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"...So I decided to Be a Pole"¹

Minority, majority, identity

Conclusions like the one in the headline were given by several of my interviewees² when being asked about their own ethnic identity. But the respondents were not inhabitants of Poland, they live in the Western parts of Belarus or Eastern Lithuania, in the areas that belonged to Poland between the world wars. Both states contain their own titular nations, Lithuanians or Belarusians. Poles are officially recognized as ethnic minorities³ in these states. Their rights are protected by (international) law⁴, their well-being is often a topic of discussions between representatives of the involved countries and in the media.

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² All interviews I conducted for my PhD thesis (Working title: "Borders of Language. The Self-Attribution of the Polish Communities in Belarus and Lithuania") in 2011/12 in Belarus and Lithuania. The used corpus contains at the moment ca. 70 hours of recorded material (ca. 50 interviewees).

³ The terms *ethnic* and *national minority* (as the terms *ethnicity* and *nationality* themselves) are used differently depending on the language. In English I use the term *ethnic minority*, in Polish, Poles living outside of the country would be *mniejszość narodowa*, see the site of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Poland: http://www.msw.gov.pl/portal/pl/238/3482/Ustawa_o_mniejszosciach_narodowych_i_eticznych_oraz_o_jezyku_regionalnym.html (access 14.02.2013). In official Belarusian documents besides the term *minority* often *ethnicity* is used. Cf. http://www.belarus21.by/en/main_menu/ethn/nat_cult_ob/ethn (access 14.02.2013).

⁴ The sites of the "Office of the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs" of Belarus refer to the "Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities" and to the "European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages", cf. http://www.belarus21.by/en/legislation/international_documents. The Lithuanian Law on National Minorities is not valid any more since 2010, minorities are protected by other national and international law. Cf. http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/library/publications_en.asp (access 14.02.2013).

What interests me here though, is not the minorities' official status and rights, but the question of how their members come to be a part of them. Is "the Polish minority" a clearly defined group of people in these states, with, for example, a common culture or language? Or is it rather every single person's decision to be a Pole (whatever that means), as in the quote in the title?

At first glance, speaking about any **minority** presupposes that there is a (small) group of people with some kind of **collective identity**, sharing values, customs, beliefs, traditions or language which mark the group's coherence in contrast or opposition to another group of people, seen as a majority⁵. Different elements can dominate how we define a minority: its rights, development, psychological structure or the region settled by its members (cf. Kreisel & Reeh 2008: 225). But, in every case, someone is responsible for detaching a group of people from a community and for defining them as a minority. It can be, for example, the decision of a group, whose members notice a difference between themselves and the majority ("we do not belong to you", but also "you do not belong to us, the minority"). Or it might be constituted by the majority ("you do not belong to us, the majority"). Also, third-side definitions are possible ("you belong to us, not to them"). In case of **ethnic minorities**, which are the main focus of this paper, the definition from outside can be made by a country, which claims that the minority in another state is a part of its own titular nation. The members of this minority might then perceive themselves as a part of the other (majority) community, and not that much as a minority in the state they live in. Also my interviewees, when describing themselves, rarely use the term *minority* (in Polish *mniejszość*). They rather call themselves *Poles* or *local Poles*, as will be shown below.

The status *minority* depends on the point of view: What area is the reference-point of the definition and what kind of borders were set up to build it? Geographical ones, or cultural/ thematic borders⁶? What is the main focus of the distinction? Language? Religion? Parentage? Passport? Or the sum of all? There are different **processes** and reasons that make an ethnic minority come into being, with people feeling they belong to it: *Founding*, for example, through socio-political decisions, or the construction of some shared culture (as happened in the 19th century with the rising of

⁵ As just one reference to the discussion about the difficult term *collective identity* see Assmann & Frieze 1998.

⁶ It might happen that in a village most inhabitants are Catholic – so Catholics are the majority there – but still all neighbouring villages are of Orthodox faith, so the majority seems to be Orthodox in the whole area. Depending on the territory you take into account, the Catholics are the minority or the majority.

nations), *moving* of a part of a community to another area (e.g. emigration of nations), or *shifting/ establishing* of *borders*, which define a new state or area and within it new groups of population. With a shift of borders or the creation of a new area, the relation between minorities and majorities can change, even though the population stays the same.

The latter happened to Poland and its Eastern neighbours. But as borders are established mostly by political decisions, it remains also a political question how to deal with those borders and what socio-political consequences come along with them. In Lithuania and Belarus the reactions were different, already when both countries were still part of the Soviet Union. Altogether, changing proportions within the population can be a powerful political instrument as they lead to new democratic majorities in processes of political decisions (e.g. elections).

