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# Polish Ethnic Minority in Belarus and Lithuania: Politics, Institutions, and Identities

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## Abstract

This article analyzes how institutions influence the process of identity formation within the Polish minority communities in Belarus and Lithuania. We focus on ways that the identities of people who consider themselves Poles in Belarus and Lithuania are targeted by institutions like the state, schools, and non-governmental organizations. We aim to shed light on how these processes are shaped by institutional settings and broader political contexts. The authors take a bottom-up approach to institutions and look at how members of the Polish communities in the two neighboring countries conceptualize the role of various institutions—NGOs, schools, *Karta Polaka* (the Polish Card)—to shape their sense of ethnic belonging. The article is built on a cross-case analysis. Data for the Lithuanian and Belarusian cases, consisting of interviews and secondary sources, were collected independently and then reread in light of a common research question. Through our analysis, we show differences and similarities in how analogous institutions function on the two sides of the border and elaborate on the reasons why these differences occur and what role state policy and supranational regulations play in the process.

**Keywords:** Polish minority; ethnic identity; institutions; Belarus; Lithuania

## Introduction

This article looks at the role of institutions in shaping Polish ethnic minority identities, loyalties, and senses of belonging in two neighboring countries, Belarus and Lithuania. For long historical periods, parts of contemporary Lithuania and Belarus belonged to the same political units. In the early 1990s, Belarus and Lithuania became independent states with linked histories and minority communities now split by a border. Polish populations reside on both sides of the border between Belarus and Lithuania, which is why a comparative approach makes particular sense both theoretically and empirically. In particular, we consider how the different (geo)political paths chosen by Belarus and Lithuania after the collapse of the Soviet Union have shaped the institutional landscape in the two countries in regard to ethnic identities as well as the role of Poland as a kin-state in constructing Polishness in these two states. The difference in how Polishness is understood, maintained, and instrumentalized in both countries on the institutional and individual levels is determined by the difference in the broader political and social contexts of Belarusian and Lithuanian developments.

Our theoretical and empirical engagement with the role of institutions in the process of identity formation departs from the following research questions: What role do institutions play in maintaining ethnicity as a key element in people's (self-)categorization? How do people engage with institutional influence on their identities? In other words, we aim to demonstrate how the

construction of ethnicity is shaped by national policies and the ways some institutions plan their activities and survival. We argue that national and local institutions should be perceived as active agents in shaping ethnic identities and interethnic relations via different instruments, which are themselves shaped by supranational institutions, geopolitical situations, and national political contexts. At the same time, we also suggest that people do not take institutional policies and actions for granted but actively engage with their agendas.

Following Jenkins, we define the institutional order as “the human world seen as pattern and organization, as established ‘ways-of-doing-things’” (2008, 59). This definition distinguishes institutions from individual actions—“the individual order” (59)—and from interactions between people—“the interaction order” (59). Thus, the notion of institution we apply in our research includes the wide range of organizational objectivated activities such as nongovernmental organizations, education, political parties, and national and kin-states, which are important in shaping people’s self-understanding. In the spirit of the neoinstitutionalist approach (DiMaggio and Powell 1991), we perceive the role of institutions as constitutive rather than constructive (Brubaker 1994, 48). Institutions constitute basic categories of identification. Simultaneously, being “humanly produced” (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 78, cited in Schraml 2012, 71), they are also influenced by people’s interactions and individual actions. As we argue, ethnic identities are emerging at the intersection of institutional practices and individual engagements with institutions. Thus, ethnic identities must be seen as shaped by interaction of top-down and bottom-up processes (Hill and Willson 2003).

The article is divided into three sections. In the first section, we engage with literature on ethnicity, identity, and the role of institutions in shaping ethnic identity. In the second section, we provide information on the methodology and the context of our study. The third empirical part represents the results of our analysis. We distinguish three institutions that are important for Polish minorities in both Belarus and Lithuania, namely, pre-university education or schooling, nongovernmental organizations, and *Karta Polaka* (the Polish Card, a document issued by the Polish state to citizens of the former Soviet Union who identify themselves as Poles), and provide the comparative perspective on how these institutions function in the two countries, how they target the Polish populations in Belarus and Lithuania, and how individuals engage with them.

### Ethnicity, Identity, and Institutions

A few minor remarks must be made about identity issues that are addressed in this article. Current approaches to ethnic identity in social sciences see it as constructed, flexible, and situational (Barth 1970; Nagel 1994; Lawler 2008). The constructivist notion of ethnicity is almost taken for granted leaving aside more thorough investigations of how the construction of ethnicity occurs, by whom, and why (Brubaker 2004; Wimmer 2008, 2013). Wimmer (2013, 2) argues that constructivist scholarship lacks comparative explanations of varying roles ethnic distinctions play in different societies and, assuming that ethnic identities are flexible and situational, offers little empirical evidence of why ethnicity is a salient part of individual identities, public debates, and inequalities in certain societies and contexts but not in others. Our comparative research aims to bridge this gap by discussing how ethnicity is employed by different institutions and at the same time actualized and made crucial in people’s self-conceptualization (on the Lithuanian case, see Fréjutè-Rakauskienè et al. 2016). The focus on institutions enables us to show that although situational contexts and individual choices in construction of ethnic identities do matter, they are not enough to explain why ethnic boundaries are more crucial in structuring individual identities and people’s interactions in some contexts than in others. Institutions as organizational entities constitute and structure people’s life experiences and categories of self-identification (Brubaker 1994, 48; DiMaggio and Powell 1991, 2; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Yet, this fact does not undermine the power of individuals to challenge, reinterpret, and refuse institutional arrangement. On the contrary, institutions depend on the interpretations of social actors and their action routine (Schraml

2012, 73). The institutional approach grasps the more nuanced picture of how ethnic categories are established and promoted by institutions and how people interact with institutional policies, categorizations, and strategies.

