The *natsyas* of the Grodno region of Belarus: a field study

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ABSTRACT. This research was conducted in 1993–4 in several peripheral kolkhoz villages in the north-west Belarus Grodno province, a religious (Catholic/Orthodox) and linguistic (Belarussian/Russian/Polish/Lithuanian) borderland. The members of the folk communities of this region conceive and categorise social reality differently than it is done by the members of a nationalised and urbanised society, according to religious, and not nation-state, criteria. People are divided by these criteria into *natsyas*, i.e. religious groups. There are two main *natsyas*: the Catholics (also called Poles) and the Orthodox (called Rus’ or Belarussians). The distinctive criterion for several *natsyas* is the language of a prayer: the Catholics pray in Polish and/or Lithuanian, the Orthodox in Old Church Slavonic and Russian. The terms Catholic *natsya* and Polish *natsya* (and similarly Orthodox *natsya* or Rus’ *natsya*) are synonymous. The language of everyday speech does not differentiate the *natsyas*; all the villagers speak Belarussian dialect or so called ‘plain language’.

The *natsya*, a concept specific of traditional folk societies, should not be confused with a ‘nation’, a political term of the modern world. None the less, the kolkhoz peasants of the region under study are confronted with a concept of ‘nation’. It results in a turmoil in their worldview and in confusion about their identity; what we see in the Belarussian villages is a process of change. The borderland where the material was collected seems an excellent field for the study of the process of the emergence of nations.

What do these people think? How do they think? Are their intellectual and rational processes akin to ours or radically different? (Benjamin Lee Whorf 1956: 65)

‘*Natsya* is *natsya*: there’s a Polish *natsya*, an Orthodox *natsya*, a *natsya* of the Muslim – that’s *natsya’.* [P] (Mr Antoni of Papiernia)*

* The people we talked to in the region of Grodno spoke in Belarusian (the western dialect) or Polish (the dialect of the north-eastern region). Since it is not possible to render in English the specific character of the dialects, the symbol *B* is used to denote the Belarusian utterances and *P* to denote the Polish ones. The necessary data of our interlocutors are abbreviated as follows: *M*, *F* for gender, *Cat.*, *Ort.* for denomination; figures are for age. For example, *B, M, Ort., 60* denotes a Belarusian language speaker, Orthodox, 60-year-old man. In the transcription of the dialogues also the following abbreviations are used: *Q* for the researcher’s question and *A* for the interlocutor’s reply.
Introduction

In this article I present some results of a field study, conducted, together with a group of students of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Warsaw, from April 1993 to November 1994 in the province of Grodno, Belarus. The topic of the study was the self-consciousness of the local communities1 of the region, defined as a cultural borderland. Why was such an issue interesting for us? First, the fall of the Soviet Union (an independent Republic of Belarus has existed formally since 1991) raised several questions about the national, linguistic, cultural and political consciousness of the inhabitants of the states which emerged from the Soviet republics. As anthropologists, we were especially interested in the impact of these great political changes in Central-Eastern Europe on the traditional societies of the region. By applying the method of case study in the field, we expected to be able to put more precise questions and to receive more detailed answers than those we could have obtained by using classic sociological quantitative methods. Only such a method, we thought, could give satisfactory insights into the complex relations between cultural, linguistic, ethnic and national self-consciousness, in the dynamic process of the emergence of a new state.

Second, we chose a region of cultural borderland for our study, because we assumed that in a multicultural and multilingual society where group identities confront each other, we would also witness the ways that one group’s national consciousness emerges in co-existence with or in opposition to that of others. The cultural and political influence of Poland and Lithuania (two historical nation-states bordering Belarus) and their contacts with groups considered as Polish and Lithuanian national minorities living on Belarussian territory, was another factor which promised to give an interesting perspective in analysing emerging nations.

Finally, there are pre-war Polish sociolinguistic and ethno-sociological case studies conducted in the Belarussian-Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian borderland, which deal with problems of language change and its influence on the local community members’ national identity (Turska 1939), as well as studies dealing with ethnic groups and their passage from ‘folk’ to ‘national’ consciousness (Obrębski 1936a, b, c). We found it interesting to compare these classical studies to the results of our field study conducted 60 years later.

The region and the topic

There are mixed people here. There are the Polish, and the Lithuanian, and the Rus’, and the Belarussian. [P] (Mr Feliks of Pieluńce)

The area under study covered some Catholic villages (parishes of Wawiórka, Piełasa, Krupowo, Bielohruda, and Skrzybowce), as well as some Orthodox
ones (parishes of Lebieda and Myto) in the Lida county of the Grodno province of Belarus. Historically, it was a region of the ancient linguistic-cultural Baltic-Slavonic borderland. Today, the region bears the mark of religious differentiation: Grodno province forms, above all, a Catholic/Orthodox borderland. To the inhabitants of the villages nearby Lida, the creation of the coexistence of two religions represents a natural state of affairs raising no special emotions. The way it is, is the way it used to be: ‘One who went to Orthodox church was Rus’ and one who went to Catholic church was Catholic. Polish, they called them. Polish.’ [B, M, 70, Ort.]

Apart from religious differentiation, there is also social differentiation characteristic of the region. Although the first kolkhozes (state-run collective farm) were organised there as early as 1948, and in spite of the subsequent superficial social equity, the old distinction between moujik (peasant) villages and gentry villages remains a vivid part of the consciousness of the local population:

The gentry never socialized with the Lithuanians. They preferred the company of their own. A genteel woman wouldn’t marry a Pole if he came from a churlish village. Even though she might be a Pole like him, they would never be married. [P, M, 66, Cat.]

Well, there was a time the gentry were proud! A moujik, even a rich one, would not do. And a gent, let him be a ragged fool, still was a gent. [P, F, 59, Cat.]

The county of Lida and Woronowo is a linguistic borderland as well. Four languages coexist in that area: Belarussian, Russian, Polish and Lithuanian. Dialectal Belarussian is called ‘plain’ or ‘local’ (miestny). It is the common language of all the village communities, irrespective of the religion or social status of its users. The literary Belarussian language, together with Russian, is the language spoken at school, on the radio and on television. Only schoolchildren and some youths use it actively. The Russian language and the strongly russified Old Church Slavonic language are the languages of the Orthodox church and those of prayer. Russian is also used as an official language for communication beyond the local contexts by some of the educated users of plain Belarussian. The Polish that they use is a dialect called ‘Vilnius Polish’. It is the language of the Catholic church and of Catholic prayer. Finally, there is Lithuanian: part of the population of Pielasa speaks dialectical Lithuanian, and literary Lithuanian is spoken at school and in church. Bilingualism is not uncommon here, and some people speak three and even four languages with equal fluency. Additional complications result from the distinction between the literary and dialectal versions:

I speak Polish, and Lithuanian, and Russian, and Belarussian, it’s all the same to me. [P, F, 60, Cat.]

