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THE ROLE OF VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS IN CONSTRUCTING THE COMMON IDENTITY AND MOBILISING OF POLISH COMMUNITY IN SOUTHEASTERN LITHUANIA

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Abstract

This paper is based on a series of qualitative (semi-structured) interviews conducted by the author with representatives of Polish civic organisations in southeastern Lithuania (the towns of Eišiškės, Jašiūnai, Pabradė, Šalčininkai, Švenčionys, Švenčionėliai, and Turgeliai). Data was collected from January 2013 to June 2014 as part of a research project to investigate ethnic, civic, regional, and local identities of ethnic minorities in southeastern Lithuania. The project was carried out by the Institute for Ethnic Studies at the Lithuanian Social Research Centre and was funded by the Research Council of Lithuania. The paper discusses the role of voluntary organisations operating in Southeastern Lithuania in mobilising the Polish community. The author investigates the activity of Polish organisations as they maintain and construct the identity (ethnic, civic, local and regional) of local community. Part of the research strategy is to recognise the content and means by which these organisations appeal to collective memory to create and affirm Polish identity. An analysis of interview data shows that the activities of organisations predominantly target the Polish community and their aims are to promote and foster Polish culture, language, and history. The Polish civic and political organisations and their leaders play active roles in identity building and mobilising the Polish Community in southeastern Lithuania. Referencing and recalling collective memories of the Polish ethnic group is an important tool for building a collective identity that lack local and regional dimensions.

Keywords: southeastern Lithuania, Polish ethnic group, ethnic, civic, local and regional identity and voluntary organisations

Introduction

This article is based on sociological empirical research[1] conducted in southeastern Lithuania (the towns of Eišiškės, Pabradė, Šalčininkai, Švenčionys, and Švenčionėliai in both the Šalčininkai and Švenčionys region). Southeastern Lithuania is an

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ethnically mixed region located near the Lithuanian-Belarusian border. Belarusians, Jews, Lithuanians, Poles, the Roma people, and Russians live in the region, but Poles comprise the largest part of the population and Lithuanians are a minority in most southeastern Lithuanian cities. According to population census data, in 2011 Poles and Russians were the biggest ethnic minorities in Lithuania with Poles constituting 6.6%, Russians 5.8%, and Belarusians 1.2% of the Lithuanian population (2,561,000), while Lithuanians constituted 84.2% of all inhabitants. The Polish ethnic minority compactly lives in Vilnius City and southeastern Lithuania (Vilnius, Šalčininkai, Švenčionys, Trakai regions) (Census 2011).

Poles comprise the largest part of the population in Eišiškės, Šalčininkai, and Pabradė – the towns, where the interviews were conducted. The titular ethnic group – Lithuanians – form the minority of residents in these towns. In the towns of Švenčionys and Švenčionėliai, the titular ethnic group dominates (Table 1).

Table 1. Population by Nationality of the towns and regions in the study area in 2011 (%)

Locality	*Lithuanians*	*Poles*	*Russians*	*Belarusians*
Eišiškės	**8.4**	83.2	**3.2**	1.6
Pabradė	**26.8**	44.7	**18.4**	5.3
Šalčininkai	**13.8**	71.4	**7.1**	4.1
Švenčionys	**56.4**	17.3	**17.3**	4.5
Švenčionėliai	**70**	14.6	**8.6**	3.9
Šalčininkai region	**10.8**	77.8	**5.3**	3.3
Švenčionys region	**52.8**	26	**13.3**	4.6

Source: *Urban areas population by ethnicity 2011. Census 2011. Official Statistics Portal. Available at: http://osp. stat.gov.lt/en/2011-m.-surasymas* [Accessed on: 7 September 2015].

Because of the complicated historical-political and cultural processes which influence the inter-ethnic relations and competing collective memories of the different ethnic groups in the study area, this region attracts the attention of scientists from different research fields – history (e.g., Stravinskienė 2010, 2011, 2012; Nikžentatitis 2011; Kamusella 2013; Sirutavičius 2013), linguistics (e.g., Zinkevičius 1993; Gaučas 2004; Hogan-Brun, Ramonienė & Grumadienė 2005; Hogan-Brun & Ramoninenė 2005), sociology (e.g., Merkys, Balčiūnas, Balžekienė, Lapienienė, Pauliukaitė & Telešienė 2006; Balžekienė, Lapienienė, Merkys & Telešienė 2008; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė & Šliavaitė 2012; Матулионис, Фреюте-Ракаускене & Шлявайте 2013; Korzeniewska 2013; Kazėnas, Jakubauskas, Gaižauskaitė, Kacevičius & Visockaitė 2014), politology (e.g., Krupavičius 1992, 2000), or related fields (e.g., Ubarevičienė, Burneika & van Ham 2015), ethnology (e.g., Kalnius 1998), anthropology (e.g., Daukšas 2008, 2012, 2014), etc. The most popular research topics centre around identity issues (borderland, ethnic, national, religious, etc.) of different ethnic groups (mostly Poles) and the influence of historical, political, cultural processes and educational system (e.g., Polonisation, Russification) on the self-identification of the residents of that area and their state language (Lithuanian) knowledge.

