

OLD ISSUES – NEW APPROACHES? PEOPLE OF POLISH DESCENT IN THE FORMER USSR COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This article concerns people of Polish descent in the former USSR countries. Terms such as the Polonia, (ethnic) Poles, the Polish minority and others are presented and explained. The majority of those terms is burdened with “martyrological” or ideological and political overtones or, alternatively, hardly fits the local realities. Hence I am of the opinion that the most appropriate is to talk of people of Polish origin, to whom it is possible to include the Poles, the Polonia, the Polish minority, as well as people of other nationalities who cherish their Polish roots.

In my opinion, it is difficult to speak of a homogeneous and cohesive culture and identity of people living abroad who refer to their Polishness, even on the level of a concrete country. The internal variability of this category makes it impossible to research as a uniform group which presents a certain type of Polishness common to its entirety, contrary to the manner of researching it in many Polish emigration studies. The study of local communities of Polish origin, which are homogeneous on the local level but illustrate the variability and gradability of Polishness on the general level, may be a possible solution to this problem.

The final section of the article focuses on the difficulties in defining Polishness in the East. These difficulties involve the issue of singling out the Poles from the broad category of people of Polish origin in the East, as well as the “artificial” kindling of Polishness. The difficult economic situation of the former USSR countries, which may affect the implementation of identity strategies, is also mentioned.

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Artykuł ten traktuje o ludności polskiego pochodzenia w krajach byłego ZSRR. Przedstawione i wyjaśnione zostają terminy takie jak Polonia, (etniczni) Polacy, mniejszość polska i inne. Większość z nich jest obciążona brzemieniem martyrologicznym lub ideologiczno-politycznym lub też niezbyt przystaje do miejscowych realiów. Dlatego też uważam, że najzasadniej jest mówić o ludności polskiego pochodzenia, do której można zaliczyć Polaków, Polonię, mniejszość polską, jak też osoby innych narodowości, które odwołują się do swoich polskich korzeni.

Moim zdaniem, trudno jest mówić, nawet na poziomie konkretnego kraju, o homogenicznej i zwartej kulturze i tożsamości osób odwołujących się do polskości. Zróżnicowanie wewnętrzne tej kategorii sprawia, że nie można jej badać jako jednolitej grupy prezentującej pewien wspólny dla całości typ polskości, jak ma to miejsce w wielu studiach polonijnych. Rozwiązaniem może tutaj być badanie społeczności lokalnych polskiego pochodzenia, które są homogeniczne na poziomie lokalnym, pokazują jednak zróżnicowanie i stopniowalność polskości na poziomie ogólnym.

W ostatniej części artykułu przedstawione zostają trudności w określaniu polskości na Wschodzie. Dotyczą one zarówno wyodrębniania Polaków z szerokiej kategorii osób polskiego pochodzenia na Wschodzie, jak i 'sztucznego' rozbudzenia polskości. Wspominam również o trudnej sytuacji ekonomicznej krajów byłego ZSRR, która może mieć wpływ na podejmowane strategie tożsamościowe.

Key words: Polish minority, former USSR, identity, ethnicity, locality.

Polish emigration studies are an exceptional field of study, covering the areas of various social sciences and utilising their theoretical and methodological solutions. Among the most renowned scholars are historians, sociologists, ethnologists, folklorists, political scientists and, to a lesser extent, also religious scientists and economists. Each of these disciplines has developed its own research workshop, which is applied in the exploration of the broad subject matter encompassed by Polish emigration studies. The research focuses mainly on Poles and their descendants living outside the Polish borders. In the current article I would like to present some remarks that occur to an ethnographer who has for many years studied communities of this type in the East.¹

The tradition of Polish emigration studies in the social sciences in Poland was established relatively recently, slightly over a century ago.² It must be remembered, however, that the existence of Polish communities abroad was mentioned also in much earlier periods and those records originated from almost all continents. For instance, the first records of Poles in Siberia date from the 16th century. In the following century quite a few diaries were written, mostly by exiles,³ which not only rendered the picture of the deportation, but also described the land and the peoples that inhabited it. In the later periods, in the 18th and 19th century, the lives of Poles abroad, not only in Russia, were documented in an increasingly efficient and more scientific manner (Kuczyński 1972, pp. 394–395; 1998, pp. 15–30).