But besides this official, political layer, the belonging to an ethnic minority has, first of all, individual importance, it is something very personal, and therefore as changeable as identity and nationality. Societies – even minorities – contain not one homogeneous group, but a sum of original identities which might add up to something we could call a minority culture. Quotes from interviews with different people, who consider themselves Poles and live in Lithuania and Belarus, will support this hypothesis. They demonstrate how the interviewees perceive themselves and their situation and how different factors like political, economic or social pressure can influence individual processes of identification and the association of minority groups. Official definitions are of minor importance for this perspective – unless they are crucial for the respondents. This allows to retrace how single persons construct their own identity and what they use to do so. Thereby, we can see the high flexibility of the respondents' identification with different groups, even if they share their identification with the same ethnic minority.

Collective experience – collective identity? Identification with the definition of "Pole"

I would like to refer here to people identifying themselves as Poles and living in the parts of Belarus and Lithuania that belonged to Poland in the inter-war period. Most of my respondents emphasise that they are autochthonous to the area and are not migrants, nor were their ancestors.

The Poles in Lithuania and Belarus, who were the subjects of my research, can be seen as members of a minority from various points of view. Firstly, they are a minority, in the political sense, in the countries they live in, Lithuania and Belarus, in relation to the titular nations. Secondly, also by the country of reference, Poland, they are seen as a minority. For Poles

living in Poland they are a minority living outside the actual borders of the country. As the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs defines on its web-site, Polish ethnic minorities are a group of people of Polish descent (but foreign citizenship), autochthonous inhabitants who have been living for a longer time (e.g. since approx. 100 years or three generations) in the same area, most often in the territory lying earlier within the borders of the Rzeczpospolita⁷. Thirdly, the members of the minority feel a difference between themselves and the majority – most often they belong to the Catholic Church, they (declare) that they speak a language other than the official one of the given state, and they feel differences relating to their traditions and ethnicity.

In these areas, many families look back to a **Polish past**: in their memory their families upheld Polish traditions, were of Catholic faith and spoke Polish at home. The oldest living generation remembers the “Polish times” – they were educated in Polish and grew up in a Polish state. After long struggles over Poland’s Eastern border, following the First World War, in the area I am focussing on, Poles became the official majority, the titular nation. All the others, Jews, Russians, Lithuanians, Karaites, Tatars, and so on, were officially minorities.

With the Western shift of Poland’s borders in 1945, the situation changed radically: Poles now became an ethnic minority in the territory, whereas Lithuanians and Belarusians became the titular nations, the whole area became part of the Soviet Union. This decisive event, brought about by world politics, had an enormous effect on people’s everyday lives in this area, especially on Poles. Their status was changed, they were cut off from Poland by a border, and they started to be repressed. The official languages were changed and, at the same time, the language of instruction at schools, at work and in most places of the public sphere. Many of them left for Poland at that time, others were deported to Siberia. Those who stayed, partly assimilated with the majority, partly kept their Polish identity and found spheres in which they could cultivate Polish culture.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Poles in the area found themselves living in two different countries and, since 2004, they have been separated by the external border of the European Union. Belonging to the Polish minority has different consequences in Belarus and Lithuania today. Due to the different conditions under which Poles in the two countries are living, I use the term *minorities* in plural form, speaking about Poles outside

⁷ See: http://www.msz.gov.pl/pl/p/msz_pl/polityka_zagraniczna/polonizacja/definicje_pojecia (access 13.02.2013). Original: „Polskie mniejszości narodowe – zbiorowości osób polskiego pochodzenia (ale obcego obywatelstwa); ludność rdzenna, mieszkająca od dłuższego czasu (np. od ok. 100 lat lub trzech pokoleń) na tym samym obszarze, najczęściej na terenach dawniej znajdujących się w granicach Rzeczypospolitej.”

Poland. I also want to stress by the plural that even inside the same country minorities can have different faces.

Officially, information about minorities can be expressed in **numbers**: in the year 2011 6.6 per cent of the population of Lithuania were Poles, i.e. 200 300 people in total. In the larger cities, the highest population of Poles is in Vilnius, in 2011 it was 16.5 per cent (Statistikos Departamentas 2012: 69). According to Belarusian data, in 2009 there were 3.5 per cent of Poles in the country, that is 294 500 people in total (Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь 2011: 8–9). These are the results of censuses – we do not know, though, in what circumstances people declared their ethnic affiliation and what elements of their individual identity were crucial for these decisions. There are different reasons why someone would keep secret that he or she considers him- or herself a Pole, but also others, why he or she might invent Polish ancestors. Still, somehow these numbers represent a group of people – a community which is officially defined as the Polish minority in Belarus or Lithuania respectively.

In some areas of Lithuania, the Polish minority actually constitutes the majority – as in Šalčininkai region, where, according to the official homepage, Poles make up 79 per cent of the population and Lithuanians only 9.4 per cent⁸.

Lithuania

In 1989, in Lithuania, a law on national minorities was adopted, according to which the state was to support cultures and the educational system of minorities. Furthermore, it had to guarantee the right of free choice of confession and the right to teach and get information in the mother tongue (cf. The Department of National Minorities and Lithuanians Living Abroad to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2000: 4).