Studies of the role of civic mobilisation of ethnic minorities in constructing the common identity of Polish Community in southeastern Lithuania are not numerous. The most recent studies on the processes in the region examine individual experiences of participation in politics (the evaluation of political institutions, the participation in elections, etc.). For example, the study about the national and political identity of the Polish ethnic minority in Lithuania (Kazėnas, Jakubauskas, Gaižauskaitė, Kacevičius & Visockaitė 2014), analysed the expression of Polish political identity using both the quantitative and qualitative sociological research methods. Informants were asked about their political preferences, activity and the importance of the elections held in Lithuania, the evaluation of Lithuanian political parties (also the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania), and political institutions. The research revealed that in the political identity of Lithuanian Poles, the element of resistance identity (against the ethnic majority), the greater attention and support to the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, and the "protest" vote against Lithuanian state policy (Kazėnas, Jakubauskas, Gaižauskaitė, Kacevičius & Visockaitė 2014, 154) dominates. Another recent article presents an analysis of the voting behaviour of residents who identify themselves as Poles and vote for the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania party in the surrounding areas of Vilnius. Analysis of the electoral data showed that "The dropping share of votes for the EAPL in the suburbanisation ring is most likely the result of the voter migration effect: Lithuanians from the city move to the suburban ring and vote for different parties than the original population in the region" (Ubarevičienė, Burneika & van Ham 2015, 235). The authors state that Poles ("Polish identity residents") "attempt to protect their weakening position in local politics" by voting for Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, because voter turnout in that area increased (Ubarevičienė, Burneika & van Ham 2015, 235).

In this paper the author highlights the role of voluntary organisations in mobilising the inhabitants of southeastern Lithuania of different ethnic origin and their influence in constructing group identities (ethnic, civic, local, and regional). This approach revealed the structural causes of the individual choice of civic participation and identity construction. The research focuses not only on Polish, but also other ethnic groups (Belarusian and Russian) voluntary organisations, which enables a comparison to be made of the scale and dynamism of activities of different ethnic organisations, and to look more critically (from the perspective of different ethnic groups) into the activities of various ethnic civic and political organisations.

Regarding the general situation of ethnic relations in Lithuania, it could be stated that comparing the two most numerous ethnic minority groups in Lithuania, Poles, differently from Russians, are presented publicly (in mass media) as united ethnic group of Lithuania which raises the most urgent questions related to language, education and other issues (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2015). The reason for this could be not only the favourable geographical situation of the Polish ethnic minority, but also the success of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania political party, which represents the interests of the Polish ethnic group and mobilises the voters in southeastern Lithuania very successfully[2]

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[2] The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania won eight mandates at the Seimas election in 2012 and also very successfully participated (in the coalition with the small regional Russian political party Russian Alliance) in the municipality elections in 2011 by gaining 61 seats. In all regions of southeastern Lithuanian

due to the capability to focus on the regional dimension in the party's programme, to define political aims and social claims. The main issues that the representatives of the Polish minority raise (they are also reflected in the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania party's programme) are related to the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection on National Minorities of the Council of Europe ratified in Lithuania in 2000, use of the minority (Polish) language in public signs and identity documents, and the situation of schools with ethnic minority languages instruction (including schools with the Polish language) in Lithuania. The amendments to the Law on Education in 2011 increased the number of lessons of the Lithuanian language in schools with the instruction in ethnic minority languages and equated the Lithuanian language graduate exam for schools with Lithuanian and ethnic minority languages instruction, which this is considered as discriminatory by some local Polish leaders. The successful election results of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania in the Šalčininkai region suggest that the collective identity of the region's population (mostly the Polish ethnic group) is politicised and this motivates them to vote and participate in political activities. "Politicised collective identity" is understood as a "form of collective identity that underlies group members' explicit motivations to engage" in a power struggle between social groups within society (Simon & Klandermans 2001, 323).

Short theoretical discussions on identity building processes and civic participation of ethnic minorities

This article analyses the activity of Polish voluntary organisations and their role in maintaining and constructing the ethnic, civic, local, and regional identities of Poles in southeastern Lithuania. The author sympathises with the constructivist approach in identity research. The scientists criticise the lack of the consideration of the mechanisms of identity construction, the influence of certain contexts to the construction of individual and collective identities (Brubaker & Cooper 2000). It is noticed that the mechanisms of group(s) "formation" or "self-formation" should preferably be analysed, rather than the groups *per se* (Brubaker, Loveman & Stamatov 2004, 45). The scientists emphasise that the identities are constructed and changing (Barth 1969, Sanders 2002, etc.) and that it is important to contextualise the analysis of identity construction and analyse how/in which ways the state policy, various institutions and social institutes the political interests groups shape collective identities or identity construction at the individual level (Wimmer 2008; Penn 2008; Ore 2011, etc.).