All the people, whether Polish or Rus’, work together at the kolkhoz so they must be the same. It’s only their languages that differ: ‘we speak Polish, and they speak Rus’, and Belarussian, and we all speak plain at home’. [P, F, 63, Cat.]
The whole region may thus be viewed as periphery or borderland.\(^2\) Among the characters who appear in the stories told about local villages are, apart from the followers of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, Jews, Tartars, Gypsies, Germans, Baptists, and followers of the Uniate church. Our interlocutors could remember several instances in history, where the administrative borderlines were changed.\(^3\)

It was Poland here, and Germany, and Russia. Whatever the state, we accept it. [B, F, 65, Cat.]

A: (husband): It was never Belarus here. Once it was Lithuania, then it was Poland. It was czardom before . . . I don’t remember, the old folks say so. And then it was a Lithuanian government, and then again Poland. Poland has been here for 27 years now.

Q: So, it was never Belarus?
A: (aunt): No, not as far as anyone remembers. [B, M, 73 & F, 96, Cat.]

We decided to call the region under study a ‘cultural borderland’. We deliberately gave up terms such as ‘ethnic’ or ‘national’, which seemed equivocal when applied to the area under study. The term ‘cultural borderland’, on the other hand, suited the requirements of our study very well, as it emphasised the cross-cultural influences and competition of three ideologies of self-conscious nations: Belarussian, Lithuanian and Polish.

Another specific feature of village communities settled a long distance from any larger cultural centre is that they remain influenced by traditional religious systems rather than by the contemporary national-political ideologies. Vivid remains of feudal society can be found here, such as the distinction mentioned above between the moujiks and the gents within the contemporary kolkhoz worker population, as well as the continuation of some of the functions of landlord by the chairman (priedsiedatiel) of the kolkhoz or the director of the sovkhoz; the confinement of informal social relations to the population of the parish which remains, especially to the older generation, the ‘whole world’. The above examples prove that what we are actually dealing with here is the structure of longue durée. In order to make our picture complete, we should mention the persistence in the Catholic church of numerous rites of the ‘Pre-Vatican II’ and residues of archaic magical practices in the form of religious rituals (such as the medieval lyrics of songs sung during the night watching over the dead, and the institution of ‘the poor’ praying for their souls). We should also mention faith-healing (zamowy) which is very common here, even in the treatment of kolkhoz cattle.

The self-consciousness of the local communities of the cultural borderland was the subject of our study. We have been trying to construe the ways in which members of these communities categorise their social world. What terms do they employ when speaking about themselves and others? Do they construct any picture of their own group? How do they perceive and interpret what we have called a ‘cultural borderland’? What does the
coexistence of so many languages and religions in such a small area mean to them? Do they attach any meaning at all to the establishment of the independent Belarussian state? What role do the traditional authorities play in village communities under the impact of national ideologies? And, finally, does the data concerning folklore, rituals and common beliefs add to the borderland ‘picture of ourselves’ and the ‘picture of the neighboring group’?

Method

The subject under study and the researcher

The researcher becomes the subject’s partner or student and describes the events using the language of the subjects rather then the language brought from outside the context of study (P. Reason and J. Rowan 1981: 417)

Our qualitative study was carried out in thirty settings. In a large part they were stationary: we visited the region five times and we stayed for ten to twelve days. Each time, we returned to the selected villages. We visited each village several times during the period of our study. We had about 180 conversations. We were trying to talk with people representing all generations (including children). The villages in the region of Lida, however, are populated mainly by old people. Therefore, the vast majority of our interlocutors (80 per cent) were above 60 years of age. Similarly, we spoke with women (64 per cent) more often than with men (36 per cent) – probably the most usual type of person to be found among the population under study was a lonely widow.

None of the eight researchers in our group had any previous field experience in Belarus. We began the study with a fresh attitude, we had to learn everything from the beginning: inquiring, scrutinising and listening carefully to our interlocutors. We wanted to bracket most of our *a priori* assumptions, theories and prejudices. Certainly we blundered; we also managed to avoid mistakes commonly made by some researchers in the field. This was due to the methods we used as well as to the fact that in our study most of the *a priori* methods gave way to *a posteriori* conclusions.

The conversation and the experience

I will treat conversation – and, I would like to stress this point, not an interview – as the basis for collecting information. (Olgézki 1991: 16)

Because ethnography is not only a product but also a process, our lives as ethnographers are embedded within experience. (Tedlock 1992: XIII)

Our research was based on the method of conversation (not interview) and participation. We were received willingly if not heartily. When we visited our hosts a second time, we were treated as good friends, and sometimes as their ‘grandchildren-in-law’. Since we were staying with the families, we also
shared their daily routines. It is true that we were their guests but, at the same time, we were working, celebrating, playing with their children, praying and watching the dead together with our hosts. And we spent plenty of time talking with them. Not infrequently, the subject of our conversation had little in common with the content of our questionnaires. Obviously, we could not record every word. It would have been too difficult to turn on the recorder while milking a cow, weeding beet, gathering hay, getting on the bus, drinking another glass of moonshine at Easter table, stopping at every second fence when walking in the village to have a chat or hearing a faith-healer murmuring into your ear: ‘from the nerve’, ‘from the head’. Moreover, we were told personal things and told personal things ourselves. And there was laughter, tears, joy and affection.

We never thought of our interlocutors as ‘informants’. They were partners in dialogue with us. We asked them questions concerning things that were new to us; we wanted them to explain the meaning of Belarusian words. In effect we were learning from them. Sometimes we refrained from asking questions in order to listen to all the things they had to say. Sometimes we answered their questions.

The inhabitants of the villages of Lida region who invited us into their lives and proved patient enough to teach their world to the often ignorant, awkward and tactless guests we were, have become genuine co-authors of the study. They were able to point out certain problems, suggest important questions and inspire discoveries. At the same time, our recognition of their differences not only gave us a chance to verify our method and field of interest, but also allowed us to reflect upon our own identity.

The tool of the ethnographer and the subject of the study: language

Care in the use of the researcher’s own cognitive structures … allows them to discover and preserve the specificity of the world view of those under study. (Wyka 1993: 23)

Bronisław Malinowski described language as ‘an ethnographer’s most important tool’ as well as ‘a document and cultural reality’ (1935: 2, 4). Edward Sapir understood language as ‘a guide to “social reality”’ (1956: 68). To Benjamin Lee Whorf language was ‘a microcosm that each man carries about within himself, by which he measures and understands what he can of the macrocosm’ (1956: 147). To Hans Georg Gadamer it was ‘the universal medium in which understanding itself is realised’ (1981: 350).