In the period of the People's Republic of Poland, the topic of Poles in the USSR was not deemed to be of particular interest. Historical studies presenting Polish communities in the "deeper" historical perspective constituted an exception (e.g. Chodubski 1983, 1984, 1988; Dach 1979; Iwanow 1988; Kuczyński 1981, 1983a, 1983b; Kurzowa 1983, 1985, 1988; Szczerbiński 1979). They focused mainly on the distant past, mainly the era of tsarist Russia; only a few included the commencement of the Second World War in their time frame. An exception to this were the works of Zofia Kurzowa devoted to the Polish language in the USSR and in Belarus and Lithuania. This state of affairs probably resulted from certain limitations imposed on scholarship by the Communist ideology, from the fear of publicising some episodes of the Soviet national policy (e.g. the issue of Katyń executions, deportations or repressions), as well as difficulties in accessing research materials in the relevant localities.

¹ Extremely interesting remarks on the understanding of the term 'the East' are found in the article by Zbigniew Jasiewicz (2004).

² More on the history of Polish emigration studies, see Kubiak 1975.

³ For instance Adam Kamiński-Dłużyk, Karol Lubicz Chojecki or Józef Kopec.

More publications began to appear after the year 1990. Many of them were based mainly on historical material. Until the mid-1990s, articles pertaining to contemporary aspects of the lives of Poles in the East were a rarity (Budakowska 1992; Dzwonkowski 1993 and others). More studies on this topic began to appear only after 1995 (m.in. Kabzińska 1999; Korzeniewska 1997;⁴ Krzyszycha 1996; Nowicka 2000; Szyrkiewicz 1996).

Historical studies seem to prevail among works pertaining to Poles in the former USSR countries, or at least they are the best known. Attempting to summarise the state of research on the Polonia in the East (in 2001), Andrzej Sadowski emphasised that in the largest number of works published after the year 1989 the approach was historical and they were based mainly on official data.⁵ “Martyrological” topics predominate, presenting the tragic fate of Poles and the Catholic Church in the East (2001, pp. 50–51). Concerning collective works with a larger input from ethnologists and sociologists, *Polacy czy cudzoziemcy?* (Nowicka 2000), *Ich małe ojczyzny* (2003) and *Kultura i świadomość etniczna Polaków na Wschodzie* (2004) are worth mentioning. They focus on more than one topic, but are attentive to those aspects of the life of Polish communities abroad which are of interest to ethnologists.

As to literature concerning issues in ethnology and sociology – and these are of the greatest interest to me – it is very varied, although seems to be dominated by the issue of ethnic and cultural identity (e.g. Jagiełło 2006; Kabzińska 1999; Kłosek 2007; *Kultura...* 2004; Sadowski 1995; *Tóż samość...* 1999; Zowczak 2003).

POLES, PEOPLE OF POLISH DESCENT, ETHNIC POLES OR...?

The subject of studies recapitulated above presents a certain terminological difficulty. The Polonia, (ethnic) Poles, Polish national minority or people of Polish descent – it is hard to decide upon the correct term.

Grzegorz Babiński is of the opinion that until now, the research concerned Poles (i.e. communities considering themselves to be Polish) than the Polonia (those who are aware of their descent, but do not identify themselves incontrovertibly with

⁴ It was probably the first article in *Przegląd Polonijny* written from the social sciences perspective on the basis of empirical material gathered in the field. It focused on Poles living in south-eastern Lithuania.

⁵ The collective work *Przeszłość, teraźniejszość i przyszłość Polaków na Wschodzie* (2001) is an example of a publication in which the historical approach is dominant. Out of 48 articles contained in the volume, less than 20 pertain to the current situation of Poles in the selected countries of the former USSR. I have no idea why the volume contains also two articles regarding Poles in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and in Hungary. The inclusion of an article by Andrzej Targowski in this volume is also questionable. He divides Poles into nine debatable categories (i.e. émigrés, Polonuses, deportees, the resettled, the evicted, escapees, locals, Poles living abroad and Poles living in Poland), not attempting to categorise the people of Polish descent with respect to culture, language or economic and political issues. A large part of his article focuses on North American Polonia (Targowski 2001).