Identities and loyalties of national minorities are subject to policies of the state of residence and the state of ethnic origin, or kin-state (Brubaker 1996); they are also shaped by the nexus of these states and supranational entities (e.g., the EU; Cheskin 2015). The institutional role of the state in shaping ethnic identities through documentation, bureaucratic categorization, and rules of political participation has been widely acknowledged in research (Brubaker 1994; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Brubaker 2004; Brubaker et al. 2006; Hill and Willson 2003; Penn 2008; Schraml 2012; Swain 2005; Wimmer 2008). The claims of the nation-state for sovereignty and independence have been largely dependent on the strategies of drawing ethnic boundaries between dominant ethnic groups and ethnic minorities (Wimmer 2008). States have developed a sophisticated apparatus of imposing ethnic categories on population via population census, passportization, and protective legislation, to name a few (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). The power of these politically institutionalized practices to influence ethnic identities is not exclusive, however. Other institutions within and beyond the state apparatus, such as education (Eriksen et al. 1991; Vincent 2003), civic organizations (Young 2000), social and political agents (Yuval-Davis 2006), religious institutions (Smith 1986, 1991), and suprastate entities (Shevel 2010) compete with or maintain state policies in relation to the ethnic question. Employing preestablished ethnic categories in their activities and policies, institutions tend to reify ethnic groups, simultaneously overshadowing their constructed nature, situationality, and heterogeneity (Brubaker 2004). As Brubaker argues, the analytical task of ethnic studies scholars is “to *account* for the ways in which—and conditions under which—this practice of reification, this powerful crystallization of group feeling, can work” (2004, 10).

To implement this analytical suggestion, we want to address a less obvious aspect of this process, that is, how economic interests and competition for resources interrelate with issues of identity (see also Cohen 1969, 1981, cited in Eriksen 2010; Wimmer 2008; Podagelytė 2014). After reviewing numerous anthropological studies, Eriksen concludes that “research on ethnic identity formation and boundary maintenance has indicated that ethnic identities tend to attain their greatest importance in situations of flux, change, resource competition and threats against boundaries” (2010, 120). In our article, we will focus on ways that ethnicity is used as an instrument in competition over resources by individuals and by institutions represented by individuals that aim to function in a certain context.

On the other hand, we do not treat ethnicity as a fictitious identity manipulated only at the institutional level, since, as research indicates, we have to see it as both a bottom-up and a top-down process (Hill and Willson 2003). We also look at how individuals engage with institutions and perceive their role. In this sense, we follow a number of scholars who look at individual experiences of ethnicity and analyze how non-elite actors conceptualize their ethnic belonging and the role of various institutions in shaping their ethnic self-understanding (Brubaker 2004; Jenkins 2008; Wimmer 2008). The pragmatic approach (i.e., emphasis on economic interests and access to resources) cannot entirely explain the power of ethnic self-categorization (Eriksen 2010). Ethnic belonging can be linked to religious experience, family ties, and class position. We also seek to demonstrate that, as our comparison of Belarus and Lithuania reveals, general contexts (political, economic, international) shape the ways that institutions work in the process of categorization (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

## Methodology and Context

In the article, we depart from the assumption that Lithuania and Belarus are different in many ways, including how they approach their respective ethnic minorities. Politically, Lithuania is an EU member, and its minority legislation is influenced by the EU policies regarding ethnic contestations. Belarus is located outside the EU legislative frames, and its political regime is nondemocratic.

However, in both cases Poland as a kin-state is an important actor in shaping ethnic identities of the Polish minorities in Belarus and Lithuania. Moreover, our focus on the bottom-up approach to the role of institutions in shaping ethnic identities allows us to make certain comparisons, since the state and state policies are considered here in their multilayeredness. Our aim is to add nuance to the dominant top-down approach to understanding the Polish minority in Belarus and Lithuania. We will examine the institutions of Polishness that people consider the most important and what role they assign to these institutions in promoting the sense of ethnic self-awareness among local residents. We treat the term *Polish minority* cautiously. Instead of taking “bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis (and basic constituencies of the social world)” (Brubaker 2004, 2), we consider the Polish minority as a heterogeneous, fluctuating group that is performatively co-constructed by various actors—including Polish, Belarusian, and Lithuanian states, institutions of Polishness, and people themselves.

Empirical material that lays foundation for our analysis was gathered in Belarus and Lithuania independently. Sasunkevich conducted her data in Belarus in the framework of the research project about *Karta Polaka*. The Belarusian part of the research consists of 29 semistructured interviews with people who had applied or were in the process of applying for the Polish Card. The interviews were conducted in January–July 2015 in Hrodna, a city in western Belarus located in the region of the Belarus–Lithuania–Poland border. Belarusian Poles are geographically concentrated in the western part of the country (Brest and Hrodna) in direct proximity to the border with Poland (Tsikhamirau 2012). According to the latest available population census from 2009, people who identify themselves as Poles make up 20 percent of 360,000 inhabitants of Hrodna (Natsional’nyi statisticheskii komitet RB 2010). Hrodna region (*Hrodnenskaia voblasts’*) is known for its multi-ethnic history (Ackermann 2010; Bepamiatnykh 2009; Gurko, Uleichik, and Gruntov 2014). A number of important Polish institutions, such as the Consulate of Poland, the Polish school, and *Polska Macierz Szkolna*, are located in Hrodna.

Research participants were recruited through the snowball method. The researcher used her social contacts in Hrodna to find informants. There were several points of entrance into the field, that is, initial contacts who varied in their social characteristics. This strategy allowed the researcher to achieve social heterogeneity of the informants along the lines of age, gender, and social background. Some general notes on the ethnic specificity of recruited respondents should be made. The major criterion for selecting respondents was their possession of the Polish Card. Thus, objectively, informants belong to the Polish minority. Yet, the ethnic self-identification of informants does not necessarily coincide with an institutionalized way of establishing ethnic belonging. People with *Karta Polaka* in Belarus do not necessarily self-identify as Poles (Sasunkevich 2020). The Polish language is also not a determinant factor in defining one’s ethnic identification (Lashuk and Shelest 2011; Lastovskii 2011). Many respondents speak Russian, less often Belarusian, or a mixture of both. The confessional belonging to the Catholic Church plays a more important role in ethnic self-identification (Golachowska 2012; Lastovskii 2011; Kabzińska 1999).