Ethnic civic organisations are based mostly on a common identity along with common interests or shared values. Such civic associations are organised along ethnic lines, thus the collective memory of these groups is evoked in creating social trust among its members

the coalition of Poles and Russians named Block of Valdemaras Tomaševskis won mandates. They gained the largest number of mandates in Šalčininkai (22 of 25) and Vilnius (19 of 27) regional municipality councils. The election slate of coalition candidates for the town municipalities of Šalčininkai and Eišiškės (a municipality of the Šalčininkai district) was particularly successful, because they gained the largest share of the votes (63.32 and 72.73 per cent respectively). The other parties that participated in the election in the same electoral districts received less than 2% of all votes (Information provided by The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania at www.vrk.lt).

(Fennema & Tillie 2001, 35). Thus, the civic community of ethnic groups is shaped and the amount of social trust within these ethnic groups is influenced by the content of collective memories (Fennema & Tillie 2001, 36).

Therefore the research presented in the article aimed to investigate and discuss the structural (i.e., institutional) factor which determine one or another type of identity. The role of voluntary organisations (as social institute) in identity building and mobilising the Polish community in southeastern Lithuania is discussed in the paper.

Ethnic identity is defined as "separating" and civic – as "inclusive" (Ignatieff 1993 cited from Hansen & Hesli 2009, 2), because in the construction of ethnic identity the most important factor is the ethnic origin of the group members, which becomes the basis of membership in and identification with the particular group (Zimmer 2003, 174-175). Besides ethnic origin, ethnic identity is based on other following factors such as common language, religion, culture, and history. Meanwhile, in the construction of civic identity, despite the ethnic origin of group members, the most important binding element is the state of residence and identification with the state of residence (Zimmer 2003, 174-175). Some scientists argue that concepts of ethnic and civic identities are not complete, because they do not incorporate other ranges of various identities that nationals have (Hansen & Hesli 2009, 3). The local and regional identities in our case are seen as supplementing the dichotomy of ethnic and civic identities. The local identity refers to the informants' identification with locality (e.g., city, street, house of residence), while the regional identity is understood as identification with the particular region. The identification of Lithuanian Poles with the particular locality (Vilnius) and region (Vilnius region, which is called *Vilnija* by Polish informants) rather than with the whole of Lithuania, was revealed by the "ENRI-East: Interplay of European, National and Regional Identities: nations between states along the new eastern borders of the European Union" research data (see more Contextual and Empirical Reports on Ethnic Minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. The Polish Minority in Lithuania 2011; Frėjutė-Rakauskienė & Šliavaitė 2012; Матулионис, Фреюте-Ракаускене & Шлявайте 2013; Waechter 2015).[3]

According to the presented short theoretical considerations, this article raises the following questions: how do voluntary organisations manage to operate in such an ethnically diverse region of southeastern Lithuania? What is the character of voluntary organisations in terms of their activities, aims, and intentions? How do the leaders of the voluntary organisations appeal to the collective memory of Poles, and what historical events, themes and wording do they use in order to mobilise local Polish residents? How do the various activities encouraged by local leaders affect other forms of Polish identity (ethnic, civic, local, and regional)?

Presentation of research methodology

The qualitative sociological research data is analysed in the article. In order to achieve the objectives of the research, the data of the research was collected through semi-structured

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[3] For more about the research on ethnic minorities in southeastern Lithuania and research areas of ethnicity and identity in social sciences and their application in researching the ethnic processes of southeastern Lithuania, see: Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Marcinkevičius, Šliavaitė & Šutinienė 2013.

interviews conducted with the leaders and representatives of actively operating various voluntary organisations of Poles, Russians, Belarusians, and Lithuanians (folk and popular music ensembles, dance collectives, associations, organisations established in schools [children's collectives of dance and songs], leaders and members of communities, representatives of political parties [Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, Lithuanian Social Democrats and Lithuanian Peasants Party].

The additional sample criteria, such as an ethnic origin (those who identify with Poles, Belarusians, Russians, or consider their ethnic origin as "mixed"), gender, and age (the informants of three groups: younger age group – from 17 until 30 years, middle – from 30 – until 50 and older – from 50 and older) was applied in the research.

Various concepts are used to refer to the civic community organisations (Vu 2008; Channey & Fevre 2001; Heelsum 2002; Fennema & Tillie 2001), although even if they are civic, they do not always qualify as non-governmental organisations (see more Willets 2006; Žiliukaitė 2006; Šiliauskas 2006, etc.). This research also included those civic organisations that are not always defined as non-governmental, because most of them were established under the curatorship of cultural centres and schools with the Polish language of instruction and partly funded by the municipality or school resources. Taking into account the specifics and nature of the organisations whose members the author interviewed for this study, all of the organisations are referred to as voluntary rather than non-governmental. The concept of a voluntary organisation includes a wider range of institutions, such as public organisations and associations, charity and support funds, political parties, and religious communities (Žiliukaitė 2006, 21).