If we agree that the world is constituted linguistically and that comprehension of the world consists in its linguistic apprehension, it will follow that we never actually study ‘objective reality’ of any kind. Instead, it is a linguistic picture, or interpretation of reality that we are able to analyse. ‘The human mind has given it structure’ (Whorf 1956: 147) and this structure is reflected in a conceptual-linguistic system. If, therefore, we want to analyse that picture of the world, or the conceptual system, we have to
analyse the language in which it is framed. Thus, in order to learn about the consciousness and self-consciousness of our interlocutors, we had to get to know their language.

We had to learn the Belarussian dialect, that is, the ‘plain language’, as a communicative tool. In fact, we could communicate with most but not all of our interlocutors in Polish. Besides, there were many differences between the Polish dialect that they used, the ‘Vilnius Polish’, and the official Polish that we spoke. These lexical and semantic differences were particularly interesting for us. At every moment we had to recognise the character of those differences as well as the fact that, in spite of their formal similarity, the language that we and our interlocutors spoke was not the same.

Our study of the language of our interlocutors consisted, in the first place, in becoming acquainted with their terminology, both in Belarussian and in Polish. At that early stage of our research we were concerned with lexical analysis: the study of the meaning of particular lexical units and the reconstruction of the conceptual system and mental stereotypes behind them.

For example, it would be a mistake to take it for granted that ‘a Pole’, meaning ‘a member of a self-conscious nation’ as in official Polish, was the self-qualification of the vast majority of the Catholic population under study. We would have learned nothing about the world that we were trying to comprehend by making that assumption. What is more, we would have made another error of hypostasis. In fact, both our Catholic and Orthodox interlocutors used the terms *Polish*, *Rus’* or *Belarussian* with respect to religion. The above terms are synonymous with the terms *Catholic* and *Orthodox*:

Q: What was your parents’ faith?
A: It’s Polish. [P, F, 87, Cat.]

A: It says in my passport I’m Lithuanian.
Q: And what do you consider yourself?
A: I’m Polish! What kind of a Lithuanian am I? I can say Polish prayers, and I have taught them to my grandchildren, and to my children, and they had their first Communion, and they confess, everything in Polish. [P, F, 70, Cat.]

The Gypsies were baptised at the [Catholic] church. They’re Polish, too. [B, F, 80, Cat.]

There were Germans that were Polish, too, they’re Catholic. [P, F, 70, Cat.]

There was a Muslim here and he converted to the Polish speech, and then to the Polish faith. Now he’s a Pole. Before only he and his father prayed to their God. [P, F, 70, Cat.]

The above examples suggest that the word *Polish* does not mean: ‘a person of Polish nationality, originally from Poland’ (Doroszewski 1964: 864) as it does in official Polish. To the communities under study the word means rather ‘the one who goes to Catholic church’ or ‘the one who follows
the Roman-Catholic creed’, called the *Polish faith*. This is the definition given by our interlocutors:

[Cath.]: We write ourselves Polish because we are Catholic. [P, F, 75, Cat.]

[Ort.]: Catholics are considered Polish here in Belarus. There are many of that kind. [P, M, 84, Ort.]

[Young woman from an Orthodox family married to a Catholic] I think I’m Catholic – then, I must be Polish. [P, F, 26, Cat.]

*Polish* is defined as ‘Catholic:’

How are we Polish, called? Well, Catholics, surely Catholic. And the others are Orthodox. We go to [Catholic] church, and they go to [Orthodox] church. [B, F, 66, Cat.]

They’re Polish because they go to Catholic church, and they were baptized there, and they call themselves Polish. [B, F, 58, Ort.]

Similarly, the words ‘Rus’’ and ‘Belarussian’ mean ‘the one who goes to Orthodox church’ or ‘the one who follows the Orthodox church’, called the Rus’ (Belarussian) faith:7

Q: What’s the religion of your children?
A: They’re Belarussian.

Q: Of Belarussian religion?
A: They’re Belarussian. [P, F, 87, Cat.]

In Poland, there are the Belarussians, too. They call them the Lemki. That’s what they call them. [P, F, 75, Cat.]

The questionnaire based on the concepts of the language of our interlocutors served us as a draft of our conversations. Consequently, we introduced there the terms that were in use. We replaced ‘nationality’ with *natsya*, ‘religion’ or ‘denomination’ with ‘faith’, and we added ‘speech’ to ‘language’. There appeared expressions: ‘to count (a Pole)’ and ‘to write oneself (a Pole)’. We asked questions concerning ‘pure’ *natsya* and ‘mixed people’, ‘accurate Poles’/’Lithuanians’/’Belarussians’, ‘plain language’, and ‘pure’ and ‘mixed languages’. More often than not we asked about definitions. And we kept asking our interlocutors about the meaning of the concepts that they used. We aimed to have them explain their system to us in the most exhaustive possible way. Consequently, apart from ‘why?’ the classic question of the ethnographer, we asked repeatedly: ‘what is it?’ and ‘what does it mean?’

Thus we inquired: What is *natsya*? What about ‘nation’? ‘Nationality’? How do they differ from one another? What is faith? Is it the same as *natsya*? Is it something else? Does every *natsya* have its own (separate) faith? Is every Pole supposed to be a Catholic and is every Pole supposed to speak Polish? Is a Belarussian the same as a Belarussian-speaking Orthodox? Who is a Lithuanian? Are the Polish *natsya* and the Polish faith the same
things? Can a Pole be Orthodox? Baptist? Communist? Is a Pole supposed to be baptised? Are the Belarussian and the Russian the same?

Since we wanted to apprehend the conceptual network of the subjects under study, we had to avoid any a priori assumptions that might appear both in our questionnaire and in our talk. We had to be conscious of our own mental scheme in order to avoid imposing it upon the subjects under study. We distanced ourselves, too, from theoretical systems. We bracketed the opposition ‘we group’/‘they group’, ethnic stereotypes, ethnic distance, and conflicts. We did not want theories to interfere with the data so that the latter would simply confirm our theories in a circular way. We were trying to control our ‘prejudices’ as strictly as possible. Instead, we preferred to follow our key question: ‘What is your world like? Please, tell us all about it . . .’