Polishness⁶) (2001, p. 65). Myself, I am more inclined to agree with the nomenclature proposed by Tadeusz Paleczny, who considers the Polonia communities to be communities of people who retain the memory of their Polish origins and cultivate Polish cultural customs. Paleczny mentions also the knowledge of the Polish language, but in my opinion this is not a necessary condition⁷ (2001, p. 7).

The term ‘Polonia’ is, in my opinion, strongly associated with the Polonia émigré activity, and thus with political activity. I would be happy to abandon it altogether, or to limit its use to persons involved in the “Polonia movements” and the activity of associations and the “Polish houses”. Additionally, I think this term is not at all helpful to us as scholars; it contributes nothing to making our analyses better, more precise, scientific or objective.

The term ‘(ethnic) Poles’ is also highly controversial. If ethnicity is understood as descent, many Poles born from mixed marriages could just as well be defined as Ukrainians, Russians or others. It often happens, after all, that persons who consider themselves Polish do not “possess” any “objective” indicators of ethnicity. It also happens that persons who do “possess” quite a few of the “objective” indicators of ethnicity do not consider themselves Polish. Everything depends on our understanding of ethnicity. If it is the social organisation of cultural differences (e.g. Barth 1996) and the issue of awareness, then almost anyone can become an (ethnic) Pole. What is at stake then is not the true descent or objective indicators, but the person’s own subjectively perceived culture, tradition and the past. This also explains why similar local communities, speaking the same language and having the same traditions and culture, define themselves differently, as for instance Poles and Ukrainians.

The concept of ‘Polish national minority’⁸ is equally unhelpful, mainly due to the use of the adjective ‘national’. Firstly, until today no single and generally accepted definition of a nation has been developed. Secondly, this term is more political than scientific; in reality, it is the state authorities that decide who may and who may not be a national minority.⁹ Finally, the functioning of nations presupposes the existence of some canon of national culture, of which the national minorities in the East are most often deprived¹⁰ (Derlicki 2003, pp. 171–172). In addition, Andrzej Sadowski mentions

⁶ It is hard to say what Babiński means by this; in my opinion, these are people of Polish origin who underscore their own mixed descent or the fact of having been born in emigration.

⁷ In my opinion, a sentimental attachment to the language of one’s ancestors and the perception of it as valuable are sufficient.

⁸ This expression (in my opinion, rather unfortunate) was used by Andrzej Sadowski in one of his articles (2001, p. 57).

⁹ In many countries of the former USSR the Poles have the status of “national minorities”, but in many other countries they are only an “ethnic minority”.

¹⁰ For various reasons. I pass over such obvious ones as repressions, assimilation or renunciation of nationality, but it must be remembered that the canon of Polish national culture was created after many communities had already emigrated or were cut off from it by, for instance, a frontier.

the activities aimed at including “members of the Polonia in the East into the Polish nation, into the Polish national culture”¹¹ (Sadowski 2001, p. 58). His phrasing suggests that, since the Polonia needs to be included into the Polish nation, it is not a part of it, and a national minority even less so. Also, one cannot resist an impression that those members are supposed to become Poles only after the process of their inclusion into the “Polish nation” is concluded.

Personally, I consider ‘people of Polish descent’ to be the broadest category which may undergo analysis. Polish descent, even a distant one, is of central importance to it. The framework of this group may include Poles, the Polonia¹² and people of other nationalities.¹³ A category defined thus is usually characterised by an enormous diversity of culture, language, awareness, religion and identity. Hence this category generates difficulties regarding the description of discrete group or its presentation as a homogeneous. I shall return to this problem further on, in order to propose a solution to it.

OLD ISSUES?

An overview of literature pertaining to Poles in the East indicates that the majority of ethnological and sociological studies focused on the issue of the continuance of Polishness in that region. Andrzej Sadowski emphasises that the role of the Church and religion in shaping and maintaining the identity of Poles in the East is already well known. Sociological research seems to confirm the existence of some correlation between the Polish nationality and Catholic denomination in that region. Sadowski notes also that not all Catholics in the former USSR countries are Poles and that this indicator of nationality is currently changing. He is of the opinion that more emphasis should be placed on the research of “small fatherlands”, the state of language and culture, and Poland as the ideological fatherland. He also poses several questions, regarding e.g. persons of other denominations than Catholic who consider themselves Polish. He also draws an interesting division between Poles and persons considered to be Poles. He underlines the need to investigate their self-identification, their number (on the basis of their self-definition and statistical data), attitude to the Catholic Church and the indicators of the category of Polishness, if any (Sadowski 2001, pp. 52–53). Some of these issues have been very well researched indeed and, in practice, lack the ability to tell us much about the cultural reality of the descendants of Poles living abroad. Sadowski’s