Informants were researched in various ways, i.e., looking for personal contacts and by the snowball sampling. Different strategies for informants selection allows the research sample to be diversified.

The author conducted 26 qualitative semi-structured interviews: nine interviews were conducted in the town of Šalčininkai, seven in Eišiškės, and five in Švenčionys. During the process of researching the informants, three interviews were carried out in Pabradė and one each in the towns of Turgeliai and Švenčionėliai, i.e., localities near the research locations. Šalčininkai, Eišiškės and Turgeliai are in the municipality of Šalčininkai region, Švenčionys and Pabradė – in the municipality of the Švenčionys region. The interview data were collected during the period from January 2013 to June 2014.

The instrument of field research was the questionnaire, which consisted of 62 questions, divided into the separate groups related with the various spheres, themes, supposedly important for the formation and expression of identities: ethnic origin, religion, language and social relationships, historical homeland, history and change of territorial borders, education, labour market, civic and political participation, ethnic tensions, and media consumption and media choice. A qualitative research questionnaire was applied to consider each informant individually: the experiences of the informant, reactions to the research questions, and the sequence of narration and content. Additional, clarifying questions were asked during the interview. Aspects of civic participation were revealed by asking a series of questions regarding the activities, aims, and goals of the respective voluntary organisations, the main sources of finances, descriptions of their membership, the target audience when organising different activities, the frequency and modes of

collaboration with other voluntary organisations, state institutions, and various contacts in Lithuania and foreign countries, the role of "kin states", the support of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, the meaning or raison d'etre of ethnic minorities parties, and the attitude of organisation members and the leader to state policies concerning the ethnic groups.

There were no major difficulties in getting agreement to give interviews.

The interviews were conducted by the author in the Lithuanian and Russian languages depending on the fluency of the interviewee.

The richest, deepest interviews were transcribed word for word in the language in which the interview was conducted. Most interviews were made in the Russian language, which is used widely in the research area (see also Hogan-Brun, Ramonienė & Grumadienė 2005, 356; Daukšas 2014). Interviews were anonymised and analysed according to thematic codes (components of ethnicity which are important to different ethnic groups [language, origin, religion, history, etc., drawing boundaries between ethnic groups and interethnic relations], the relations to the locality, region, and state, the elements and concepts of public spirit and civic activity, relations to Lithuania and "kin" states [Belarus, Poland, and Russia], cultural celebrations, historical monuments, relations to historical memory and ethnic and civic identity formation, and the role of social memory in civic and political mobilisation of ethnic groups). The research data was structured and summarised in order to clarify the meanings constructed by informants and to answer the research questions.

The research data was analysed through two different aspects. The first is the expression of ethnic, civic, local, and regional identities and the interplay of these identities in different research locations regarding the informants' age. The other is the analysis of civic participation and their interaction with ethnic, civic, local, and regional identity formation and transformation.

This article is based on data which is presented below and elicited in interviews conducted with representatives of Polish voluntary organisations in order to show how voluntary organisations, in their activity and by evoking the collective memory, history, and the past, mobilise the Polish community and shape the identities on a collective and individual level.

The activity of Polish civic organisations

Polish ethnic group have an intense network among their voluntary organisations in most towns where Poles are the dominant group. These were also the towns chosen for conducting the interviews. Most all the Polish organisations where interviews were conducted are actively engaged in activities to promote their national culture. The highest number of interviews with the representatives of Polish voluntary organisations were completed in Šalčininkai and Eišiškes; some in Švenčionėliai, Pabradė, Jašiūnai, and Turgeliai; none in Švenčionys. Most of the interviewed Polish voluntary organisations (i.e., folk/popular music song and dance ensembles) were established under the curatorship of cultural centres and their structural units – entertainment centres or leisure halls – and schools with Polish as the main language of instruction. The House of Poles, established in Eišiškės is a branch of the Union of Poles in Lithuania (the biggest voluntary organisation,

which unites thousands of Poles in different places of Lithuania).[4] The Union of Poles in Lithuania also has branches in *Šalčininkai* and *Švenčionys*.

Since promotion of their ethnic culture, language, and history is at the core of most interviewed Polish voluntary organisations, their activities and events are focused on carrying out this mission. Most of the Polish folk ensembles not only in the Šalčininkai region (Solčanie, Zgoda, Vilija) were established after Lithuania regained independence. According to the leader of one of the folk ensembles, Poles also wanted to revive and maintain their culture and to speak their native language (No. 29, a middle-age Polish woman). On the other hand, the younger generation that attend schools with Polish language instruction do not feel the same need to be involved in the activities of the Polish ensembles as the older generation who find it more challenging to maintain their native language and culture (No. 29, a middle-age Polish woman).