Data for the Lithuanian case were collected by Frėjūtė-Rakauskienė and Šliavaitė. Poles constitute the second largest ethnic group (after Lithuanians) in Lithuania and make up 6.6 percent of the total population (Statistics Lithuania 2011). The case is based on an overview of secondary sources as well as on expertise gained during fieldwork conducted between April 2013 and June 2014 in southeastern Lithuania in the framework of a collective research project, which focused on similar questions that are addressed in this article, that is, on the role of institutions in shaping ethnic identities and interethnic relations (see Frėjūtė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016). Southeastern Lithuania is populated by different ethnic groups—Belarusians, Poles, Russians, and Lithuanians. The majority of the Polish-identifying population of Lithuania resides there (Statistics Lithuania 2011). Coming under different rules, this region and its population has been under the influence of different policies, ideologies, and political regimes that shaped its ethnic and civic identities (Kalnius 1998; Stravinskienė 2007, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). When Lithuania regained independence in the 1990s, all permanent residents, irrespective of their ethnicity, were granted right to

receive Lithuanian citizenship (Lietuvos Respublikos Aukščiausioji Taryba 1989). Thus, the majority of the population became full citizens of the independent Republic of Lithuania. Despite this fact, the identity and civic loyalty of the inhabitants of southeastern Lithuania (including the Polish population) has been an important question for numerous researchers (Kalnius 1998; Daukšas 2008, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Kazėnas et al. 2014; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016) and a policy issue for different governments (Klimanskis et al. 2017). As in the case of Hrodna, the area was ruled by Poland between the two world wars. It became the part of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic before the Second World War and of independent Lithuania after 1990.

The fieldwork was carried out in the following localities: Šalčininkai, Eišiškės, Švenčionys, Švenčionėliai, and Pabradė. Interviews were conducted with people of different generations, ethnic backgrounds, education, and gender in the region. In this article, however, we primarily refer to interviews with school communities (in total, 30 interviews with members of the administration and teachers, parents of students at schools with Lithuanian and Polish as languages of instruction) and members of local nongovernmental organizations (31 interviews in total). The researchers approached the majority of schools that function in the area where the research was conducted and teach mainly in Lithuanian, Polish, or have classes in several languages (some schools provide teaching in two languages; e.g., they have separate classes in Polish and in Russian). Members of school administration and teachers, as well as some pupils' parents, were interviewed. Since most schools that provide education in selected sites were contacted and agreed to participate in the research, the information gained reveals perspectives of different groups of population. In this article we focus mainly on the interviews that were conducted at the schools with the Polish language of instruction as well as compare them with some interviews that were conducted at the schools with the Lithuanian language of instruction. We can estimate that the majority of nongovernmental organizations' leaders and representatives from the list provided by the Department of National Minorities (Tautinių mažumų departamentas 2016) in the region were contacted and agreed to participate in the research as well. The leaders or representatives of Poles, Russian, and Belarusian organizations in the region were approached and asked for interviews. Therefore, the collected information reveal perspectives of different ethnic groups and their organizations. This also means that our fieldwork focused on the role of the above-mentioned institutions in identity-shaping processes and did not include some other institutions that could be relevant, such as the Roman Catholic Church.

To bring two independent studies together for comparison, we use a cross-case approach (e.g., Khan and VanWynsberghe 2008). We first discussed our independently researched cases of Polish minority communities in Belarus and Lithuania and, noting differences in our data, identified a theme, namely, institutions, that was relevant for both. We then formulated a research question: What are the main institutions that play a key role in maintaining the Polish ethnic identity in Belarus and Lithuania as perceived by our informants in the areas where we conducted the research? The institutions we identified as essential on both sides of the border are education, nongovernmental organizations, and *Karta Polaka*. In Lithuania, political parties are also an important institution in shaping ethnic identity, but they are not equally relevant in nondemocratic Belarus where parties do not occupy a significant position in the political sphere. Therefore, as we argue below, certain contextual peculiarities (e.g., the political situation, Lithuania's membership in the EU) shape the ways in which ethnic and civic loyalties are constructed and negotiated in local contexts.

Our methodology has its limitations. Since our empirical studies were conducted independently and with different initial research questions in mind, our comparison is not always consistent. The Lithuanian case sheds light on how individual agents *within* institutions shape their agenda and how these activities, in turn, influence institutions' role in maintaining ethnic identities. The Belarusian case gives more information on the individual perspective *outside* institutions, that is, how people who identify themselves as Poles, perceive institutions of Polishness in Belarus and support or resist their work. Moreover, since the Belarusian part of the study was initially more

focused on the Polish Card, it contains more information on people's engagement with this phenomenon, while the Lithuanian case is rather based on secondary sources. These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that our comparative approach provides an important ground for future empirical research on the role of institutions in shaping ethnic identities across national borders.

## Institutions of Polishness in Belarus and Lithuania: Comparative Analysis

### Education

Education is a sector which is closely related to construction of social belongings. In this section we aim to demonstrate how schools might become key actors in constructing ethnic boundaries and solidarities that are primarily based on ethnicity.

In Lithuania schools are generally differentiated by the level of teaching as well as by language of instruction. However, it is important to keep in mind that teaching language (Lithuanian, Polish, or Russian) notwithstanding, schools are attended by students from different or mixed ethnic backgrounds, so their communities are not limited to one particular ethnic group (Tamošiūnas 2000; Leončikas 2007; Šliavaitė 2016). In ethnic minority language schools, students study many subjects in their native languages, but they are also obliged to develop competences in the state (Lithuanian) language (LR Seimas 2011). In southeastern Lithuania people use multiple local languages—Polish, Russian, Lithuanian—in everyday communication (Kalnius 1998; Hogan-Brun and Ramonienė 2005; Geben 2013; Šliavaitė 2015b; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Šliavaitė, Šutinienė 2016; Balžekienė et al. 2008). In this region about 56 percent of Polish population relate the Polish language to the Polish identity (Kazėnas et al. 2014, 86). Further we will discuss our fieldwork data which reveals how ethnicity is employed in attracting pupils to some schooling sector and what aspects are important for pupils' parents in selecting a school with Polish or another language of instruction for their pupils.