Some main conclusions

People divide themselves into natsyas, i.e., ‘religious groups’

Each natsya must believe its own belief. [P] (Mr Antoni of Papiernia)

Q: ‘Is natsya the same as faith?’
A: ‘Natsya and faith? Well, sure they must be the same.’ [B] (Mrs Nina of Szpilki)

One of our most important observations was that our interlocutors did not comprehend social reality in terms of nationality as we do. Our interlocutors from the region of Lida never used the word ‘nationality’ (narodowości in Polish; nacyjanalnasć in Belorussian), crucial both in our formal and colloquial language,8 and very often they did not even understand its meaning. The word simply does not exist in their vocabulary. The only place where the Belarussian equivalent of ‘nationality’, nacyjanalnašć, occurs is in passports. In the spoken language, it appears in quotations from formal usages. Speaking about themselves, our interlocutors never declared: ‘I am of this and that nacyjanalnašć.’ They said, instead: ‘I write myself Polish, or Belarussian, or Lithuanian.’ These are, however, the terms for natsyas, and natsyas are not the same as ‘nationalities’, just the contrary. The word natsya in Russian and Belarussian literary language is translated into Polish as naród (nation), just as the Polish, rather old-fashioned, nacja means ‘nation’. Still, lexical equivalents of the same etymology (e.g. those derivative of one and the same Latin word, as in the case of natsya)9 tend to acquire various meanings in different languages, as well as in the literary and the dialectal forms of one language.

This is the case for the Belarussian dialect, or plain language, and the kind of Polish spoken in the villages under study. The semantic fields of natsya and naród (Polish for nation) are shaped in the following way. The Polish naród and the Belarussian narod (both derivative of the old Slavic rod
(Brückner 1970: 459–60)) acquire their meaning from the verb narodzić (to be born). Therefore, both naród and narod mean: ‘all those who were born and remain bound together by their common birth’, or just: ‘the people’, ‘mankind’.

Only if understood in this way, can naród – or ‘the people’ – be further divided into natsyas. Natsya, both in Polish and in plain language, may be defined as ‘a group of people who believe their own belief’, to adapt the expression of Mr Antoni of Papiernia. According to the definition given by Józef Obrzębski, natsya is ‘a religious group’. Obrzębski wrote: ‘Independently of . . . political identification of the population of a given part of the state territory with the state authorities, the population is divided into natsyas, i.e. religious groups, each of which varies from others in culture, and, above all, in faith, and speech’ (Obrzębski 1936c: 427). The vast majority of our interlocutors understood natsya precisely as a ‘religious group’, or a ‘grouping of the people of one and the same religion’. In their usages the words natsya and faith were treated as synonyms and they were often exchanged within the context. Clearly enough, thus understood, natsya does not bear any similarity to the official Polish naród (nation) or ‘nationality’. Here is an example of a typical conversation concerning natsya:

Q: Didn’t you say that you were a patriot of your natsya or . . .
A: . . . or my faith.
Q: Aren’t the Polish a nation? What’s their natsya, then?
A: Also Polish.
Q: So, are natsya and nation the same?
A: Natsya and nation are the same. There are the Polish natsya, the orthodox natsya, the Muslim natsya – that’s natsya.
Q: And what about natsya and faith? Are they any different or they’re the same, too?
A: Each natsya must believe their own belief. [P, M, 70, Cat.]

Natsya, therefore, is identified with faith. Humankind is divided into natsyas, or faiths. Such is the world order accepted by our interlocutors. The following examples bear out this conclusion:

Q: And what’s the faith of your children?
A: It’s Belarussian.
Q: Are natsya and faith the same, then?
A: That’s right. [P, F, 87, Cat.]

Identification with one’s denomination proves fully sufficient when it comes to defining natsya. The character of the local culture allows its members not to employ any external ‘national’ categories: ‘They’re all Polish, Catholic. When there was the census here, we all said: we’re Polish, Roman-Catholic. One even said: I’m a Roman-Catholic and I won’t declare any more than that, don’t you even try to learn it’ [P & B, F, 76, Cat.].

In the world of our interlocutors there exist, as we already know, two
main *natsya*/faiths: the Catholic/Polish one and the Orthodox/Rus’ (Belarussian) one. The labels Orthodox/Belarussian (Rus’) and Catholic/Polish are synonymous and mutually exchangeable:

One who is Orthodox must be a proper Belarussian, the Orthodox man, and we are Catholic, Polish. All Catholics are Polish. [P, M, 66, Cat.]

Consequently, the names of particular *natsyas* are derived from the names of religions. That is why our interlocutors speak about Orthodox and Catholic *natsyas*. And the other way round, there may be Polish and Rus’ (Belarussian) faiths. Our interlocutors recognise yet other *natsya*/faiths:

A: Tartars live here as well.
Q: What language do they speak?
A: I don’t know. That’s not any language they speak. It’s a terrible one. And they say their prayers their way, too . . . Each *natsya* has its own faith. [B, F, 35, Cat.]

There were Jewish *natsyas* here a time ago. They sure were Jews . . . They had their own faith. The Jewish faith, wasn’t it? It wasn’t Polish nor Rus’ – theirs was Jewish faith. [B, F, 66, Cat.]

A [daughter-in-law]: There are some Baptists in Lida.
Q: What’s their faith?
A [mother]: They believe in Moon.
Q: And what’s their *natsya*?
A [daughter-in-law (uncertainly)]: Maybe they count Rus’.
A [mother]: They don’t. They are what they’re called: Baptists.
A [daughter-in-law]: But, mother, maybe they don’t count so these days?
A [mother]: No, they’re Baptists, that’s what they are.
Q: Is it their *natsya*?
A [mother]: That’s right. [B, F 35 & 60, Cat.]

In the system, as self-consistent as it is, where there does not exist the category of ‘nationality’, the otherwise possible combinations like Orthodox Pole or Catholic Belarussian are definitively excluded. Thinking in terms of those combinations seems quite natural in terms of our ‘nationality-oriented categorisation of the social world’ (ObreÏbski 1936c: 427) but not for our interlocutors. If ‘Polish’ is synonymous with ‘Catholic’ and ‘Orthodox’ is synonymous with ‘Belarussian’, it is a contradiction in terms if we say: ‘a Belarussian Catholic’ or ‘an Orthodox Pole’.

A: Each Pole is a Pole. They never converted. One that’s Catholic is a Pole. There are no Belarussian Catholics. [P, M, 69, Cat.]
A: That’s what they call them: Polish and Rus’. Polish can never be Orthodox just as Rus’ can never be Catholic. [P, M, 69, Cat.]
Q: Does everyone in your *natsya* believe the same faith?
A: There’s no Orthodox Poles. No converts at all . . . The Belarussians are Orthodox and the Polish are Catholic, all of them. [P, F, 64, Cat.]