The repertoire of some Polish folkloric ensembles mostly reflects aspects of Polish culture through selecting songs from various regions in Poland. However, the repertoire of other Polish folk ensembles features elements of the local and regional culture. In creating their repertoire, most Polish ensembles are guided by the published collection of songs from the Vilnius region. Some of the leaders of the ensembles are folklorists who travel to the countryside to collect songs from older people in order to renew their repertoire. Paradoxically, according to folklore experts, it is hard to tell which songs come from the southeastern region in Lithuania and which songs come from Poland (No. 29, a middle-age Polish woman). The distinctive language[5] of the region is partly reflected in the texts of these songs. The research data revealed that Polish politicians and leaders of some voluntary organisations have frequently expressed their wish for Lithuanian Poles to speak in normative Polish rather than the local dialect (*po prostu* or *tutejszy*), pointing out that Poles from Poland laugh at hearing it (No. 29, a middle-age Polish woman). The repertoire of most Polish music ensembles is dominated by songs in Polish. However, after a change in the leadership, there have been cases when the ensemble's repertoire was supplemented with Lithuanian and regional songs. Such initiatives were opposed by many members and also met with negative reactions in the regional press. In due course, the members of that collective realised the benefits of having songs in different languages, because it opened up more opportunities for the ensemble to participate in diverse events and festivals not only in Lithuania and Poland (Poland regions festivals), but also internationally (e.g., in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Italy, Spain, Germany, etc.) (No. 23, a middle-age Polish woman).

Often these music collectives have a repertoire of religious songs, which they employ when they are invited to sing in Catholic churches during religious ceremonies and sacral music festivals.

The music ensembles and collectives of Poles have a well established schedule of annual events, which take place in the cities and towns of southeastern Lithuania: the regional

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[4] Information provided by the Union of Poles in Lithuania on their website www.zpl.lt.

[5] The informants perceive this specific regional or local (called *po prostu* or *tutejszy*) language as a mix of different languages (Polish, Belarusian, Russian, sometimes Lithuanian) spoken by the inhabitants of southeastern Lithuania in their everyday life.

Polish song festival "The Song Nearby Vilija", which takes place in the House of Polish culture in Vilnius, the previously known Vilnius festival "The Blossom of East Lithuania", "The Song Nearby Šalčia" in Šalčininkai, "Choral Music Festival" in the Eišiškės Catholic church, "The Flowers of Poles" in Nemenčinė, and "On the Shores of Žeimena" in Pabradė. They were also invited to international festivals in Poland, the Czech Republic, Belarus, Germany, etc. (No. 31, a middle-age Polish woman; No. 22, a Polish woman of retirement age; No. 29, a middle-age Polish woman).

According to informants, commemorations, feasts, and other events organised by Polish voluntary organisations are held in the official language of the state, although some events of Polish voluntary organisations are held in Polish (No. 22, a Polish woman of retirement age). Taking into account the multi-ethnic audience, the repertoire of feasts (i.e., which are held in the centres of culture in the Šalčininkai region municipality) includes Russian and Lithuanian songs as well as western music (i.e., songs in the English language) alongside Polish songs.

The activities of these organisations mainly target the local Polish community. The qualitative data revealed that those schools with instruction in Polish and the Catholic Church are the most involved in the voluntary organisations. The Church also helps inform the community about forthcoming events and is the place where members of the voluntary Polish organisation meet. Regional newspapers such as *Mūsų kraštas*, *Šalčios žinios*, and *Švenčionių kraštas* provide information about the voluntary organisations' different activities.

Most organisations take care of students at Polish schools and mediate in searching for scholarship sponsors in Lithuania or Poland. The voluntary organisations sponsor excursions for children to Poland and take them to different meetings:

"<…>*We are searching for sponsors and supporters. We have supporters from Poland. They are taking our children out – and now, on Friday, one sponsor will arrive and will bring us (laughing) a huge cake, he promised. <…> organising, some meetings <…> Now in January it was the meeting with the priest <…> – spotkanie opłatkowe. There were representatives from the entire region <…>*" (No.22, a Polish woman of retirement age, interview conducted in Lithuanian language).

Members of three voluntary organisations said that their activities target the wider audience (mainly youth) in Lithuania. The activities of one of those two organisations is dedicated to youth intercultural cooperation and dialogue (international youth exchanges: projects, conferences, forums and meetings, seminars, and trainings) (No. 38, a young Polish woman). The other organisation also cooperates with civic organisations abroad and participates in the international programmes (i.e., the EU program "Leader") (No. 37, a middle-aged Russian woman). The activities of the third organisation are devoted to multi-ethnic members of the town (No. 4, a middle-aged Polish man).