Schools with a particular (Polish or Lithuanian) language of instruction are often seen by members of their administration as key agents in constructing ethnic identities and a sense of belonging (Šliavaitė 2015a, 2016; cf. Balžekienė et al. 2008). Schools with Polish language of instruction were described by their representatives as key institutions for forming or maintaining the Polish identity, socializing in Polish culture, and teaching native language. At the same time these schools were seen by interviewees as educating loyal citizens of Lithuania and providing substantial competencies of the state language, which were seen as important for students' future in Lithuanian society. Completion of these schools was also described as enabling the most advantageous students pursue their university studies for free in Poland. A member of administration at the school with Polish language of instruction says,

How to say, we learn together with our kids, our kids speak correctly [in Polish] and we aim to speak correctly. And we aim to have some festivals together. There is a possibility to go to visit Poland, often we are visited by guests from Poland, from schools in Poland ... pupils communicate, and they feel better. I think everybody understands that we need to know our native language, a person has to be educated. If you have this [Polish] nationality, you cannot neglect it. (A., female, 50 years old)

In a similar vein, interviewed representatives from the schools in Lithuania usually suggested that schools with Lithuanian as the language of instruction provided better competencies in the state language in comparison to the schools with minority language of instruction. The choice of a Lithuanian school was seen by some interviewees as a sign of loyalty to the Lithuanian state and a way to better integrate into the society, so these schools were related with better studies and career possibilities in Lithuanian society (Šliavaitė 2015a, 2016).

Informants who have enrolled their offspring in Polish schools ground their reasoning in the need and the right to be educated in one's native (Polish) language, helping their kids in the learning process, the necessity to preserve their ethnic culture. The choice of a school with Polish language of instruction was not seen as minimizing mobility possibilities in Lithuania but as providing additional language competencies (Polish, Lithuanian) and opening additional career possibilities due to these language competencies. The possibility to study in Poland for the most advantageous students of schools with Polish language of instruction was indicated as an important argument in considering one's education at these schools (for more see Šliavaitė 2015a, 2016). The funding for public schools is allocated by the Lithuanian state as based on the number of pupils, and attraction of students becomes of key importance for institutional survival. The ways schools aim to attract students involve references to presumed ethnic (or civic) solidarity and socialization in ethnic culture, as well as access to certain resources (such as studies abroad). In this context choice of a school is not only a matter of choosing a school that meets families' expectations of the quality of teaching but also a matter of affirmation of one's ethnic belonging, that is, who you are and who you are not in an ethnic sense (Šliavaitė 2015a, 2016; cf. Balžekienė et al. 2008; cf. Podagelytė 2014 on Lithuanian minority in Poland).

As in Lithuania, the Polish schools in Belarus perform an important function of maintaining the Polish identity, language, and culture. In Hrodna the interest in the education in Polish language is booming. The language is not the most significant indicator of the Polish identity in Belarus. During the population census of 2009, only 5.4 percent of Belarusian Poles claimed Polish as their native language, and even fewer (3.8 percent) stated that they used Polish in their daily life (Ackermann 2015). The sociological research (Lashuk and Shelest 2011, 31) shows that the share of Polish speaking people can be higher than the population census indicates. Yet, the Polish language still lags behind Russian and Belarusian languages in its function as the native language and the language of daily life communication (Lashuk and Shelest 2011). However, the demand for the formal and informal education in Polish is significant in Belarus, in particular among younger people (Lashuk and Shelest 2011, 49). Hrodna, compared to other regions of the country, offers relatively good educational possibilities to study the Polish language and culture (Ackermann 2015, 166), including formal education (a secondary school with Polish as the primary language of instruction), an informal educational organization (Polska Macierz Szkolna 2011), and commercial language courses.

The secondary school with Polish language in Hrodna, which informants usually refer to as "Polish school," was opened in 1996 with substantial support from the Polish government. It is one of two Polish schools in Belarus, and both of them are operating in the Hrodna region. The school in Hrodna is located in one of the city's residential districts at some distance from the city center. Among the informants, two families send their children to the Polish school, two plan that their (grand)children will study there, and two studied at the school themselves. The motivation to choose the Polish school among these respondents is strongly related to the ethnic sentiment. When the informants are asked to elaborate on their choice, they find this question peculiar, arguing that it is the only logical choice for the family who self-identify as Polish. In two interviews the Polish school is described as "our school," that is, as the institution that belongs to a certain ethnic group. The Polish school is also several times counterposed to a "regular school," meaning a school with the Russian language of instruction. In words of Brubaker et al., the Polish school and Polishness are marked categories, that is, special, different, other, while schools with Russian language are unmarked as "normal, default, taken-for-granted" (2006, 211).

While marked categories usually refer to the experience of subjects or groups falling out of what is defined as the universal norm in the society (as women in relation to men in patriarchy or non-white people in relation to a white population; Brubaker et al. 2006, 212), the special position of the Polish school also has connotations of high quality and resourcefulness. The school's access to additional funding and networks provided by Poland as a kin-state maintains a high quality of education. One informant admits, for example, that she could not send her daughter to this school

because it was very hard to get there since the number of applications exceeds the number of available places. Another respondent quit the Polish school because of the high workload and the level of requirements that, in her view, exceeds the level of “Russian schools” (G., female, 22 years old). In words of O., whose daughter studies at the Polish school,

the Polish school has its own cohort. Children there are kind; you won't find misbehaving difficult children there, as it is the case in other schools. Even children from disadvantaged backgrounds behave differently. There is a completely different culture at the Polish school; it is much higher than at other schools. I am very happy with this school; I regret that my elder children didn't go there. (O., female, 46 years old)

This quote can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, given the general context of this interview where the research participant refers to Polish people in Hrodna as being more cultured, the citation above continues this line of argument—to go to the Polish school means to belong to the more sophisticated group of people whose ethnic belonging (opposed to a social background in the quote) makes them more superior. On the other hand, in the context of other opinions about the school's approach to education and noneducational (cultural) activities, the quote also maintains that the school stands out among others regarding quality.