But already in the time when Lithuania was a part of the Soviet Union, there were more institutions supporting people in preserving their Polish identity than in Belarus. Throughout the whole period, schools and classes existed where Polish was the language of instruction. In 1956 there were 263 schools with 18 659 pupils, in 1991 there were still 123 schools with 11 407 pupils (cf. Grek-Pabisowa 1997: 163–164). According to the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science, in 2013 there were 49 kindergartens, 81 schools and 1 university where the language of instruction was Polish (cf. The Republic of Lithuania, Ministry of Education and Science 2013).

Also, regular access to several local newspapers in Polish has allowed

⁸ Cf. Šalčininkai region Municipality: http://www.salcininkai.lt/pol/O_rejonie/431/2/89 (access 13.02.2013).

people to stay in contact with the language (among others, the daily *Kurier Wileński*, which has been coming out since 1990 under this title, had been published as *Czerwony Sztandar* since 1953). Today, the local Polish radio station *Znad Wilii* broadcasts 24 hours a day in Polish. Many of my interviewees, of different ages, told me that they listen to it regularly. The radio station has existed since 1992 and, according to opinion polls, around 19 per cent of Lithuania's inhabitants can receive it (cf. Namavičius 1996: 92). Unfortunately, it is not available in regions distant from the capital. Even though there are television programs in Polish, especially younger respondents prefer to watch television in Russian⁹.

Most Lithuanians are Catholics, just as Poles. So a distinction according to faith is less obvious in Lithuania than in Belarus, where an important attribute testifying that someone is Polish is the Catholic faith, as most Belarusians are Orthodox. Still, in almost every church in the Vilnius region there are services in Polish (cf. Maciejkianiec 2010), which provides people with another possibility to listen to Polish.

In some areas of the Vilnius region, the percentage of people considering themselves Poles was very high during Soviet times, as one of my interviewees, a woman born in 1935 close to Nemenčinė (north of Vilnius), confirms. In her eyes, the situation has not changed today:

Everybody was Polish. There were only those Old Believers. They were here, those Russian Old Believers. There were no Orthodox people here close to us. [...] But it was like this since ever and ever. **There were Poles here, and Poles will stay here.** And those who came here from Lithuania, bought somewhere some buildings, when people left for Poland. But anyway, they speak, well, Polish¹⁰.

Belarus

The situation in Belarus was different for Poles. When the country was part of the Soviet Union, there were neither schools teaching in Polish, nor Polish press or books. That led to a drastic decrease of people speaking Polish. It was only in the 1990s that schools and other forms of teaching Polish were organized (cf. Grek-Pabisowa 2005: 82). Today, there are possibilities to study Polish in Grodno, e.g. at school no. 36, which has been teaching in Polish since 1996, or at classes given by *Polska Macierz Szkolna*. Outside Grodno region it is much more difficult to study and use the language.

The Union of Poles in Belarus, which had existed since 1990, in 2005 split up into two organisations, one supported by Poland and the other

⁹ The researches of Masojć and Naruniec confirm this observation, in their opinion both radio and TV are dominated by Russian and Lithuanian language (cf. Masojć & Naruniec 2005: 332).

¹⁰ All translations from Polish and bold emphasis in the quotations by me (IA).

supported by the Belarusian state¹¹. The disputes between representatives of both organisations led to much confusion and had a slowdown effect on the activity of local Poles. As, for example, one woman in Vitebsk oblast told me, she had to show loyalty with the pro-Belarusian organisation or to stop teaching Polish. She decided to do the latter. Since the 1990s, the Union had been publishing the magazine *Głos znad Niemna* – since 2005 there are also two magazines¹². Besides this, there are various smaller local publications available in Polish, in a few bigger cities there are libraries with books from Poland, but no actual press from Poland. Probably the most popular source of information in Polish today is the internet. Close to the Polish border people can also listen to radio stations from Poland, almost all my respondents do so. Older interviewees told me that they listen to the Polish religious radio *Radio Maryja* that can be received in many parts of Belarus.

In the public sphere, the Catholic Church is the place where Polish is still used the most today, but also here this language is gradually being displaced by Belarusian (cf. Konczewska 2011: 127–129). A student from Grodno (born in 1986) stresses the importance of Polish in the Catholic Church:

Well, here is church, language, Polishness. That holds it together. Only like this. Because if there were no Catholic Church... [...] For example, my old grandmother. She has neither a visa to Poland nor the Card of the Pole¹³. When her husband died, **she went to church on her own. That's the only place where she can listen to this language, for example, where she can talk in Polish to the priest.** Because there is just no other possibility. For example, there's only Church. And if they would take also this from us, then there would be no more [Poles].