Young (2000) distinguishes between private and civic associations. The former are defined as "organisations which welcome strangers, but only strangers with whom the organisation members claim a specific identity or affinity", and civic associations "tend to be inclusive in this sense that it is open in principle to anyone" (Young 2000, 161). Polish voluntary organisations could be viewed as more private than civic (inclusive).

For example, one of the leaders of the civic-oriented organisations stated that the local authority of one municipality tried to block their activities and did not provide a place for their organisation to meet because it was afraid of the political competition and did not want to foster interethnic dialogue:

"<…> this is a small town and everybody knows who "is breathing what". When you just go to any school for a meeting, <…> to invite the youth to join our organisation, since we are lacking volunteers from the youth. And they [local authority of municipality – authors' comment] think that you are creating some new force against them. They really are afraid, because they know that they will not live like that all the time." (No. 38, a young Polish woman, interview conducted in the Lithuanian language).

The organisations' repertoires of events, which are established under the House of Culture, are determined by the Department of Culture of the Municipality. Some interviewees that were representatives of such organisations were not of Polish origin. They stated that the Municipality addressing these questions politicised them by highlighting Polish nationalism, (i.e., "Polishness"). This was evident by them selecting mostly Polish (and also some Lithuanian) songs, but not songs in Russian:

"We wanted to sing Russian songs at the feast, and they take these songs and removed them from the repertoire. Why is that? Beautiful song. <...> No, you should sing Polish songs. Only Polish songs, that's all... <…>" (No. 1, a middle-aged Lithuanian man, interview conducted in the Russian language).

It was revealed that the initiative to organise and celebrate various events, feasts, and commemorations is mainly derived from the municipality administration. It is sometimes initiated by voluntary organisations or even the Polish Consulate (No. 19, a Polish man of retirement age). It is also stated that the authorities of a municipality influence the decisions related to which events, feasts, and dates are to be held/organised or celebrated/commemorated:

"Our authorities, play the game of nationalism, Polish nationalism. <…> It was an excellent feast of ensembles of popular music. Why did they close it? Now they are heavily financing the development of such events, such nationalistic <…>, because they gain benefit from that. <…>" (No.1, a middle-aged Lithuanian man, interview conducted in Russian language).

The forms of appeal to the collective memory by Polish voluntary organisations

The qualitative interviews with the representatives or leaders of Polish voluntary organisations revealed that history is involved in the process of strengthening or constructing the collective identity of Poles. This is accomplished through the following activities or events organised by voluntary organisations: commemorations of historical events and people, and (re)building monuments of historical personalities or heroes important for the Polish ethnic group. Therefore, it could be stated that collective memory is a very important tool used to construct Polish ethnic collective identity and mobilise

it. Collective memory, according to the definition of Maurice Halbwachs, is the memory of a group's past, which helps them define their identity in relation to other social groups (Fine 2005, cited from Halas 2008, 107). Researchers who explore collective memory make the connection between identity and the construction of the meaningful places, symbolic landscapes, where collective memory and national identity are formally and informally constructed and reinforced (Osborne 2001).

The main and most important events for Lithuanian Poles mentioned by the interviewees are the commemoration of Poland Independence Day (usually commemorated at the manor of Zalavas where Józef Piłsudski was born) and Constitution Day, the procession from Seimas to the Gates of Dawn in Vilnius to celebrate Polonia Day, Christmas meetings, and the marathon from Zalavas to the Rasos Cemetery in Vilnius to commemorate the Poland Independence Day, etc., (No. 22, a Polish woman of retirement age). Polish politicians usually take the opportunity to participate in these important commemorative events. Students and members of voluntary organisations also make up most of the other participants at these events (No. 8, a Polish middle-aged woman; No. 22, a Polish woman of retirement age).

The other mentioned feasts that are celebrated are Pancake Day (usually in the schools) and the Fall harvest feast. Different organised sport events or competitions are also related to different Polish historical dates (the annual marathon from Zalavas to the Rasos Cemetery in Vilnius commemorates Poland Independence Day) (No. 22, a Polish woman of retirement age).

An interviewee spoke about their voluntary organisation's aim to revive and perpetuate important historical personalities and places, such as Józef Piłsudski and the manor of Zalavas, where he was born, the Chapel-Mausoleum of Polish General D. Konieževskij in Punžionys, the places in Švenčionys, Adutiškės and Švenčionėliai where, in 1942, local inhabitants (among them Poles) were killed, and the cemeteries of the Polish soldiers of 1919-1920, etc., (No. 19, Polish man of retirement age; No.22, a Polish woman of retirement age).