The school choice is also connected to future prospects. In one case, the respondent refuses to send her child to the Polish school because, in her view, this would limit the child's options to make an education and career path in Belarus due to the lack of proper skills in state languages (Russian and Belarusian). As this argument implies, the choice of Polish as the language of instruction also presupposes the plan to continue studying in Poland after graduation. At least this is how the future is envisioned by those respondents whose children go to Polish school and how the reality looks like for a person who finished the Polish school, studied at a Polish university, and then returned to Hrodna. The interest to receive higher education in Poland or to send children to study there is perceptible among residents of Hrodna. Those who do not manage to get a place at Polish school, study Polish language and culture in Polska Macierz Szkolna, a cultural organization that arranges activities aimed at promoting Polish culture, history, and language. It is financed through the Polish Senate, the Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs of Poland, and some nongovernmental organizations (Polska Macierz Szkolna 2011). The commercial courses in Polish are also popular among Hrodna residents but especially among people who plan to apply for *Karta Polaka* or work in Poland.

As our analysis of schooling and education in Belarus and Lithuania shows, at the individual level the choice of school with a particular language of instruction signifies a public affirmation of one's ethnic belonging and simultaneously carries with it access to certain benefits (such as a good level of education or possibility to study or build a career in Poland). Those who choose a school with Lithuanian language of instruction in Lithuania or regular school (mostly with Russian as the language of instruction) in Belarus explain their choice by a presumed higher quality of teaching state language. This is considered as a necessary factor for social mobility in the country of residence (Lithuania or Belarus; cf. Leončikas 2007 on Lithuanian case). In Lithuania where funding of schooling is closely linked with the number of students, ethnicity is used as a key instrument to compete for human, and consequently economic, resources by schools with different languages of instruction (Šliavaitė 2015a, 2016). Ethnic boundaries are thus reaffirmed, and the schooling sector becomes a field of ethnic tensions and competition instead of solidarity building (Šliavaitė 2016; Balžekienė et al. 2008).

In Belarus ethnic boundaries are paradoxically maintained by the Belarusian state through its interventions into the school's educational process and attempts to limit the number of school subjects taught in Polish (Gushtyn 2017; Hrodna.life 2017). While parents who struggle against this are foremost interested in maintaining their children's education in Polish for their sense of ethnic



belonging and, more importantly, their future prospects, on a public level the question is inevitably framed as political pressure on the Polish ethnic minority in Belarus.

### ***Nongovernmental Organizations and Politicization of Ethnic Identity***

In this section we consider the role of nongovernmental organizations in maintaining Polish identity. We argue that nongovernmental institutions serve as important actors in shaping ethnic identities and can be seen as a tool for both civic and political mobilization of ethnic groups in these areas.

65 Polish nongovernmental organizations are registered in Lithuania, most of them located in the capital city of Vilnius or in the Vilnius region. Many of them are well organized. The biggest and the most influential among them is the Union of Poles in Lithuania, which has units across the country (Tautinių mažumų departamentas 2016). In southeastern Lithuania, nongovernmental activities encompass choirs and folk song groups, ethnic and popular dance collectives, school song and dance ensembles, and youth organizations. As a rule, these organizations use ethnicity as the main criterion for membership. Language, the Roman Catholic religion (Savukynas 2003; Korzeniewska 2013; Schröder and Petrušauskaitė 2013; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016), history or historical narratives (Korzeniewska 2013; Štutienė 2016), ethnic roots or descendancy (*kilmė*), and family origin (Daukšas 2014b; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016, 74–75) or genealogy (Daukšas 2014a, 98) have been reported by different researchers as important markers of the Polish ethnic identity in Lithuania. Consequently, nongovernmental organizations promote Polish ethnic culture, traditions, language, historical memory, and religion in their activities. At the same time, research indicates that, at the individual level, the importance of these elements is negotiated and context determined (Daukšas 2012; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016).

The activity of Polish NGOs focuses much on the organization of various events (e.g., commemoration of Poland Independence Day and Constitution Day, World Day of Poles) and construction of monuments that aim to sustain and promote Polish culture and commemorate specific events, places, and historical personalities (e.g., Józef Piłsudski and the manor of Zalavas, where he was born) that were considered of key importance by the Polish informants. Therefore, the activities of Polish NGOs are oriented to the Polish community and its members rather than to the broader multiethnic civil society (cf., Young 2000, 160–161). In this way, ethnic belonging is cherished and maintained (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2016, 2015a, 2015b).

Many of these organizations are subordinated to the municipality's cultural centers and partially dependent on municipal institutions and their funding. The Department of National Minorities is a governmental institution that functions at the national level and orients its activities toward national minorities in Lithuania. The Department allocates funding for projects of various ethnic minority organizations across Lithuania that aim to disseminate ethnic culture, as well as to promote cultural cooperation and intercultural dialogue (Tautinių mažumų departamentas 2018). However, our research indicates that the funds for the support of these organizations are searched in Poland due to various reasons, including low awareness of the leaders and members of NGOs in southeastern Lithuania about possibilities to apply for government funding. As a consequence, significant parts of their finances come from various organizations and foundations established in Poland, such as the Association “Polish Community” (Stowarzyszenie “Wspólnota Polska”), the Foundation “Aid to Poles in the East” (Fundacja “Pomoc Polakom na Wschodzie”), the Council for the Protection of the Memory of Battles and Martyrdom (Rada Ochrony Walk i Męczeństwa), and also the Polish Consulate (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2016). Organizations and foundations established in the Republic of Poland thus support the Polish community in southeastern Lithuania via local (regional) NGOs. The support is directed toward cultural events that are meaningful, particularly for members of the Polish community, or toward schools with Polish as the language of instruction. Consequently, the activities of these NGOs are shaped by the rules and funding provision by Poland as the kin-state (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2015a).