¹¹ Further on, Sadowski writes that it is necessary to “create the conditions and climate for the members of the Polish national minorities in the East to organically and wholly, not selectively, enter the Polish nation and Polish culture, yet not lose irretrievably that part of their identity which linked them with the majority culture of their country of residence [...]” (2001, p. 58).

¹² In my understanding as persons involved in Polish émigré activity.

¹³ During my research in Moldova I encountered communities which did not consider themselves Polish at all, although they were indicated as such by the local Polonia activists.

postulate to focus on the **small fatherlands**, however, seems to me exceedingly interesting. From my own area, into the new issues which should be put to debate with regard to persons of Polish descent in the East I would include for instance the issue of the participation of Poles belonging to the Communist party in the local government structures, and the methods of selecting a career path in the period of the USSR. These topics are, in my opinion, extremely interesting and significant; yet so far they have not been researched, although the witnesses of that era are still alive. Among the newer topics, to a great extent linked with Sadowski's observations recapitulated in the following paragraph, I consider the research on the perception of the Polish Charter (*Karta Polaka*) and its effects (e.g. transformations in the perception of Poland, change in the intensity of contacts with Poland, selection of identity strategies and very many other aspects) to be of particular importance. Persons of Polish descent currently staying in Poland (e.g. to work or to study) are also insufficiently represented in published research. On the one hand, statistical data regarding their return to the countries of origin are unavailable; on the other, the effects of their stay in Poland on their awareness are not known.

According to Sadowski, a great shift in the identity and consciousness of people living in the East is taking place at the current moment, and today it is no longer possible to distinguish Poles only on the basis of objective indicators, such as the Catholic religion, descent or nationality recorded in the passport. He also points out to transformations of the political regime and the development of "culturally homogeneous" states in the territories of the former USSR. He is interested in the state/minority relations in this aspect. Postulates to renounce the Polish system of values and socio-cultural behaviour in the Polish emigration studies and to give more attention to the local **context** (2001, pp. 53–57) are also essential. What is at stake is a certain shift of the centre of gravity. It appears that initially the examination of Poles in the East focused on ethnic issues as understood by researchers who were Polish (attachment to the Catholic religion, learning and maintaining the language, adherence to customs and rituals etc.), whereas the new approach based on a presentation of the transformations and development of nation states is to uncover the context and underscore issues important to the persons being researched. What is involved is, in a sense, a change of the research perspective.¹⁴

NEW APPROACHES?

The studies mentioned so far, especially those by Babiński (2001) and Sadowski (2001), constituted a brief overview and delineation of new directions in the research on Poles in the East. Additionally, they were written from the sociological perspective. I was curious whether there existed any specifically ethnographic approach in the Polish emigration studies. In search for it, I encountered the article by Walerian

¹⁴ The emic/etic paradigm has a relatively long tradition in ethnology (cultural anthropology). The reality is presented as seen by the researcher, but what is important is its perception by the person being researched.

Sobisiak (1975). This text, in many respects outdated, remains current regarding some issues. Sobisiak wrote that until the present day (by this meaning the 1970s), Polish emigration studies focused mostly on economic, political and historical issues. He lamented the fact that little attention was devoted to cultural issues, and that the ethnographic achievement in Polish emigration studies was meagre. In his opinion, it was precisely ethnographic research that should have been the starting point for other disciplines, since familiarity with cultural issues of a given group ensured greater efficacy of other research. In Sobisiak's opinion, ethnologists involved in Polish emigration studies ought to investigate a selected group and its culture, which is a classic subject of ethnographic research (1975, pp. 30–33). Definitions of culture cited by Sobisiak are slightly outdated but, as I have already stated, in some respects the article seems quite valid.