For many interviewees their faith is fundamental for their identification as Poles. Some even use *Pole* and *Catholic* as synonyms¹⁴, the same applies to *Belarusian/Russian* and *Orthodox*:

Well, **at our place there were mainly Poles. There were no Orthodox people.** The Orthodox village was a bit further. So we had only nobility, only Polish people. [a woman, Grodno, *1930]

Two younger respondents from Grodno reflect on this as follows:

Here the situation is quite specific. When you say you are a Pole, then you are automatically a Catholic. And when you are a Catholic, then you're automatically

¹¹ See the Union's page promoted by Poland: <http://www.zpb.org.pl/node/2> (access 13.02.2013).

¹² Available here: http://kamunikat.org/glos_znad_niemna.html?pubid=23708, information about the other one here: <http://polaki.org/?p=1016> (access 13.02.2013).

¹³ *Karta Polaka*. See "pragmatists".

¹⁴ Some respondents also see *Pole* and *noble* as synonyms, what would be another topic of investigation, cf. Waszczyńska 1996.

a Pole. And the Orthodox people are Belarusians. **But many Belarusians are now in the Catholic Church.** [*So it's not true anymore, right?*] No, it's not true anymore. But earlier it was a bit different. **All Poles used to be in the Catholic Church, about 99%.** [a man, *1986]

But here was such a custom that only Poles could go to the Catholic Church. And that the Catholic Church is only for Poles. To make it possible that someone else could come and feel [good], there was a time that the Belarusian Catholic Church was more promoted. [a man, *1976]

This observation is supported by numerous other studies, also among Poles in Ukraine (cf. Dzwonkowski 2004).

In the Soviet Union most Catholic churches in Belarus were closed or used for other purposes, e.g. as warehouses. Only 96 of the 370 churches existing before World War II survived until the 1980s. People went to church secretly in Soviet Belarus. Many interviewees also relate that they used to travel to Lithuania to baptise their children and take part in holy mass. After 1991, many priests from Poland came to Belarus but now most of them have been replaced by local ones.

Who is a part of the Polish minorities?

But who are the members of these minorities? Some might say that many of the Poles in the area are just polonized Lithuanians or Belarusians – whose ancestors would have once learned the Polish language, also Lithuanian nobility would have changed its identity to Polish. The question is, if this is right, are they then Poles (as they declare) or Lithuanians (as their ancestors were), or part of both ethnic communities? In censuses, the ethnicity is indicated by the respondents, so the definition is according to declaration¹⁵. Many of my interviewees, though, explain their Polishness through ancestry or refer to official documents. In the Soviet Union citizens got an entry about their nationalities in their passports – not always in accordance with the feelings of its owner. Now this entry does not exist anymore, so the interviewees state that, according to their documents, they have become Belarusians or Lithuanians¹⁶. One of the younger Belarusian interviewees, when answering my question about the attributes a person

¹⁵ E.g. the Belarusian population census of 2009 states: “In the 2009 population census, like in the previous censuses, answers to the questions on ethnicity were recorded as put by respondents according to their self-identification and wish. Ethnicity of children was specified by their parents.” (Національний статистический комітет Республіки Беларусь, 2011: 6).

¹⁶ Other than in the other Baltic states, it was not difficult to get Lithuanian citizenship after the independence. All inhabitants of Lithuania had time between November 1990 and November 1991 to decide, if they want to be citizens of Lithuania. The absolute majority of Poles living in today's Lithuania took this opportunity. (cf. The Department of National Minorities 2000: 4).

should possess to be a Pole, underlines the difference between citizenship and ethnicity:

Well, actually most often this term is still ethnic, not like the citizenship. It is understood as an ethnonym, most often. [a man, Vitebsk oblast, *1981]

But also the question of ethnicity depends on one's own definition. As the director of the Polish school in Grodno, Danuta Surmacz, said in an interview: there are children who's Polish roots can be detected very deeply, going back to their great-great-great-grandfathers¹⁷. In many family histories we can still observe the mosaic of ethnicities and languages that used to characterize this area and, to a certain extent, are still present today. Especially many young interviewees claim to descend from a mixed family and remember their grandparents' different nationalities. And, as will be shown below, they are aware of the possibility of deciding now who they want to be.

Individual identities

When talking to my interviewees, one can see that it is quite difficult to figure out commonalities even within the Polish minorities. There are remarkable differences not only between people living in the two countries, but also between individuals in the same area.

All of the people I present here, declared themselves as Polish. But they had various ways of describing their Polishness. Some never questioned that they were Polish, for others it was a long road and an (inner) struggle before they came to this conclusion. Also, double ethnic identities are possible. After analysing different statements, it must be concluded that being a member of the Polish minority is not given. As ethnic identity, it is something created, constructed and bases on a decision – or on many decisions, made time and again.

I will now move on to different forms of identification with the status "Pole" in Belarus and Lithuania. These I have grouped and named in a stereotypical, over-generalizing way. The purpose of this is to point out the different ways of creating ethnic identity and to underline the contrasts between the respondents. This grouping makes it easier to show patterns that are repeated by different persons and it allows comparing statements to each other. Obviously, this procedure does not allow me to present individual biographies. All of the created groups could and should be split up into as many pieces as there are persons cited, since every interviewee has an outstanding history and individual reasons for identifying as a Pole.