These nongovernmental organizations are connected, often via personal links, to the political party Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (EAPL-CFA; formerly named as Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania [EAPL]), which claims to represent the interests of Lithuania’s Polish community. The qualitative research data reveal that the leaders and members of Polish NGOs raise questions similar to those addressed in the program of the EAPL-CFA (e.g., the use of minority languages on public signs and the situation of schools with instruction of Polish language) (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2015b). In addition, many informants expressed great political confidence in the political party and its leader as representing the interests of Poles living in southeastern Lithuania. Therefore, the informants see ethnically-based party as an important actor in representing interests of ethnic minorities at the political level.

The focus on a particular ethnic group makes ethnicity a key element of political mobilization. This is nicely summarized by inhabitants of other nationalities (informants from the local Russian and Belarusian communities) who reflect on the ways political power, economic resources, and ethnic processes are interconnected:

Authorities try to shape policy to turn all these people [local people] into Poles (ополячить—in Russian), because the most important political party is now Akcja Wyborcza Polaków and they try to introduce the policy of Polonization of all this region. [. . .] This is the ruling party in our region and always, as you know it yourself, exists the ruling authorities, and it means that these people always have an open road (всегда везде дорога—in Russian). (S., male, 50 years old)

As Janušauskienė argues, “the high level of political mobilization of the Polish national minority over the issues of identity and status, and the EAPL’s near monopoly over the Polish minority votes, demonstrate the limits of multicultural integration” (2016, 588). According to data of the Central Electoral Commission, the EAPL-CFA (in coalition with the political party Russian Alliance) wins most of the votes in local and national elections in the municipality of Šalčininkai in southeastern Lithuania where Poles constitute the majority of the population (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania 2019; see also Janušauskienė 2016, 583; Kazėnas et al. 2014, 118–135). As a consequence, members of other ethnic groups in the region sometimes feel that the Polish community has more representatives at municipal-level institutions and therefore enjoy more favorable conditions for actively maintaining their culture and accessing economic benefits (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2015a).

This kind of ethnically oriented mobilization and funding helps Poles to maintain ethnic culture, but, on the other hand, promotes ethnically closed community. Activities of nongovernmental organizations gain a political dimension as well via their close contacts with the political party oriented toward the Polish ethnic minority in Lithuania. These factors can also stimulate the successful mobilization of the Polish ethnic group, joining the activities of various NGOs created on the basis of ethnicity, as well as politicizing the content of ethnic identity.

The politicization of the Polish question is also perceptible in Belarus, but the mechanisms are different. Due to the homogeneity of the Belarusian political scene under the rule of the authoritarian president Alexander Lukashenko, political parties do not play any role in this process while the political relations between Belarus and Poland are indeed significant. Poland has been an outspoken critic of Alexander Lukashenko’s political regime for a long time, providing substantial prodemocratic assistance and support to Belarusian civil society (Pospieszna 2014). The political tensions between the two countries have influenced the attitude of the Belarusian government toward the Polish minority (Tichomirow 2014).

These tensions have been remarkably represented in the situation around the most famous Polish nongovernmental organization, the Union of Poles in Belarus. There are 79 Polish cultural organizations registered in Belarus, and almost half of them are in the Hrodna region (Upolnomochennyi po delam religii i natsional’nostei 2020). However, none of the research

participants are among members of these organizations or have information on their activities. Yet, many mention the Union of Poles in Belarus when they talk about Polish organizations in Hrodna. The Union of Poles in Belarus was established in 1990 with the support of Poland (Gawin 2010). It has been long known as a politically engaged organization that expressed the position of the Polish state in regard to the Belarusian government and President Alexander Lukashenko (Gawin 2010; Pushkin 2007). In 2005 the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus did not recognize the results of the elections of the Union's chair and required re-elections. The supporters of the elected chair Andželika Borys perceived this requirement as the state's intervention into organization's affairs and the political pressure. The situation around the Union also led to diplomatic tensions between Poland and Belarus. As the result of the conflict, the Union split in two organizations with the same name. One of them works in accordance with the Belarusian legislation but is not officially recognized by Poland. Another Union is not legitimate in the eyes of the Belarusian authorities but the Polish state supports it. In Hrodna, it operates on the territory of the Polish Consulate.

Respondents who mention the Union of Poles in their interviews usually refer to the one that Poland supports. To make this distinction, people designate the Union's location (e.g., "I visit the Union on the territory of the Consulate"), the names of its chair(s), or its relations with the Polish state (e.g., "the one that is recognized by Poland"). There is also a distinction between official and unofficial Unions, but this distinction is ambiguous and depends on the position of the subject who makes the distinction. In the eyes of the Belarusian authorities, the official Union is that which works legally on the territory of Belarus. From the Polish community's point of view, the official Union is, on the contrary, the organization that is supported by Poland. Four informants are members of this Union; several others are involved or have been involved in its work. Research partners usually praise the cultural activities of the Union, claiming that they bring Polish people together and give an opportunity to practice Polish language, travel to Poland, gain useful information about Polish affairs, and spend time together. Among activities that are valued by the members and active participants of the Union are maintenance of Polish/Catholic cemeteries, language courses, and musical events for youth. However, the political dimension of the Union's work is perceived with tangible dissatisfaction. Oksana, a self-identified Pole and a teacher of the Polish language, argues:

Interviewee: I have many friends in the Union, and I can say nothing bad about it, I think it is good as such. What I really don't like is that they engage in politics too much.

Sasunkevich: So, you want them to do something else...

Interviewee: You know what I think they have to do? I think their fundamental work should be about culture and education. For example, the language courses or events aimed at consolidating Polish people. But very often the Union of Poles is associated with [political] opposition. I don't like this. [...] Politics should be done by politicians. (O., female, 28 years old)

A similar critique of Union's complicity in politicization of the ethnic question reoccurs in several other interviews. The split of the Union is defined as a dirty power game that casts shadow on the Union's activities. According to Rohava (2017), any analysis of how Belarusian citizens speak about their identities should be aware of the influence of the stable authoritarian political regime in Belarus. Thus, the clear avoidance and even condemnation of political engagement can be interpreted in the light of the political climate in Belarus where citizens "attempt to distance themselves from the political sphere and politics in general" (Rohava 2017, 663).