In addition, Sobisiak pointed to some topics of ethnographic research, for instance contemporary culture and its transformations, traditional culture and its relics, the influence of diaspora on its environment, assimilation and acculturation, or the manifestations of multiculturalism. Sobisiak referred to ethnographic works pertaining to the Polonia and some Western studies devoted to the phenomena of assimilation and acculturation. He emphasised that the majority of ethnographic studies focused on a village, settlement, city district, city or region, whereas studies focused on a population scattered around an entire country seemed to be non-existent (Sobisiak 1975, pp. 34–46). This observation is a correct, if rather banal. The qualitative method used by ethnologists precludes conducting large-scale research. I do not think that such research would be possible even with the use of the sociological quantitative method. Even in Moldova, a relatively small country, it would be impossible to conduct such research among all the persons of Polish descent, since apart from a few larger groupings in the vicinity of the city of Bălți, in Transnistria and in the capital city of Chişinău, a few individuals belonging to this group live in every prefecture.

Delineating research priorities, Sobisiak points out that the most important issue is to discover the sets of behaviour forms associated with the cultivation of the native cultural heritage understood as “progressive traditions of national culture of the emigrants' place of origin” (1975, p. 47). Conducting this type of research among the Polish highlanders in the USA or economic immigrants in Germany does not raise doubts. It is, however, difficult to conduct such research when there is no “native cultural heritage” (in Sobisiak's understanding) – and this is precisely the case of a large part of the Polish-origin population in the former countries of the USSR, to whom the native culture is most often the Russian culture. Few elements or relics of the Polish culture survived there until the 1990s;¹⁵ only those associated with the Catholic religion (Polish prayers, the custom of sharing the Christmas wafer, carol-singing etc.) survived to any greater extent. I am also critical of the division of subjects into the “emigration environment”, “culture”, “work” and “native cultural heritage”, which is proposed by

¹⁵ Currently cultural and educational activity is carried out by organisations and associations existing there.

Sobisiak (Sobisiak 1975, pp. 46–49). Such division fits, or perhaps fitted, Poles in Holland and Germany, whom he was researching, but it would be difficult to apply it to Poles who have lived in Moldova for over a hundred years and whose great majority arrived there from Ukrainian Podolia. On the other hand, I fully agree with the assumption that a researcher should be interested in what has remained in people's awareness and in reflections pertaining to the connections between mass culture and the traditional cultural heritage (more in Sobisiak 1975, pp. 49–51).

Sobisiak points to the validity of the ethnological approach in Polish emigration studies, emphasising that this approach should be the starting point for other disciplines. It must be, however, noted that in this approach members of the Polish emigration milieus do not receive any special treatment; it can be applied in the study of any socio-cultural group.

It is worth noting that in the post-Soviet region, an ethnologist from Poland has an advantage over Western scholars. Ewa Nowicka and Paweł Trzcziński are of the opinion that due to our historical and cultural encumbrances “we are able to understand cultural transformations to a greater extent” (2004, p. 46). Although their text pertains to the region of Siberia, I notice many analogies with regard to the entire area of the former USSR. Nowicka and Trzcziński note also that issues which to the Western scholars are rather exotic, to us may be an obvious element of a none too distant past (*ibidem*: 48).

It must be noted that a new trend or approach is evident in the context of classic ethnological studies regarding the Polonia (e.g. Posern-Zieliński 1982) or Poles in the East in particular (e.g. Jasiewicz 1992; Kabzińska 1999). Increasingly often, while doing research among the population of Polish origin, ethnographers entirely overlook the emigration issues and focus on various aspects of local culture (e.g. *Centrum...* 2005; *Etnografia...* 2005; *Podole...* 2003). Such studies devote very little space to the “preservation of Polishness”, “attachment to the Catholic religion” or “activity of émigré institutions”, i.e. topics for a long time exploited in the research pertaining to Polish emigration. Instead, scholars focus on the mechanisms, functioning and manifestations of syncretic **local cultures**. They provide the view of the researcher, of course, not the researched people, but they do not show the investigated community “from above”, but precisely from the local level, which is often marginalised by the researchers of Polish emigration. In my opinion, such approach has a much greater value than, for instance, generalised (and generalising) descriptions of Poles in particular countries.