Apparently, the *natsya*/faith order of the Catholic/Polish and Orthodox/Rus’ dominates the constitution of the local world. In fact all citizens of
Belarus might be called ‘Belarussian’, but this does not alter the basic order:

A: We all count Belarussian because we live in Belarus, don’t we?
Q: Are all the people in Belarus Belarussian then?
A: They count Belarussian but aren’t we Christian and they Orthodox? That makes a difference.
Q: Do the Catholic write themselves Polish?
A: It is not enough that one lives in Belarus. It doesn’t make any difference if one’s a Pole – one’s Polish. [P, F, 65, Cat.]

There is one obvious consequence of such system of categorisation. Since one cannot be Polish and Orthodox or Belarussian and Catholic at the same time, the change of denomination entails the change of *natsya*, and the other way around; the change of *natsya* has a consequence in the change of denomination.

[A Catholic priest] at wedding ceremony says to her that she should learn the prayer so that the Rus’ girl knew the prayer, and then she’s going to be Polish, a convert. She won’t be Rus’ any more, not an Orthodox. She’s going to write herself Polish . . . She’ll be Polish. [B, F, 65, Ort.]

Q: If a Catholic girl gets married at [Orthodox] church, is she not Polish any more?
A: Surely not. What kind of a Pole should she be were she married at [Orthodox] church?
Q: And are their children going to be baptised at [Orthodox] church?
A: Sure they are, where else? [P, F, 65, Cat.]

Of course, the same mechanism applies to all kinds of *natsyas*:

There was a Jew here, and he was a Catholic, too. A young Jew he was and he was fond of one girl so he went to [Catholic] church and they got married, and then he wrote himself Polish. A Jew he was, and still a Pole. [P, F, 87, Cat.]

When we asked our interlocutors questions of the origin of *natsyas*/faiths they told us belief stories like this one:

I believe that all those faiths, what one’s faith is like, depends on what was predestined to each and that was accepted [from the life of Jesus Christ]. I’m thinking, why, I mean, all those faiths. Because there were lots of people crowding as they were watching the murder of Jesus Christ. Some believed Jesus an innocent man, wasn’t he, and they crucified him, yet others believed in a cock that was dead and came to life, still others believed, well, there could be an eclipse or maybe a moonrise, and then they came to believe in moon, and there were such small groups like . . . That’s how all those faiths, the *natsyas*, started. [P, M, 70, Cat.]

In the normative system of local people the divine order of *natsyas*/faiths takes precedence over the mundane order: that of nations. Mankind divided into *natsyas* represents the mythical order. The mythical order shapes the world view of the population of Belarussian villages and supplies them with the normative system. We asked the following question according to historical and political categories: ‘What came before: nation-
states or natsyas? And we received answers according to religious categories:

You may say there were no natsyas before, it was all pagan. Then they received baptism. Each nation received baptism. [P, M, 70, Cat.].

Because that was the order given by God. It was God who gave people faiths:

There's one Lord and there are many faiths. First, the Lord created states and gave them faith. There is English faith, American faith, German faith. Even the Germans believe in God. They have 'Got mit uns' written on their belts [P, F, 63, Cat.].

According to the social order natsyas originate in the moment of creation, or more precisely, in the 'mythical time of the beginning'. According to the individual order a baptism is the relevant moment as a symbolic act of the creation of a human being as a cultural being, as opposed to a natural one. The natsya of individuals originates in their baptism:

Q: Are the children going to be Belarussian or Polish?
A: Well, one daughter-in-law had her children baptised at Catholic church and so she brings them to Catholic church, and they pray there . . . And the other, as an Orthodox priest baptised them, then they bring them here and there, as they will.
Q: And what is their natsya?
A: They're Belarussian. And those baptised at Catholic church are going to be Polish. What else should they be? . . . And their parents are going to write them: father – Belarussian, mother – Polish. I think it's going to be so.
Q: Is natsya the same as faith?
A: It is. Natsya and faith, yes, they must be the same. [B, F, 65, Ort.]

The language of talk vs. the language of prayer: some criteria of qualification of natsyas

The language of talk

Q: Who can speak plain?
A: Anybody can! (Mrs Janina of Surkonty)
Q: But, how do you come to know he's a Pole?
A [Mrs Maria]: Why? It's just so!
A [Mrs Władysława]: How you come to know him? You never do! (From a conversation in Serafiny)

Researchers studying 'ethnicity' tend to agree that language is an unquestionable classificatory criterion of national groups. Our own field experience of the religious-linguistic borderland implied, however, that it was necessary to rethink the above statement even if it appears too obvious. We had to ask ourselves several key questions: Is it legitimate to refer to the linguistic criterion in our study? Since what we deal with are natsyas or religious denominations, and not nations, is the linguistic criterion relevant at all? If it is not, then is the criterion of religious denomination a sufficient...
one to classify *natsyas*? And, if we accept the linguistic criterion, what exactly do we have in mind when we say ‘language’?

Catholics and followers of the Orthodox church in the region of Lida speak the same language, a Belarussian dialect. It is the language of everyday common talk used by families and local communities. There are exceptions to this rule – as in the cases of some gentry and newcomers from Russia – but they are extremely rare. Furthermore, the rule is confirmed by the fact that the local Poles do not speak Polish:

A: There are mixed people here. We don’t get much of that Polish.
Q: What do you mean by mixed?
A: Well, ourselves like, Belarussian. It’s all the same, the Belarussian or the Polish, but we speak plain Belarussian. [P, F, 70, Cat.]

Now, take our kids. There’s five I have . . . And none speaks Polish. And in their passports they are written Polish. Even one granddaughter of mine, a medicine major, she’s Polish, too, and she can’t speak Polish at all. [P, M, 70, Cat.]

In order to explain the correlation between language and ‘nationality’ we asked the following question:

Q: What is the *natsya* of those who speak plain language?
A: It’s all kinds of *natsyas*. There is no difference. [P, M, 70, Cat.]

Some of our interlocutors were not even able to answer the question. After all, it was not asked in the categories of their order:

Q: . . . and who can speak plain?
A: Anyone can!
Q: What would you call the *natsya* of those who speak plain language then?
A: The *natsya* . . . [hesitating, not able to answer] . . . Now, this daughter of mine, she can’t speak Polish. She doesn’t speak it. When she was brought up it was Russia here and so she puts everything in Russian. [P, F, 82, Cat.]