¹⁷ Cf. *Onet*, 1.9.2012, <http://m.onet.pl/wiadomosci/swiat,q5fyp> (access 13.02.2013).

This step would require a detailed analysis of every respondent's biography and taking a different point of view¹⁸. For the purpose of the article, which is to show how different the ways to be a Pole outside of Poland can be, this conscious generalization should be the most illuminating.

Always Poles

My oldest interviewees were born and grew up before World War II. At that time, the researched area was a part of Poland. For all of my respondents in this age group, there was no doubt that they are Poles. As a woman expresses it: "my czysta Polaki jesteśmy" ('we are pure Poles') (a woman from Grodno, Belarus, born in 1922). Some of them stress how difficult and strange it was that all of a sudden they found themselves in another country:

No, I always count that it was Poland here and it will be Poland here. And many of us, when we meet up with the whole family, we always say that. **It was Poland and will be Poland.** And our parents, even though they were dying, they always waited for Poland. They always waited. And there still will be Poland here. [a woman, close to Grodno, *1930]

[Now] there are no Poles. And, you know, **there should be Poland in Druskieniki, Grodno should be Poland.** And why the Poles did not take this land, but the Soviets did, I have no idea. [a woman, Grodno, *1922]

They claim their families were of Polish descent; they spoke Polish and were of Catholic faith:

Because my grandfather and great-grandfather were Poles. **In our family there were no Belarusians. Only, only Poles.** Now they are already mixed. [...] Well, it was good to go to school. We were all among ourselves, all Poles, all with the Polish language. Religion was very good, because we all liked the priest. In our school we had lectures on religion. [a woman, close to Grodno, *1930]

But also some of the younger interviewees had no doubts about being Polish. In Belarus, in most cases this was strongly connected to the respondents' families:

[*Did you always know you were a Pole?*] Yes, from my early years. There is such a verse: „Kto ty jesteś – Polak mały. Jaki znak twój – orzeł biały¹⁹”. My grandfather always, **my grandfather is also such a patriot.** He was one of the organizers of the Union of Poles in Grodno. [a woman, Grodno, *1995]

¹⁸ This kind of detailed analysis of single persons and families I undergo in my dissertation.

¹⁹ A verse by Władysław Bełza known by every Polish child. The beginning reads: "Who are you – a little Pole. What's your emblem – the white eagle".

Also at another moment of the interview this respondent stresses that the whole family has the Card of the Pole. For many old people to acquire the Card of the Pole means to have a document proving their being Polish for the first time. Many of them are very proud to get it. The same seems to be applicable to the cited young girl, she has not the smallest doubt about being Polish. In this respect she differs strongly from other young inhabitants of Grodno who use the Card mainly as an instrument (see below: *pragmatists*).

In Lithuania most interviewees were sure to be Poles:

[Is it always clear for you that you are Poles or not?]

L1: Poles, what else.

L2: When you never go to the city and stay at the village, then you don't even need to speak Lithuanian here, Polish is enough. Because everyone around speaks Polish. Only when somebody comes here, some Russian, then with him. Even when you have colleagues, also with them – **there are many Poles, and if there comes one more Lithuanian or Russian, then they have to adapt to us.** Not we to them, but they to us. When we speak one to one, it can be Lithuanian or Polish. But when we are in a group, we speak more Polish. We, well, we are not embarrassed. [L1: a man, close to Vilnius, *1964, L2: a man, close to Vilnius, *1994]

Anyway, there are Poles in the group [at the university]. Many Russians. At the university, we could say, **I speak much Russian and Polish. They are just one of you,** you find a Pole, you find a Russian, and with them you talk more. And with Lithuanians I somehow don't know, no, there is nothing [in common]. [a man, close to Vilnius, *1991]

Russians seem to be much closer to the last respondent than Lithuanians. This was confirmed by many other young Poles in Vilnius (between 18 and 25 years old) who stressed that they also like to watch Russian films, listen to Russian music and use Russian on Facebook.

Some of the younger interviewees identify without any questions with Poles but they remark that in Poland **they are preserved as being different to Poles** living within the country. Their own ethnic identity is clearly Polish, they wish to be Poles. But there is a definition from outside, stressing their belonging to another group, the one of the Polish minorities in countries lying east of Poland.

I always felt that I'm a Pole, and I was always eager and was always punished. Yes, and I was called a *przek*²⁰. And I always stood up and was involved into beatings at school that I am a Pole and worthy. [...] And when I came to Poland for the first time and **when I was called by some Polish friends, that I am not a Pole** at all, you know? [a man, Grodno, *1976]

But there is this problem that I see, my mom does not see it in the way I do. That

²⁰ A negative name used for Poles in this area referring to a typical sound in Polish, *prz*.

there is no difference; all my life I am already a stranger here, because I am not a Belarus. But there, **I will be a stranger as well**, I will always be a Russian. Even if I learn the language, the accent will stay, at least a little bit. Well, maybe in 20 years the accent will be gone. But still, I will be a Russian. The young generation of Poles doesn't make a difference any more between citizenship and nationality, it's already the same. [a man, Vitebsk oblast, *1981]

My interviewees from Lithuania observed the same reaction but they were not offended by it but found it rather interesting:

[And there [in Poland], when someone asks who you are, what do you answer?]