As our analysis in this subsection reveals, in both Lithuania and Belarus the nongovernmental organizations are perceived as important agents in maintaining Polish identity. They provide cultural activities and educational (in the Belarusian case) opportunities for the Polish community on both sides of the border. These organizations are often financially supported by Poland as a kin-state. This, in turn, can create perceptible tensions between a Polish organization and the state of its

operation (as in the Belarusian case) or between the Polish community and other ethnicized groups (as in the case of Lithuania). Moreover, Polish NGOs in the two countries contribute to politicization of the ethnic question through their relations with the political party representing the Polish population in Lithuania or through explicit engagement in the critique of the authorities, as in the Belarusian case. At the institutional level, ethnicity is used by the leaders of the nongovernmental organizations as a key element of civic and political mobilization of Poles and attracts economic resources from Poland. At the individual level, the participation of the Polish community members in activities of Polish NGOs is also encouraged by the cultural, political, and economic motives, but, at the same time, the explicit politicization may raise critique and even resistance from the Polish people who prefer the organizations representing them to stay in the sphere of culture or education. This, however, may depend on the general political climate and relations to politics among the population.

### **Karta Polaka**

*Karta Polaka* (the Polish Card), the document issued by Poland, is an important instrument for the kin-state (Poland) to shape ethnic identities of populations across the border (Ustawa 2007). It is the form of extra-territorial or “fuzzy” citizenship (Agarin and Karolewski 2015; Fowler 2004) that “gives an ethnically bounded group of non-residents certain rights on the territory of a kin-state and requires some duties (such as loyalty) in exchange” (Sasunkevich 2020, 8). The Polish government introduced *Karta Polaka* in 2007. The document targets citizens of former Soviet republics, who are of Polish descent, speak Polish, identify themselves as Poles, or promote the Polish language and culture in their societies. Those eligible to receive *Karta Polaka* should prove their Polish descent, demonstrate knowledge of the Polish language and Polish traditions, and sign a declaration of belonging to the Polish people (in Polish, *przynależność do Narodu Polskiego*; Ustawa 2007; Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, n.d.). In exchange, the Polish Card guarantees certain benefits to its possessors, such as tuition-free higher education at public universities, emergency health care in Poland, free admission to public museums and special tariffs in Polish public transport, and a visa to Poland (Ustawa 2007). Experts consider the Polish Card as a soft power strategy to promote the Polish language and culture and to recruit educated youth to the labor market in Poland (Karolewski 2015).

According to some sources, about 8,000 holders of the Polish Card were in Lithuania in 2018 (L24.lt 2018). It is estimated that *Karta Polaka* is less popular among Poles in Lithuania in comparison with Polish population in Ukraine or Belarus (Kazėnas et al. 2014, 108). The researchers indicated that for Poles in Lithuania *Karta Polaka* is first of all related with their national or ethnic belonging (Kazėnas et al. 2014, 107; Daukėsas 2012, 2015). *Karta Polaka* is seen as a form of “institutionalized identity” (Daukėsas 2012, 186) and as an instrument of a kin-state to maintain links with its ethnic population on other territories (Daukėsas 2015). Researchers indicate that *Karta Polaka* is a subject of controversial opinions and political debates in Lithuania (Kazėnas et al. 2014, 107; Daukėsas 2012, 2015). The researchers refer to public announcements of political leaders who negotiate whether holders of *Karta Polaka* are eligible to be employed in the state institutions due to their presumed disloyalty to the Lithuanian state or double loyalties (Kazėnas et al. 2014, 68; see also Daukėsas 2015). These discussions only confirm the importance of different forms of categorization and documentation by any state in shaping ethnic identities of individuals (cf. Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Daukėsas 2015).

*Karta Polaka* opens access to certain resources and benefits for its holder, such as studies in Poland (Kazėnas et al. 2014, 108–109). As discussed in the previous section on education, free-of-charge studies in Poland are valued by people in southeastern Lithuania and sometimes are perceived as the single affordable opportunity for less affluent families (cf. Šliavaitė 2016). However, we do not have data on people’s considerations on importance of *Karta Polaka* for university studies in Poland. As other research indicates (Kazėnas et al. 2014; Daukėsas 2015) some benefits offered to

holders of *Karta Polaka* might be not so important for Poles in Lithuania in comparison to Belarus. For example, Daukšas (2015, 61) refers to some qualitative fieldwork data that indicate that local Poles do not relate *Karta Polaka* to free mobility to Poland or other EU states since Lithuanian citizens are granted these rights as citizens of the EU. During our fieldwork in southeastern Lithuania we did not focus particularly on the people's perceptions and interpretations of *Karta Polaka*. However, we agree that it can be perceived as an important instrument introduced by the kin-state in maintaining Polishness and links with Poland of ethnic population over borders (Kazėnas et al. 2014; Daukšas 2015). In the context of southeastern Lithuania, where families are often ethnically and linguistically mixed and people's identities are not bounded and often flexible and situational (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016), such an instrument as *Karta Polaka* could be seen as promoting understanding of an ethnic group as some social unit marked by roots, language, and culture, what Brubaker refers to as "groupism" (2004, 2). In a similar vein, *Karta Polaka* is perceived as not compatible with the oath of allegiance to the Republic of Lithuania in discussions in the Lithuanian public space (Kazėnas 2012; cf. Kazėnas et al. 2014; cf. Daukšas 2012, 2015). This reveals the perception of ethnicity as "either-either" when simultaneously belonging and constructing one's affiliation to few cultures and groups is considered as not acceptable.