Therefore, the linguistic criterion does not prove effective here. The conclusion seems obvious. Plain language spoken by all does not account for *natsyal* faith, nor does it favour any group of a national kind. In other words, those who speak plain do not form any specific *natsya*. They do not constitute the Belarussian nation, either. They are just plain people, or a peasant nation. What kind of a language is plain then? It is hardly enough to call it the ‘Western-Belarussian dialect’ (Kuraszkiewicz 1963). Rather, it is worth learning what the native speakers themselves have to say. When asked, they tend to give an apparently illogical answer: ‘plain is plain’:

Q: What kind of a language is plain?
A: It’s just plain . . . Plain is just the way you speak. The way we’re talking, you know, that’s the way it is when you talk in plain words. [P, F, 70, Cat.]

A: It’s not Belarussian that we speak. It’s just plain. [B, F, 75, Cat.]

But what exactly does it mean: *plain*? As they refer to their language as *plain*, it seems that what they mean is: ordinary, natural, clear. They say:
‘we just speak the way we do’ [P, F, 70, Cat.], or ‘we just speak plain’ [B, F, 63, Cat.]. As Włodzimierz Pawłuczuk put it: ‘To the members of an ethnic group their culture, language, customs, and patterns of behavior are too obvious, plain, and natural to make one ever reflect upon them. We are “local” people so our language is “plain,” and our customs are “common” – nothing gets beyond the normal and ordinary day-to-day life’ (Pawluczuk 1968: 37). In addition, plain is the language of plain people, that is, peasants, the uneducated. Plain language as opposed to pure language is synonymous with dialect as opposed to literary or official language. Plain is the language of the peasant just as pure is the language of the genteel and educated one.

A: We speak plain language us villagers. [P, M, 66, Cat.]
A: It’s plain illiterate. Russian and Belarussian are clearly [literate] and this one is our kind.
Q: What does it mean: literate?
A: As far as I see, say, if it’s Belarussian, there are all those proper words there and it’s called literate. [B, F, 60, Ort.]

The users of plain language pay much attention to pragmatic criteria. Their language proves an excellent means of communication:

Q: Can everyone in Belarus speak plain?
A [neighbor]: Everyone can.
A [host]: Everyone can.
Q: Is plain any worse?
A [neighbor]: I don’t say that, no, it’s not so ugly. No, the talk’s not an ugly talk, is it? You can understand. [P, F, 72 & 75, Cat.]

The language of everyday talk unifies the people because the language that they speak is precisely what they have in common. When a man, a moujik (etymologically, moujik means ‘man’)[11] speaks plain – he plain speaks. His world, that of everyday life, is the only world that exists. In everyday life the Catholic vs. Orthodox opposition disappears. It’s the realm of work as opposed to festivity, the profane world as opposed to the sacred. Since plain language belongs there it cannot account for natsyas. That is why the only answer we could get to our question of who could speak plain was: ‘Anybody can!’ [P, F, 82, Cat.]. As the language of the borderland, plain language is a mixed one. It is rich in borrowings as it is meant to serve its central function, namely, the communicative one:

Q: How did the plain language start?
A: It all started with the Russian occupation. They talked and talked with one another, and the talk started. [P, M, 70, Cat.]

A: There are the Polish, the Russian, the Belarussian, all mixed up together. [P, M, 80, Ort.]

The plain language may be considered lower than pure or civilised ones:
Q: What language do you speak?
A: Damn language, they laugh at us, the youth ... It’s neither Russian nor Belarussian and it varies from one village to another. [B & P, F, 60, Cat.]

A: In accordance with culture, civilisation, the Polish language is the right one. It’s as if you could hear a voice from heaven. It’s a voice from heaven, gentle as it is ... And that Belarussian doesn’t fit in. Russian may be, it’s like Russian. But those Belarussians, they bow to nobody.
Q: Is Russian better than Belarussian then?
A: Sure it is. [B & P, F, 70, Cat.]

I think that the Belarussian language is lousy, like. It can’t be a civilised language. Russian talk is a civilised talk. And even more so is Polish – that’s what I call civilised talk! ... I’m a Belarussian, right, but I hate it myself. I can understand it but I hated it since I was a little girl. [B, F, 58, Ort.]

There exists nothing like plain natsya. Plain applies to the nation – the people. Plain is the language of the nation – the people. It is not a language of any natsya or faith – and it could not possibly be one since it belongs to the realm of the profane. As a consequence, it is vulnerable to negative evaluation.

Seventy years ago Konstanty Srokowski wrote: ‘The attitude of the Belarussian peasantry to linguistic questions, should still be described as practical-objective rather than emotional-subjective’ (Srokowski 1924: 9). Presumably it is true. But in order to say that we would have to assume that if the user of the Belarussian language should ever show us his ‘emotional-subjective attitude’ towards the linguistic question of his own, he would first have to become a self-conscious member of his nation-state. There are such people in Belarus. Some distance away, in Minsk, plain language has its literary counterpart. The latter, however, remains beyond the reach of the Belarussian peasantry. In this way, the vicious circle is closed. It was, after all, the gentry, and not the peasantry, who invented the literary and national languages together with the nations themselves. Yet, Srokowski did not tell us the whole truth. There is, indeed, some kind of linguistic question towards which the Belarussian peasantry show an ‘emotional-subjective attitude’.

The language of prayer

Q: What differences are there between one nation and another?
A: It seems to me that there’s none ... They all believe the same God, just in different languages. [P] (Mr Michal of Lebieda)

As we have already said, ‘the linguistic criterion does not prove effective’. Still, there do exist different natsyas and, what is more, the differences are accompanied by a strong sense of distinction. Apparently, there is something effective enough. What is it? We must ask our interlocutors what, in their view, the meaning of the differences between natsyas is.
Q: Are the Catholic and the Orthodox faiths alike?
A: They are. The prayers are the same, just said in Rus’ by the Orthodox and in Polish by the Catholic. The Orthodox priest prayed in Old Slavonic and the Catholic priest in Latin.

Q: And what about his sermons?
A: Sure in Polish.

Q: And the Orthodox priest?
A: In Rus’.

Q: And how did they speak to the people?
A: The Catholic priest spoke Polish, and the Orthodox priest spoke Rus’, or Belarussian, like ourselves. [B, M, 70, Ort.]

As we could see, language is crucial indeed. But it is not the language of daily talk that matters. It is the language of the sacred sphere: that of liturgy, sermon, catechism, and, finally, that of prayer. It is different in the Catholic church and in the Orthodox church:

A Catholic church, an Orthodox church, what does it matter? It’s all the same. They’re just the same, it’s just that their languages are a bit different. [B, F, 65, Ort.]

There’s one Lord in the whole wide world so even the Rus’, if they believe, there’s one Lord, it’s all the same. The Holy Mass in Rus’ though, is still the Holy Mass. Quite the same. The words … they mention Jesus, and the Mother of our God … There’s just one faith and various languages. [P, F, 75, Cat.]