ETHNICITY VS. LOCALITY

History and tradition express the symbolic continuity of the past into the present¹⁶ and reinforce the community's cultural integrity, especially in the periods of violent transformations which may threaten its existence. Considering the phenom-

¹⁶ They are a testimony of the preceding generations, which have passed them on to the current one.

enon of the endurance of communities, Anthony Cohen states that general patterns of endurance do not exist, and emphasises the role of ethnicity and locality. In his opinion, people confirm their community in the form of ethnicity and locality when they find this community to be the most adequate medium of expressing themselves. Ethnicity or locality provide strength to a thought construct which is the community (2000, pp. 103–109). Looking at the manner at the functioning of many the Polish-origin communities in the East, it seems difficult to disagree with this assumption.

Cohen devotes much space to the issue of constructing the community on the basis of its contrast to neighbouring groups (the “others”), similarities and differences between them, and cultural boundaries (*ibidem*, pp. 115–118). His reasoning is closed with the realisation the “People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity” (*ibidem*, p. 118). The community’s symbolic dimension and construction of its boundaries in an opposition to neighbouring groups was exemplified with many case studies.

The connections between ethnicity and locality remain a key issue. Those phenomena begin to overlap and the boundary between them is being blurred – at least according to Osten Wahlbeck (2002, p. 224). Writing about communities in the general sense, Cohen seems to be of a similar opinion, making solely the differentiation between their foundation being ethnic or local (2000). Clifford shows how the Mashpee Indians were unable to demonstrate before the court that they were indeed a tribe. In the process of a long court investigation it was discovered they had lost cultural and demographic continuity with the earlier Indian tribes and created a Creole community. Yet the loss of “ethnic” distinguishing features did not mean the end of the group’s existence, because it had created a specific local culture (Clifford 2000, pp. 299–370). In Clifford’s opinion, culture and identity “need not take root in ancestral plots; they live by pollination, by (historical) transplanting”.¹⁷ Local groups present their culture and identity through a new interpretation of the past, done by means of new (non-traditional) media, symbols and languages (*ibidem*, pp. 22–23). The aim of those endeavours is to ensure the group’s cultural discreteness and to preserve it (albeit in a different shape). Zygmunt Bauman maintains that presently, in order to be a community, a community does not need anything that would legitimise it. Communities can be found in many ways and in many places (2000, pp. 347–366). Also, it seems that all communities are constructed in a similar manner, and that their boundaries are delineated by culture or its selected elements. In this respect, ethnicity is to a very great extent reminiscent of locality.

In many cases – especially where a given group cannot be easily defined on the basis of its “ethnic” distinguishing features – the group’s specificity is best rendered by the concept of the local group/community/commune. While doing research among people of Polish descent in Moldova, I have encountered a few local communities which

¹⁷ <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/clifford.html> (translator’s note).

emerged at a similar time¹⁸ and were formed from a similar component.¹⁹ It is hard to ascertain whether their ethnicity had a more definite shape immediately after emigration than currently, but in the neighbourhoods not covered by the Polonia activity it is undoubtedly in a vestigial form. Some communities define themselves unequivocally as Polish, others as Ukrainian/Catholic; there are also ones which can be described as Ukrainian/Orthodox. This means that with regard to ethnicity, people of Polish descent in Moldova define themselves diversely. Since only a part of them defines themselves as Polish, would be hard to talk of a homogeneous minority, whereas it is possible to talk of **local cultures or local communities of Polish descent**. Significantly, different communities set store by different elements of identity. To communities considering themselves Polish, descent and religion were the most important distinguishing features. Communities considering themselves Orthodox Ukrainians, in turn, identified themselves in this way mainly on the basis of language. The Ukrainian/Catholic communities, however, had problems in defining themselves in terms of nationality; they felt easier with the religious categories. It is worth noting that the identifications were relatively homogeneous on the local level. Hence, I am of the opinion that, instead of creating a single large grouping called 'Poles in...',²⁰ it is much better to view concrete local communities which make up the total of Polish-origin population of a given country. Such perspective makes it possible to ascertain whether those communities define themselves in local or in ethnic categories.

CONCLUSION: DIFFICULTIES WITH POLISHNESS OF PEOPLE OF POLISH DESCENT

Among people of Polish descent in the East there are members of various nationalities: Poles,²¹ Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians and many others; Poles constitute no more than a section. It also happens that individuals of Polish descent identifying themselves as Russians, Ukrainians or Moldovans have "more Polish"²² origins than

¹⁸ In the late 19th and early 20th century.