By 2017, Belarusian citizens had received approximately 100,000 Polish Cards (Melnichuk 2017). Citizens of Belarus (and Ukraine) applied for the *Karta Polaka* in far greater numbers than citizens of other former Soviet republics. Such popularity of the Polish Card in Belarus, especially compared to Lithuania, can be explained by the country's location outside of the EU and the Schengen zone. The Polish government approved *Ustawa o Karcie Polaka* the same year when Poland joined the Schengen agreement, which changed the border regime between Belarus and Poland substantially, increasing visa costs for Belarusian citizens and complicating the visa application procedure (Sasunkevich 2015). In Belarus, the Polish Card is to some extent a compensatory mechanism for Belarusian citizens, particularly those who reside in a close proximity to the border. Apart from other benefits mentioned above, *Karta Polaka* gives its possessors certain privileges when applying for the Polish national visa and residence permit in Poland. As the interviews reveal, the possibility to travel regularly to Poland and other Schengen area countries is among the main pragmatic reasons to apply for the Polish Card in Hrodna.

However, as in the case of other institutions, it would be wrong to claim that Belarusian citizens of Polish descent perceive the Polish Card in exclusively pragmatic terms. The pragmatic and symbolic motives to apply for *Karta Polaka* overlap (Sasunkevich 2020). An individual choice to obtain the Polish Card can be driven by a number of reasons where symbolic and pragmatic dimensions are not exclusive of each other but mutually determining, as in the following examples:

My major motivation was, of course, it is my dream—to send my son to study in Poland. I want them—kids—to have a free... well, for the sake of children, I want them to have visas, and I want to show them Warsaw, Krakow. [...] I want my children to have a possibility to travel out of Belarus without any obstacles. But at the same time, they also have some roots, not only me. They also have to continue this family line, the line of my mom. (N., female, 35 years old)

Why did I apply for it? To have an opportunity to practice the language, to take my children there [to Poland], to show them many things which they will remember... that their granddad was in the Polish People's Army. (T., female, 40 years old)

As both these fragments reveal, the initial motivation to apply for the Polish Card is pragmatic—it is determined by aspirations for children's future that are related to their higher education in Poland and cross-border mobility. However, cross-border mobility becomes entangled with the symbolical meaning—not just to see Poland as any foreign country but as the country that has the special significance for the family heritage and Polish roots. In this sense, initial pragmatism of seeking the

Polish Card awakes symbolic feelings of belonging to Polish ancestry and to Polish traditions. People's ethnic awakening in the process of applying and obtaining *Karta Polaka* is a leitmotif of many other interviews (Sasunkevich 2020). Paraphrasing Brubaker (2004, 10), *Karta Polaka* does not simply invoke the Polish people but also evokes them, calls them into being.

As our analysis in this subsection suggests, *Karta Polaka* has pragmatic and symbolic meanings for Poles in both Belarus and Lithuania. The benefits associated with this document motivate the Polish people in both countries to apply for it. However, the degree of pragmatic and symbolic significance differs. In the Lithuanian case, where citizens do not depend on *Karta Polaka* for their cross-border mobility within the European Union and the Schengen zone, the symbolic meaning of the document as the means to approve one's ethnic belonging is more pronounced (Kazėnas et al. 2014; Daukšas 2012, 2015). In the case of Belarus, pragmatic and symbolic aspects of the Polish Card overlap. Indeed, primarily pragmatic reasons stimulate people to initiate the application for the Polish Card, but they also become aware of its symbolic dimension in the process. As we argue, the institutional role of *Karta Polaka* in confirming and underlining ethnic belonging indicates that a broader geopolitical context shapes the ways certain institutional instruments function and fulfill their job.

## Final Discussion

In this article we have distinguished three institutions of Polishness that are most important in shaping ethnic self-identification among Polish people in Belarus and Lithuania—education, nongovernmental organizations, and extraterritorial citizenship (*Karta Polaka*). We have provided an empirically nuanced picture of how these institutions function in Belarus and Lithuania and how their role in shaping the ethnic question is perceived by the Polish minority on both sides of the Belarus-Lithuania border. Our study contributes with empirical evidence to the understanding of how the broader political and social contexts of Belarusian and Lithuanian developments affects the functioning of Polish institutions and the perception of their activities by self-identified Poles. We believe that our methodological approach and the results of our analysis can be instructive for further research on institutions of ethnicity and their role in influencing people's ethnic self-understanding across national borders.

We identified certain similarities and differences in the role of institutions in constructing and maintaining ethnic categories. In both contexts Polishness is understood in ethnocultural terms through categories of native language (which is a more crucial factor for Polish identity in Lithuania), confessional belonging (Roman Catholicism), and descent (Polish roots). As we show throughout the article, Poland as a kin-state is active in promoting these categories as a sign of ethnic belonging through investments in educational institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and the institution of extraterritorial citizenship. The policy of the kin-state creates perceptible tensions between Poles and other ethnic minorities, on the one hand, and between the Polish minority and the Belarusian and Lithuanian states, on the other hand. As we argue, the institutions of Polishness contribute to maintaining ethnic boundaries and politicizing the ethnic question in Belarus and Lithuania.

The way in which Polish people in Belarus and Lithuania perceive the role of Polish institutions depends on the difference in the political contexts and geopolitical orientations of the two states. While ethnicity is broadly used for civic and political mobilization of the Polish community in Lithuania, in Belarus the community distances itself from such political agendas, arguing that ethnicity should be a cultural, not a political, question. We explain the difference in these dynamics by their distinctive political cultures, including the political homogeneity of authoritarian Belarus and the presence of competing political forces in democratic Lithuania. Further research could demonstrate whether our explanation is sustainable in other cross-national contexts.

Another important distinction is that Lithuania, unlike Belarus, is part of the EU and the Schengen zone. As the example of *Karta Polaka* shows, the existence of the supranational (EU and

Schengen) border between Belarus and Poland and the need for cross-border mobility frames ethnic identities differently. *Karta Polaka* provides significantly more benefits for Belarusian citizens who access not only the special attitude of the Polish state but also some rights of EU residents. While the symbolic meaning of *Karta Polaka* as the documental confirmation of belonging to the Polish nation is relevant in both contexts, it is more perceptible in Lithuania. A more systematic comparative analysis could prove or nuance this suggestion. Thus, despite globalization, hybridization, EU integration, and migration, ethnic identification is still an important element that is cherished on the personal level and is instrumentalized in state policies that allocate resources and map public discourses.

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