Since there is one Lord, prayers must be the same, too. But as there are many faiths, the prayers are said in different languages. This is the difference between natsyas: the language of prayer is the language of natsya. The role of the language of prayer is essential for the distinction of natsyas. Therefore, it is also used to name faiths: ‘the Polish faith’ and ‘the Rus’ faith’ are its derivatives. The name of natsya – or faith – is derived from the name of the language of prayer:

A: I can see there’s nothing like Polish faith these days. There’s just Rus’ faith … Because they all talk in Rus’, none does in Polish.

Q: Does it mean that if they talk in Polish, it’s Polish faith and if they talk in Rus’, it’s Rus’ faith?
A: That’s right. [P, F, 82, Cat.]

If we translate the terms employed by the local people to our own terms we can add some precision to them. We can say that the ‘Polish faith’ can be understood as ‘Polish-language faith’ and the ‘Rus’ faith’ as ‘Rus’ language faith’. Whenever our interlocutors told us about denominations, they characterised them above all in terms of the language of prayer:

The Polish are, the churches, they speak Polish and they say Polish prayers at church. There are … We’re all the same, we’ve got ‘Otcze nasz,’ and them, the Polish: ‘Ojce nasz’ [‘Our Father’], ‘Ducha Świętego’ [‘Holy Ghost’]. It’s one and the same, there’s one God. Languages are different. [B, F, 60, Ort.]

Taking into account the line of argument characteristic of our interlocutors, it seems legitimate to say that natsyas can be defined in terms of the
language in which the believers say their prayers. ‘Polish’ is the ‘one who says his prayer in Polish’; ‘Rus’ is the ‘one who says his prayer in Rus’. And the other way around: faith/natsya can lend its name to language. The language of the ‘Polish faith’ is ‘Catholic’ and the language of the ‘Rus’ faith’ is ‘Orthodox’. Here is further evidence to support the predominance of the order of natsyas/faiths. The logic of that order is reflected in the characteristic exchange of the terms: ‘Polish/Catholic language; Rus/Orthodox language’. Polish is most beautiful, a gentle language, it is the Catholic language. [P, F, 63, Cat.]

Q: Did Orthodox children study in Polish at school?
A: They did so. They did not study in Orthodox. They studied in Polish only. [P, F, 65, Cat.]

The Polish language defines the Catholic denomination – the ‘Polish faith’. Our interlocutors in many different ways confirmed that interdependence. Let us recall the above cited example of the self-identification of a woman of Pielulicie:

I’m Polish! What kind of a Lithuanian am I? I can say Polish prayers, and I have taught them to my grandchildren, and to my children, and they had their first Communion, and they confess, everything in Polish. [P, F, 70, Cat.]

The people define their adherence to a given natsya by the language of prayer. Self-identification is determined by the fact that they ‘had learned Polish prayers as soon as they were little children’:

I’ve spoken Polish since I was born. It’s the language of my mother, of the book, of prayer. [P, F, 78, Cat.]

I can’t even confess in a plain way. [P, F, 82, Cat.]

I always say my prayer in Polish. I just can’t say it in Belarussian. The book is Polish, and the rosary. [P, F, 63, Cat.]

Our next question is:

Q: Does it matter in which language one says their prayers? Is it necessary to say it in one’s own language?
A: Sure you must say your prayer in your own language. You can’t change your prayer, can you? Even if you spoke German, the prayer you have learned in Polish. Can you tell me how, just how could you learn it anew in German? [P, F, 59, Cat.]

‘You can’t change your prayer’ – except for one case. The change of denomination consists exactly in the change of the language of prayer:

As my granddaughter got married to a Pole she converted to the Polish faith . . . The Catholic priest gave her the book and now she can say all Polish prayers . . . He says to her: ‘There is one faith. Yet, he says, say your prayer.’ And so she said: ‘Ojcze nasz, Zdrowa Maryja [Hail Mary], Wierzę w Boga [I believe in God].’ See, she said it all, and he says: ‘That was good’ [B, F, 75, Ort.]

Yet another argument for the role of the Polish language as the language of the Polish faith can be supplied. It is the common belief that every Catholic priest knows Polish:
Our priest is a plain man . . . but he studied Polish . . . The Orthodox priest, he surely studied Belarussian but our priest studies Polish . . . He studied Polish in Riga, he studied there in Polish [P, F, 72, Cat.].

Conversations that we had in the parish of Pielasa supplied us with a specific kind of an argument in support of our thesis. The Lithuanian Catholic priest there does not speak Polish. Still, the order of norm and logic of the myth still dominates the order of practice – the reality:

A [wife]: It is Lithuanian church here, there’s nothing Polish. The preaching’s in Russian, not even Belarussian. It’s that priest, I really don’t know what to call him. What kind of a priest is he if he doesn’t speak any Polish?
A [husband]: Because he doesn’t like to.
A [wife]: You must be right.
A [husband]: The Lithuanian, and a bitter one, too! [P, M & F, 80, Cat.]

Q: The priest doesn’t speak Polish?
A: He says so but who can tell? It may well be that he doesn’t like to. [P, F, 70, Cat.]

Our considerations so far lead us to the conclusion that, as much as the language of talk and the language of prayer are concerned, there’s no room for the Belarussian language at the Catholic church. The latter is, after all, the temple of the ‘Polish’ and not ‘Belarussian’ faith:

Once I was saying my confession and I even said to the priest, Pacyna, if you preach in Belarussian, I will never step into the church. Why should he, anyway? Can you tell me why? They want to make the Belarussian of all of us. It isn’t quite proper, is it? [P, M, 70, Cat.]

Q: Is the Holy Mass always in Polish?
A: That’s right.
Q: Does everybody understand that?
A: They do. They can’t speak Polish but their understanding is fair.
Q: Didn’t the priest like to introduce Belarussian?
A: I couldn’t tell . . .
Q: Would you like him to do so? Wouldn’t you think that more people could understand him?
A: Well, somehow it doesn’t work. Anyway, there’s no language better than Polish. Somehow it wouldn’t fit in. It seems to me that it wasn’t a Catholic priest at all, it could be an Orthodox priest, the way he spoke, plain like.
Q: Doesn’t fit in?
A: Well, no, it doesn’t. [P, F, 65, Cat.]

Q: Do people say Belarussian prayers at church?
A: No, they don’t. Polish prayers only, and some Lithuanian, too.
Q: But, if the people speak plain, wouldn’t it be easier to say plain prayers, too?
A: Why should it be? You pray the way you have learned to pray. Take myself. My mother taught me to pray in Lithuanian, and so I say my prayer’s in Lithuanian. The other woman was taught Polish prayer, and so she taught it to her children. [B, M, 52, Cat.]