L3: Poles. They ask why we are speaking Polish.

L4: They say, there is an accent.

L2: And the Lithuanians ask, if we came here from Poland, how it comes, that, well.

L3: Yes, yes, that's interesting. They ask how it comes that we know Polish. [L2: a man, *1994, L3, a man, *1991, L4 a woman, *1964, all close to Vilnius]

They even seem to be proud that others are surprised about their linguistic abilities. This difference between the pride of Poles in Lithuania and his own feelings was also observed by an interviewee from Grodno. He and some other respondents in Belarus drew my attention to this different valuation of their own status and dialect:

Because, for example, I was often in Lithuania, in Vilnius region. There they speak Polish in everyday life, and they have their own dialect. And they are not embarrassed about it. [a man, Grodno, *1976]

Both in Lithuania and Belarus, some interviewees explained to me that they are better Polish patriots than Poles in Poland. Living outside Poland – as they said – they need to stick to Polish traditions more carefully and to teach their children to be aware and proud of being Polish. This group also often sees a difference between themselves and Poles in Poland but they are proud of it, and sometimes also lament about the decay of traditions and values in Poland.

Decided to be Poles²¹

Another group of respondents clearly describes the process how they decided to become Poles. For example, a man from Grodno in his thirties starts his story about how he decided to be a Pole at an earlier point, namely

²¹ Besides people who decide to be Poles, of course there are also those who decide to be Belarusians. I met several persons who presented me to family-members identifying as Poles but my respondents themselves declared to be Belarusians (or sometimes also Russians). They are left out here due to space restrictions.

when he decided to be Belarusian: at a certain point of his life the interviewee decided together with his family to start speaking Belarusian at home (and no more Russian) and to be Belarusian. They are Catholics, and also in church they wanted to promote the Belarusian language (additionally to Polish). This conscious change was also connected to oppositional political ideas. But as the interviewee stated laconically, at a certain point they came to the conclusion that also by being Belarusian you cannot change anything in the country. At that moment he and his family decided to be Poles. They knew about some Polish grandparents, already were Catholics and spoke a little bit Polish. Today they are back to Russian as the family language but their child attends the Polish school in Grodno.

Another respondent, a woman also from Grodno, describes her way to the decision to being Polish in the following way:

Well, and I like the Polish nation a lot, really. And you know, recently, when I started to grew up more and [asked myself] consciously who am I actually? Because I live in this territory, ok? And here you never know anyway, if you are a Belarusian or a Pole. Because here everything is mixed up, if it is Orthodox or Catholic. Because we are actually like salad. And that's normal for me, you know? That's normal for us. **And the decision how you feel like is just necessary.** Above all. **And I started to ask myself who I am.** Am I Belarusian, am I Polish? And I started to think about it consciously. And well, above all I said, no, I am not a Russian girl, Russians are to me like, that's really like Africa, you know? That's a different culture, a totally different nation, that's not me. Belarusian. Well, I like this nation, but you know, well, it's like, my inside is a bit different. And I like more the European ideas and culture, the Polish one. And you know, **so I decided to think every year that I am a Pole.** Well, I just made this decision that I will, simply like that. Because it is the closest to my heart, to my soul. [a woman, Grodno, *1977]

The woman's story shows her conscious decision, but also how pliant one's own identity is. She puts in words what many other examples show: in a multicultural surrounding that used to belong to different states in history, where different confessions and ethnicities get into contact, everybody has to decide at a certain moment, what group he or she belongs to.

In some other parts of the interview, the respondent told me that she used to be Orthodox and only later switched to Catholic faith. She also has a Polish husband who probably was not without influence on her. Her story shows that in some cases it is also possible to identify with a group that used to be alien earlier.

Another young man from Grodno did not consciously change his ethnic identity at one moment, but shows much flexibility depending on the situation. At different moments of the interview, he makes very different statements about his ethnic identity. Several times he stresses that he and

all his family are (noble) Poles, “*chamów u nas nie ma*”²². Later the picture gets more differentiated:

Firstly, I am a citizen of Belarus, of course. Secondly, I am a Pole. Whom I am more, I cannot tell. When I travel somewhere, to Poland or Germany, then the feeling of being Belarusian is a dozen times stronger than here in Belarus. [*And in Germany, are you also a Pole there?*] Yes, I am a Pole, too. Because at some conferences, I have my surname, and then, oh, a Pole. [laugh]. **Ok, so I will be a Pole today. Today.** Well, that’s this borderland culture, a little bit, such a man from the borderlands. [a man, Grodno, *1986]

Also when it comes to the line of descent, the interviewee acknowledges that there were different ethnicities: “I can tell that my blood is 70% Polish. 30% of it is Belarusian and Lithuanian blood. [laugh].”