The interview data revealed that Poles in Lithuania, regardless of generation, are interested in the history of their historical homeland (e.g., the history of the Warsaw Uprising and the beginning of the Second World War, starting with German military forces invading Poland in 1939); They refer to the territorial-historical dependence of Lithuania to Poland (e.g., one interviewee said that Lithuanian textbooks should acknowledge that the territory of southeastern Lithuania formerly belonged to the Polish state and this region has always been inhabited by Poles and only the state borders have changed) (No.22, a Polish woman of retirement age). In the construction of the Polish ethnic identity, Polish voluntary organisations employ a mix of elements from local, regional and Polish culture. Regional elements include the history of the region, important memorial places (e.g., the museum of A. Krepštul, a famous folk artist from that region), the traditions of Kaziukas Fair (St. Casimir), the songs of the region in local vernacular, religious customs, and so on. The main elements of Polish culture included are the history of Poland (important historical dates, places, personalities, and a Polish-centred view of history), Polish songs, and speaking in normative Polish. It should be noted that leaders and representatives of voluntary organisations explicitly emphasised their civic position during the interviews, thus demonstrating their political loyalty to the Lithuanian state. They said that they

celebrated official state holidays and commemorated all the important dates of Lithuanian history (e.g., The Day of Freedom Defenders on January 13th, The Day of Restoration of Independence of Lithuanian on March 11th, The Day of Restoration of the State of Lithuania on February 16th, Mindaugas Coronation on July 6th). They admitted that not many people attended these state celebrations (mostly these commemorative events were not attended in Eišiškės and Šalčininkai).

The financial sources of Polish voluntary organisations:0 "those that pay have their choice of music".

Poland as the kin-state plays an important role in the identity construction of Poles in southeastern Lithuania. The evidence for support is that Polish non-governmental organisations are mainly financed by organisations from Poland. Funds for the different cultural or commemorative projects mainly come from Poland, from organisations 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 Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa), and also the Polish Consulate:

"<...> We are applying to the Polish Consulate, writing the projects <...> concluding the budget. And then they are arriving, they have Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństw, one firm in Poland, which takes care of the memorials of culture and tragedy <...> where soldiers are buried. This is the whole history. <...> And then they arrive, the commission, check all the projects and <…> provides funding. <...>" (No. 19, a Polish man of the retirement age, interview conducted in the Russian language).

Schools and other educational institutions with instruction in Polish cooperate with the schools in different cities of Poland and write projects together (No. 19, a Polish woman of retirement age). Cooperation also takes place at the municipal level, as administrators of a municipality will sign cooperation agreements with cities in Poland.

The other financial necessities of organisations are met through the collection of funds from "local resources" (i.e., membership fees, the two per cent income tax, and sources in the municipality). The appeal for financial support from funds of the Lithuanian state (i.e., the Ministry of Culture of the Lithuanian Republic that supervises the issues of ethnic minorities during the period when the interviews were conducted) was very rarely mentioned. Some informants did not even know about the possibility to appeal for the financial support from the Lithuanian state.

The representatives of Russian or Belarusian voluntary organisations in the towns where the research was conducted complained about the lack of support (also financial) from the municipality for their activities:

"The Polish – all the authorities are Poles. Everything is theirs in the municipality <…> (laughing) <...> we are poor relatives. Sure, if to speak the truth, the other Lithuanian political parties, could provide us with some help. <…>" (No. 6, a Belarusian man of retirement age, interview conducted in Russian language).

"*We are fighting that our region and municipality build any monumental stones (to the victims of facism – a.n.) in these villages <…> They are answering us: yes, we are also interested in preserving the memory of these events. But before solving this question and building some monuments or simple monumental stones, we need to conduct some research. And in Warsaw, in Poland, there are such organisations, which can conduct such research…<…>*" (No. 7, a Russian man of retirement age, interview conducted in the Russian language).

The politisation of the collective identity of Poles

The close cooperation between the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania and other Polish voluntary organisations was revealed during the interviews. Usually, the members of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania are also members of civic organisations and are involved in their activities. Polish voluntary organisations (civic and political) cooperate mainly with each other and strategic questions are decided together (No. 19, a Polish man of retirement age).

The qualitative data revealed that the leaders of Polish voluntary organisations raise questions similar to those addressed in the programme of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania. The use of minority languages on public signs and the situation of schools with ethnic minority language instruction (including schools with Polish instruction) in Lithuania were commonly referred to by the informants' issues. Disappointment regarding the situation of the Polish minority (or the situation of minorities in general) related to the amendments to the Law on Education in 2011, which raised the number of lessons taught in Lithuanian in schools with instruction in the language of an ethnic minority (e.g., Polish, Russian) and uniform the requirements for the Lithuanian language graduate exam for schools with Lithuanian and ethnic minority language instruction, was expressed (No. 2, a Polish middle-aged woman; No. 18, a Polish middle-aged man; No. 8, a Polish middle-aged woman; No. 19, a Polish man of retirement age). The recent decade of the absence of the Law on National Minorities and the abolition of the Department of National Minorities and Lithuanians Living Abroad was perceived as the state's lack of concern regarding ethnic minorities (No. 19, a Polish man of the retirement age).

