connected with the difficult history of a Polish national group living in this part of Europe in the last two centuries. Intensive ‘Russification’ carried out in the second half of the nineteenth and the second half of the twentieth centuries, in addition to population changes after World War II, led to the radical exclusion of the Polish language from social communication space, and even home/domestic communication, to a great extent.

Diagram 5: Issues considered as important in building national identity of the Poles living in Belarus according to the examined representatives of Polish minority



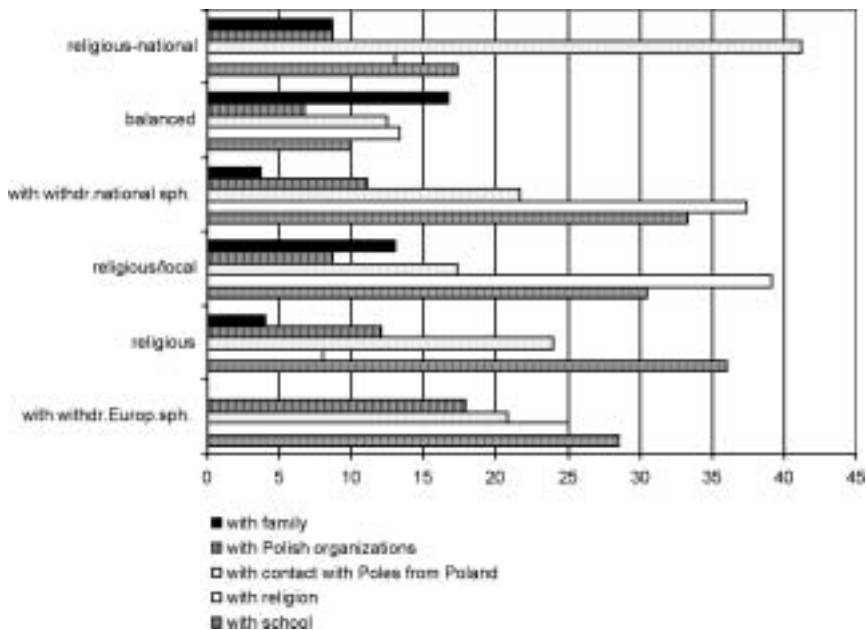
The respondents of national-religious profile attribute the highest importance to almost all of the criteria: 'singing Polish songs' is the only exception. This was mostly expressed by the respondents of the withdrawn European sphere profile. The same group evaluates the importance of 'being recognised as a Pole by others' apparently lower than others.

Cultural heritage transmission and the formation of social-cultural identity takes place in specified situations. The respondents were asked to indicate the situations that had significant influence upon their identity formation. In the case of Poles living in Belarus we notice clear dominants. In the profile of withdrawn European sphere and the one with religious dominant in the identification, the respondents attribute the highest importance in creating identity to school.

Although it is hard to see these results obtained as surprising in the case of the profile with the withdrawn European sphere, we were surprised in the case of the religious profile, particularly when compared to the low percentage of people declaring the influence of situations connected with religious life upon their identity formation. On the other hand, situations marked with religious features are most often brought to mind by the people who, apart from religion, identify strongly with 'Little Homeland' as well as by the people whose identification with the national aspect is by far the weakest. Possibly these people have disordered identity in the national sphere, which often characterises those born in mixed relationships. The very obvious domination of only one type of a situation in the religious-national profile, which is connected with the still-vivid stereotype of a 'Pole-Catholic' in Belarus, deserves attention. Those people regarding themselves as Poles and Catholics by far the most frequently claim that their national identity is influenced by contacts with Poles from their Motherland.

In the case of the Belorussian minority only three – the most numerous profiles – were taken into consideration. The declared situations are rather different here. Such

Diagram 6: The situations that are of highest importance in forming identity of the representatives of Polish minority in Belarus divided into identifying profiles (data in %)



significant situational categories as those connected with symbolic culture, and meeting a prominent personality, appear here.

The infrequent mention of school in building identity seems surprising. School in this role appears quite frequently in the balanced profile. However, absolutely the highest rate regards the profile with the identification of the region as dominant. What is interesting is that people representing the regional/local profile most frequently list situations connected with religious life as those that influenced their identity.

A surprising result was obtained from the group of people whose European sphere was much more poorly/weakly represented than the other in the identification. Here, the situation of contact with products classified as symbolic culture sphere was listed most often, but also situations connected directly with tradition.

Summing up, despite political and social differences which characterised the social functioning of national minorities on both sides of Polish-Belorussian border in the last decades, we can notice many analogies in the respondents' identifications. The most frequent identifying profiles are the same and mostly regard the profile of a balanced identification. On both sides the presence of the profile with the withdrawn European sphere was very apparent. It is much easier to explain the frequency of its occurrence/appearance on the Belorussian side than on the Polish one. Perhaps on the Polish side it refers to mostly Euro-sceptic inhabitants of one of the poorest economic region in Poland. The issue should be further researched and analysed in detail on the basis of the profound interviews being collected.

Diagram 7: The situations that are of highest importance in forming identity of the representatives of Belorussian minority in Poland divided into identifying profiles (data in %)