Pragmatists

In Belarus I met different people, all in their 20-ties, who decided to be Poles out of pragmatic reasons. They all wanted to get *Karta Polaka*, the Card of the Pole, which people of Polish origin not being citizens of Poland can get from the Polish consulate, when they prove that they know at least basic Polish and declare to belong to the Polish nation. They also should know and cultivate Polish traditions (cf. Ustawa o Karcie Polaka 2007). A group of three students of German studies told me that during their last year at university they attended additional Polish classes. At class, they studied not only the Polish language, but were also prepared for elements of the exam concerning Polish traditions. It was not difficult for them to find Polish persons in their families, so they could convince themselves and the Polish consulate that they were of Polish origin. As the students told me, they had primordially planned to get the Card, because it allows getting free visa to Poland and other kinds of price cuts. They planned to leave Belarus for Germany after finishing studies and saw Poland as a step on this way. During the interview, I had the feeling that their strategy had also other effects: they started to reflect on their ethnic identity. As they told me, earlier they had never thought about this, neither did they speak Polish. It is difficult to tell, to what extent they considered themselves Poles at the moment of the interview. But I got their phone numbers from a contact person, who knew I was searching for Poles in Belarus and who took them as such himself.

One of the men cited above as those who had never had a doubt about their Polishness, complains about the same phenomenon:

²² Approx. “There are no lumps in our family”. The Polish pejorative term *cham* is often used in this territory to describe Belarusians or Ukrainians, seen as peasants. E.g. cf. Waszczyńska 1996.

People remember about their Polish roots to get a grant. And later on, they very quickly and easily forget about those roots. I dislike that very much. Once I was at such a meeting of Belarusians in Poland. Those persons get grants, they have all these documents proving that they are Poles, all. They come to study, and when there is a meeting, they shout around, we are Belarusians. [a man, Vitebsk oblast, *1981]

So the Card of the Pole and other programs supporting Poles East of Poland do not only support people of Polish origin, but also make people trying to find out about their Polish identity for the first time. In other words, the Card helps to enlarge the Polish minority in Belarus.

Other persons in Belarus avoid being officially Polish, as the student from Belarus cited above. Some further statements show that his uncertainty about being a Pole is strongly connected with the fear about eventual repressions. In this point, he is more careful than his parents and grandparents:

Yes, only when we all come together, the whole family, all compatriots, then we think, then we have our Polish identity. But in everyday life it is a bit difficult. **It is not always good when you say 'I am a Pole'.** It is not good when you have to register somewhere, for example at university. Then, we write that we are Belarusians. Belarusian passport. But when we are within the family, or somewhere at Church, then there is more Polish. [...] But to say that we are Poles, or if we are Belarusians, I couldn't say that, because I don't know an answer to that question. [*But your father knows it better?*] My father? He says that we are all Poles. [laugh] I am a Pole. That's already bad. Because he is a bit radical in this question. My grandparents, that's obvious, say we are Poles. But that's already another generation, right? And it gets a bit lost. [a man, Grodno, *1986]

He underlines this point also telling another story:

For example, my cousin is a policeman. And he had some colleagues, also policemen, who had the Card of the Pole. **They've lost their jobs.** That's not good. Because they say that there are no Poles here, here are only citizens of the Republic of Belarus. We have no Poles. We are also no members of the Union of Poles. For the same reason. [a man, Grodno, *1986]

Both phenomena, to stress to be Polish in order to get visa to the European Union and to hide it in fear of repressions, are met only in Belarus. But even though Lithuania is a member of the European Union, it is not always seen positively when people hold a Card of the Pole there, though the consequences are not comparable to those in Belarus²³.

²³ E.g. the Lithuanian parliament thought about letting the legality of the Card be checked by the constitutional court (they decided not to do so): http://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/506787,litewski_sejm_nie_skieruje_karty_polaka_do_trybunalu_konstytucyjnego.html (access 13.02.2013).

Locals

The last group of respondents does not feel the need to decide between feeling Polish or Lithuanian/ Belarusian. They chose a third kind of identity, a local one. As a student from Vilnius, born in 1984, says: “Normally, when people ask me, if I consider myself a Pole or a Lithuanian, I answer that I am a ‘Wilniuk’, or a Pole from Vilnius county”. Later he remarks that some Poles from Poland might call him Russian, whereas some Lithuanians would take him for a Belarusian. He underlines that Vilnius and the territory around was always multicultural and also Polish was present for a long time there. A respondent from Northern Belarus (born in 1981) puts it similarly, showing that he feels connections with both countries:

I would take it like this: [I have] **two home countries**. Belarus is also my home country as the place where I was born. And Poland is more where I descent from. **Additionally, my little home**, which I name if someone asks me where I am from, is Vilnius region. Because here is also a very interesting element that this place here was very artificially connected with the Postaw region and Vitebsk oblast. Never in history was this neither Postaw region nor Vitebsk region. Never. [a man, Vitebsk region, *1981]

Both interviewees present their own, local identity, not imposed by a dominant culture.