¹⁹ Mostly settlers from Ukraine, mainly from the area of Podolia.

²⁰ This is a deliberate reference to the series published by the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL).

²¹ Many valuable observations regarding the identity of people of Polish descent are found in the study by Jakub Ber. Ber considers denomination to have been the fundamental criterion in the rural areas. For this reason, the Catholic population arrived from Podolia considered itself Polish and indicated this nationality in general censuses, although it did not have a coherent identity and its members did not know the Polish language. Ber is also of the opinion that putting such population into one category with contract workers and others, arrived from the former Congress Kingdom, is unproductive (Ber 2008, p. 29).

²² For instance, individuals whose majority of ancestors were Poles may define themselves as non-Polish, while ones who, for example, have only one Polish ancestor (and a distant one at that) may consider themselves to be Poles.

those who declare themselves to be Poles. I think, however, that in this case the issue of self-identification is paramount and I do not intend to question the identity of people wishing to be Poles.

It must be remembered that people of Polish origin are very numerous in the East. Out of my own experience I can say that when one talks with the locals about Poles, many of them bring up the subject of their Polish ancestors,²³ although they do not consider themselves Polish at all. If all people of Polish origin were uncritically perceived as members of the Polish minority, it might turn out they constitute a considerable percentage of the populations of the countries in which they live.²⁴ In the form of the Polish Charter, Polish authorities have introduced a *sui generis* “Polishness exam”; yet even all the holders of the Charter together still constitute only a small percentage of people considering themselves to be Poles.

An odd situation arose a few years ago in Moldova. Associations of Polish Families began to be organised, often upon the initiative of the Polish embassy, in villages whose residents clearly declared themselves to be Ukrainian/Catholic (e.g. Grigorovka and Petropavlovka) or Ukrainian/Orthodox with Polish roots (e.g. Novye Druitory)²⁵ (*Jutrzenka...* 2005a; 2005b). It is quite understandable that Polish diplomatic missions are trying to be active; yet, in my opinion, to assign Polish nationality to all people of Polish descent is an overstatement. In this case, it might turn out that in the East live a few, perhaps even several million Poles who would be entitled to having their activity supported by the Polonia institutions or who could apply for the Polish Charter or for repatriation to Poland.

The subsequent ambassador²⁶ to Moldova abandoned these practices. Yet the issue remains current, even more so considering that the actions involved an artificial rekindling of Polishness among the assimilated local communities. Many historical examples indicate that long-term promotion of a certain identity leads to its emergence and

²³ Many years ago, I encountered in Yakutia many Russians who had Polish ancestors. Even in a tiny Yukagir settlement upon the Kolyma lived the sons of one Dzyngalewski. In southern Moldova, in Vulcănești, I met some Russians who had a Polish grandmother. Examples could be multiplied *ad infinitum*.

²⁴ It might turn out that every fifth Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian or Moldovan is a Pole in this interpretation.

²⁵ The Associations were usually joined by a few individuals, for instance Poles who came from the Ukraine after the Second World War, a small number of native residents considering themselves to be Polish, or persons who expected tangible benefits (e.g. economic aid, relocation to Poland, vacations or studies in Poland for their children). Currently the Associations established at that time are practically non-functional.

²⁶ I.e. Krzysztof Suprowicz. His actions also caused much controversy. He was perceived as a “Romanian nationalist”. In 2008, at a meeting organised to celebrate the Teachers’ Day by the Polish Embassy in Chișinău, he addressed the Polish teachers and emigration activists in Romanian. It must be added that his staff policy was curious, as he very often changed the consuls in charge of Polish emigration to Moldova. In this context, it will be interesting to observe the actions, and their evaluation, of the new ambassador Bogumił Luft.

continuance.²⁷ Ethnographic surveys may have a similar result when, for instance, a researcher over several visits asks people considering themselves to be Ukrainians about a definite identity (for instance the Polish one). The actions of the researcher may arouse interest, move people to reflection upon their own descent, and in effect to formulating a conclusion or developing an uncertainty about being Polish after all. Both researchers and diplomats working among people of Polish descent in the East would do well to bear this in mind.