According to the informants, they feel no ethnic tensions in their everyday lives, and feel that whatever ethnic tensions exist are fuelled by Lithuanian politicians (No. 18, a Polish middle-aged man; No.8, a Polish middle-aged woman).

"*In each region there are people, who understand us... the problems are made by those up above, they raise hostility among us and do not know what they want*" (No. 32, a Polish woman of retirement age, interview conducted in the Russian language)

Most informants, especially those who identify themselves with the Polish ethnic minority, consider the political parties based on ethnicity to be very important, as they were the sole actors for political representation of the ethnic minorities. The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (and its leader) is perceived as the only political force that represents Polish minority interests, both at the national and international level (No. 22, a Polish woman of retirement age; No. 2, a Polish middle-aged woman). The informants emphasised that Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania proves to their electorate that they

are defending their interests not by speeches but by actual results. For the informants, it was a very important fact that the members of their party originated from this region (No. 2, a middle-aged Polish woman).

"*Maybe for the Polish minority it is a little bit easier, since they have their representatives in the parliament and even in the European Parliament. This is some kind of support. You are just not pushed away and nobody cares for you.*" (No. 18, a Polish middle-aged man, interview conducted in the Lithuanian language).

The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania is also seen as a conduit for young and active persons to make a political carrier and seek high political posts not only on municipal but also at the national level (No. 8, a Polish middle-aged woman).

The informants who did not identify themselves with the Polish ethnic minority expressed criticism towards the parties of ethnic minorities, specifically towards the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, since they are said to promote ethnically based conflicts (No. 3, a middle-aged man from a mixed Russian-Polish family; No. 1, a Lithuanian middle-aged man).

Conclusions on the role of Polish voluntary organisations in constructing the identities of the Polish community in southeastern Lithuania

The analysis of qualitative interview data show that civic participation in the cities of southeastern Lithuania where the research was conducted is fragmented along ethnic boundaries. Voluntary organisations are based mostly on a common identity (Polish), along with common interests or shared values with regard to political or religious affiliations. Although many of the informants said that the people of other nationalities, not only Poles, are members of their organisations, it was apparent that most organisational activities target the Polish community and their organisational aims are focused on promoting and fostering Polish culture, language, and history. Thus, Polish civic and political organisations and their leaders play active roles in identity-building and mobilising the Polish community in southeastern Lithuania. The collective memory of the Poles in this area is an important tool for building a common identity.

The content of identity constructed by Polish voluntary organisations and their leaders and members of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania political party includes features of ethnic, local, regional, and civic identity. The content of Polish ethnic identity is often filled by features considered characteristic of Poles from Poland (e.g., normative Polish language, the songs, dances and music of Poland regions), but not local or regional features. The normative Polish language becomes one of the components in the cultural content of Polish ethnic identity as constructed by the Polish voluntary organisations. The important issues for the Polish community are reflected by the voluntary Polish organisations' leaders and declared in the political programme at national and international level. These issues are related to the use, or more specifically the absence of use, of Polish in bilingual street names, Polish alphabet inscriptions in personal documents, and the increase of subjects in the Lithuanian language in schools with instruction provided in Polish. History is

the subject of many different events (e.g., feasts, concerts, exhibitions, show, festivals, commemorations, (re)building of monuments, religious events, sport competitions, marathons, and so on). These events are organised by voluntary organisations and typically articulate the history of Poland (celebration of Polish state holidays [May 3rd, November 11th, etc.], honoured historical personalities of Poland [e.g., Józef Piłsudski]). On the other hand, these organisations also affirm their loyalty to the Lithuanian state (e.g., in celebrations of Lithuanian State holidays). However, the empirical data show that at the local level, these "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm 1983) lack "local" or "regional" dimensions of identity reflecting Poles in Lithuania. The research on the identity of Poles in southeastern Lithuania shows that at the individual level these local forms of identity are important but have no opening for expression given the ritual emphasis on Polish national historical events. However, the research on ethnic minority voluntary organisations shows that the activities of those few voluntary organisations with leaders of the younger generation of Poles are more civic than ethnic oriented.

Polish voluntary organisations mostly gain attention and are financed by Polish organisations for compatriots, which also partly shapes the content of their activities. After closing the Department of National Minorities and Lithuanians Living Abroad, the voluntary organisations of ethnic groups, felt the lack of financial support and are not aware of the possibility to appeal and where to appeal for financial support from the Lithuanian state. Such support could help strengthen civic identity. Such a situation as it is now leads to the attitude of local inhabitants of the region that only the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania serves their interests, and those who disapprove of this party policy can not see a viable alternative in the political field.

In such a political context, civic participation in maintaining the ethnic boundaries of the Polish community leads to the development of strong social ties among voluntary (civic and political) organisations and among members of those organisations, and politicises their collective ethnic identity.

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