Regional identification is also very common among the senior generation living in small villages, who call themselves “tutejsi” (‘locals’) without further precision (e.g. cf. Trepte 2004). Not only their identity, but also their language is described by them as local or “prosta mowa” (‘simple language’) (cf. Wiemer 2003). This kind of self-description can show that their life is connected with a small territory that needs no bigger context. But it can also be a way of consciously creating one’s own idiosyncratic context and constitute an original identity. An identity that enables autonomy and originality and allows escaping all dominant cultural contexts.

Conclusions

So who of my interviewees is a “real” Pole then? As we could see, there are big differences between the feelings of individual interviewees, but also between respondents from different regions and the two countries, Lithuania and Belarus. In all cases, the interviewees present themselves in dissociation with the Belarusian or Lithuanian majority-culture and language, but many also feel a difference between themselves and the inhabitants of the country of reference, Poland. We could see different ways of how people

construct and define their "being Polish" when belonging to an ethnic minority. The respondents show their individual reasons, considerations and decisions. For some of the respondents belonging to a Polish minority means being something separate, creating their own identity. With the acknowledgement of ethnic minorities, the sum of different identification as a Pole is institutionalized. So the sum of all these personal identities makes the big minority.

There are many external factors influencing the respondents' considerations about being Polish, like education, media or the language of the Catholic Church. In my dissertation I analyse these influences on the use and attitude towards the Polish language. The quotations confirmed how crucial the preservation of Polish is for the respondents' feeling of being Polish.

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„....A więc postanowiłem być Polakiem”

Wielu z moich rozmówców zakończyło swoją wypowiedź na temat własnej tożsamości narodowej tak, jak w cytacie w tytule. Jednak nie są to słowa mieszkańców Polski, tylko terenów północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. Moi respondenci mieszkają na obszarach Białorusi i Litwy, które były częścią Polski w czasie międzywojennym. W wielu z ich opowiadań widać pozostałości po mozaice różnych narodowości i języków, która była kiedyś charakterystyczna dla tego rejonu – i do pewnego stopnia jest tam obecna do dziś.

Wszyscy cytowani rozmówcy deklarowali, że są Polakami. Przy dokładniejszej analizie jednak widać, że opisują oni swoją polskość w bardzo różny sposób: różne były ich drogi do podjęcia decyzji lub osiągnięcia pewności, że są Polakami. W niektórych przypadkach można zauważyć świadome stworzenie własnej tożsamości narodowej, czasami nawet określony moment, w którym dana osoba decydowała, że od teraz jest Polakiem. Inni byli wychowywani jako Polacy i nigdy nie zakwestionowali tego, że mogliby być kimś innym niż Polakiem. Niektórzy uważają siebie za bardziej polskich niż Polacy w Polsce, inni mówią o sobie jako o nieprawdziwych Polakach i chcieliby być takimi, jacy Warszawiaczy są w ich wyobrażeniu. Istnieją więc ogromne różnice między indywidualnymi rozmówcami, ale również między rodzinami, regionami i krajami Litwą i Białorusią. We wszystkich przypadkach respondenci podkre-

ślają swoją odrębność od białoruskiej lub litewskiej kultury i języka większości, odczuwają także różnicę między sobą a mieszkańcami kraju, do którego się odnoszą – Polakami. W artykule przedstawiam różne sposoby, w jakie respondenci określają i konstruują swoje „bycie Polakiem” w sytuacji, w której należą do mniejszości narodowej.

“...So I Decided to Be a Pole”

Conclusions like the one in the headline had been given by several of my interviewees when being asked about their own ethnic identity. But the respondents are no inhabitants of Poland, they live in the Western parts of Belarus or Eastern Lithuania, in areas that belonged to Poland between the world wars. In many of their family-histories we can still observe the mosaic of nationalities and languages that used to characterize this area and to a certain extent is present until today.

All of the persons I present declared to be Polish. But there are various ways of how they describe their Polishness: they came by different ways to the decision or belief that they are Poles. In some cases we can remark a conscious creation of one's own ethnic identity, some even describe a moment in their lives, when they decided to be a Pole. Others were brought up as Poles and never questioned that they could be someone else. Some declare to be more Polish than Poles in Poland, others call themselves no real Poles and wish to be as Polish as people in Warsaw in their eyes are. So there are big differences between individual interviewees, but also between families, regions and the two countries, Lithuania and Belarus. In all cases my interviewees present themselves in dissociation with the Belarusian or Lithuanian majority-culture and language, but also feel a difference between themselves and the inhabitants of the country of reference, Poland. In the paper I present different ways of how people construct and define their “being Polish” while belonging to an ethnic minority.

Key words: minority, identity, Pole, Belarus, Lithuania, individual