Considering the magnitude of economic emigration from the western countries of the former USSR, Poland's neighbours in the east – which, according to official estimates, in the case of Moldova (not counting the separatist Transnistria) amounts to c. 600,000 out of c. 1.65 million people in productive age – it is obviously not a country of prosperity and comfort, especially since 95% of those working abroad are doing so illegally.²⁸ In 2001, the emigrants brought back to the country 220 million USD earned abroad; this equals 1/3 of Moldova's export (see Wróbel 2004, p. 22). The country's tragic economic situation was pointed out by many of my respondents, who at the same time confessed their dream that their children be able to move to Poland. Significantly, a large percentage of persons coming from Moldova to Poland, for instance to study, stays permanently afterwards. Many of my Moldovan acquaintances asked me whether I could help them obtain the temporary residence permit or a job in Poland.

Poland is perceived as a country of economic prosperity and a member of the European Union. It is the object of dreams not only to citizens of Moldova, but also of many other countries. The worth of a Polish passport and Polish citizenship is increasing also in the perception of, for instance, the Ukrainians (see Zychowicz 2007). After Romania entered the European Union, very many citizens of Moldova began to apply for Romanian citizenship: relevant documents were submitted by nearly a million individuals (Skieterska 2006). This example demonstrates perfectly that the majority of citizens of Moldova does not link their future with their native country.

This situation seems to influence the ethnic identity of the residents, who change their official nationality in order to obtain a passport to a different country (e.g. Romania, Russia, Bulgaria, Ukraine and others). I also think that the national policy of the Soviet era, when frequent changes of nationality (voluntary, mandatory or sometimes even unwitting²⁹) were commonplace, caused ethnic and national identities and their perception in the countries of the former USSR to develop in a truly exceptional manner. In my opinion, those countries are characterised by a flexibility and discretion in making identity choices far greater than anywhere else in the world. Due to its mixed

²⁷ The "Moldavian" identity of the Moldavians, created and promoted in the Soviet era in opposition to Romania and the Romanian identity, may be an example of this process (more in Derlicki 2007a).

²⁸ Illegal employment is, in my opinion, linked with a greater determination on the part of those who undertake it, caused by adverse economic conditions in their native country.

²⁹ For instance, local authorities could make relevant changes in the censuses.

origins (mainly Polish/Ukrainian and Polish/Belarusian), the population of Polish descent is able to select whichever identity seems to them the most profitable. In this respect, Polishness has certainly the most to offer.³⁰

In Moldova, even the titular ethnos feels uncertain when its national identity needs to be defined. The political opposition defines themselves as Romanians, while the majority of the society considers themselves to be Moldovans, although Romania's joining the European Union may change this. It is all the more understandable that the minority groups, such as Poles, may refer to a freely selected identity; they may even be more immersed in the Ukrainian or Russian tradition, and the Orthodox tradition, than in their Polishness. Past examples indicate that many people of Polish descent living in the East became Ukrainians, Belarusians or Russians; some of them do not even realise they have Polish roots. On the other hand, many individuals retained their Polish identity and, what is more, in some places it is even being actively created.

The idea of the rebirth of Polishness in the East, vigorously promoted in many publications, is a separate problem. In my opinion, there is more of birth than rebirth in this process, although it is clear that, from the point of view of a minority, it is more justifiable to speak of its "recreation" than "creation", since the latter calls in question the existence of this minority in the past (Levy 2000, p. 149). Lech Mróz came up with a felicitous expression to denote ethnic revival, calling it an awakening; by this, he meant its rebirth as much as birth (Mróz 2004, pp. 9–10, 13–14). It seems that in the case of Poles in the East it is the latter rather than the former. By this, I do not mean to say that before the year 1991 there had been no Poles there – yes, there were, of course. Nevertheless, in the period of the USSR Polish emigration activity, which would in any way reinforce Polish identity, was not conducted. Before the Second World War, in turn, the forms of this activity, as well as its elites, media or symbols, were different; so were Poland's support and the expectations of the local emigrant circles. If we accept the assumption that being a Pole in the East means something entirely different today than it did before the war, it is obvious that at the current moment Polishness is being created, not recreated there.

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³⁰ In Moldova, this group includes few persons considering themselves to be Moldovans and trying to obtain the Romanian passport. In the past, marriages with Moldovans were looked upon with disfavour; this situation continues today. Apart from individuals identifying themselves as Poles, the majority of the Polish-descent population declares themselves as Ukrainians or Russians.

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