Contrary to the language of everyday talk, the language of prayer is the
one of intrinsic value to the local culture. ‘It is deeply embedded in affectional roots of ideological systems and its function consists in self-identification of the group. The special attitude towards intrinsic values results from their ability to ensure the essential bond between the social and cultural systems of the group. Were they missing, both systems would fall apart’ (Smolicz 1987: 59). That explains why Belarussian ‘doesn’t fit’ in a Catholic church and why ‘there is no language better than Polish’ as Mrs Maria of Papiernia puts it, and the others chime in:

The Polish language is the right one. It’s as if you could hear voice from heaven. It’s voice from heaven, gentle as it is. [P, M, 70, Cat.]

Say, at church, as the priest . . . begins preaching in Polish – plain man you are but, Jesus, it’s as if you were standing there in heaven! [P, F, 70, Cat.]

Here, we shift to the mythical level:

Q: And what was the natsya of Jesus?
A: Must be Jewish.
Q: Was God’s Mother Jewish, too?
A: No, I wouldn’t say so. And Joseph wasn’t Jewish, too.
Q: So, what was their natsya?
A: I don’t know, my dear.
Q: And what was the language they spoke?
A: Polish! [P, F, 82, Cat.]

Poles have been here since the beginning of the world. They were there when Jesus was born. There were Adam and Eve, too. They were Polish. Our Lord’s Polish. [P, F, 82, Cat.]

Our interlocutors confirm in this way Stefan Czarnowski’s statement on the Catholicism of Polish peasants: ‘For the vast majority of our peasants the Polish and the Catholic are the same just as the German and the Lutheran are the same. It is true that the peasant realises that there are yet other Catholic nations but he prefers to consider them . . . rather faraway from God and the Saints whose language is in his belief Polish’ (Czarnowski 1982: 371).

Thus, ‘the Catholic’ are ‘the Polish’. And what about the followers of the Orthodox church? About those who call themselves ‘Rus’ or ‘Belarussian’ and so they are called? ‘The still dominant concept of Russicisity is applied with regard to the broadest cultural collectivity’ – these words written by Konstanty Srokowski (1924: 9) seem not to have lost their relevance today.

‘Russicisity’ is synonymous with the ‘Orthodox natsya’. At the same time, ‘Belarussicisity’, as Srokowski suggests, should be understood as a synonym of the ‘Belarussian nation’, the concept deriving from another order: the order according to which nation is determined by the Belarussian colloquial language. As regards the peasants, however, there exists nothing like the Belarussian nation since Belarussian is not a language of prayer:
'They sing Polish and Lithuanian at church. The Belarussians haven’t got their own song. There’s no such singing’ [P, F, 60, Cat.]. Yet our interlocutors do use the word ‘Belarussian’, though exchangeable with ‘Rus’ and ‘Orthodox’, to denote their natsya/faith. What is more, the very language of Orthodox liturgy and sermon is called ‘Belarussian’ which, of course, is not the case in reality (Old Church Slavonic and Russian are the languages of the Orthodox church):

Our priest will walk around, consecrate a grave, say a prayer, say it plain. [P, F, 77, Ort.]

Q: Do other people say their prayers plain, too?
A: No, why? He just can’t speak pure Russian at all, just Belarussian.
Q: So, there is some Belarussian at church?
A: Sure. [B, M, 52, Cat.]

Q: And what is the language of the Holy Mass?

Summary

From the folk natsya to the national nation

At that census there was a teacher coming and she always argued: ‘What kind of a Pole are you if you can’t even speak?’ And she said to me that I was Belarussian . . . but I can’t speak Belarussian at all. [P] (Mr Michał of Krasnowce)

And today it happened to be Belarus . . . Once it wasn’t at all and so we never knew it was Belarus . . . And now we’ve learned that we’re Belarussian people. Once it wasn’t so, the language was plain and we were Polish. [P] (Mr Jan of Pieluże)

If we were to compare local categorisation of the social world and that of ours we would have to proceed in the following way: Mankind is divided into natsyas/faiths (plainly speaking), i.e. religious denominations (in our terms). We, however, prefer to divide mankind into ‘nations’. Among natsyas there are ‘the Polish or Catholic one’, ‘the Rus’ (Belarussian)’ or ‘Orthodox one’, as well as ‘the Muslim natsya’, ‘Jews’, ‘Baptists’, etc. But if we wanted to continue dividing natsyas themselves, that is, if we asked ourselves who belongs to the category ‘Polish’ or ‘Rus’, a problem would arise. In order to answer the question in our own categories it is quite enough to put down the ‘Catholics’ of all ‘nations’ (including some ‘Poles’, ‘Lithuanians’, ‘Germans’, ‘Gypsies’, etc.) as ‘Poles’, and the followers of the ‘Orthodox’ church (including some ‘Belarussians’ and ‘Russians’) – as ‘Rus’. But the division of our pigeon-hole natsya according to plain categories is not that plain at all. When this is done, the terms that our interlocutors use appear equivocal. For example, the words ‘Polish’ and ‘Rus’ alike denote the whole pigeon-hole and, at the same time, a compartment of it, or a certain group belonging to a given natsya.
As we know, ‘all the Polish are Polish’. That means: ‘all the Catholics are Catholics’. Statements like: ‘the Lithuanian is a Pole’, or ‘the Gypsy is a Pole’ are not contradictions in terms. Instead, they mean: ‘the Lithuanian (Gypsy, German, Tartar, Jew, etc.) is a Catholic’. In the region under study it was most common to see the kind of the Catholic whom one would be tempted to qualify as: ‘the Catholic of Polish nationality’. But if we were to elaborate upon that definition adapting the conceptual system of the subjects of our study, our first impulse would be to give a negative definition: ‘the Catholic who is not a Lithuanian, Gypsy, German, etc.’ Only now we can distinguish between two meanings of the word ‘Polish’: first, ‘the Polish is a Catholic’; second, ‘the Polish is a non-Lithuanian Catholic’ or, more precisely, ‘Catholics who say their prayers exclusively in Polish’.

Thus, if we were to continue dividing the category of natsya we should say that the ‘Polish natsya’, or the group of the followers of the ‘Polish faith’, comprises several subunits. Apart from ‘the Polish’ (in the second meaning of the word, that is, ‘the Catholics who say their prayers exclusively in Polish’), there are also ‘the Lithuanian’, ‘the Gypsy’, as well as German, Tartar, and Jewish followers of the Catholic church, etc. The category of ‘the Rus’, in turn, comprises the Belarussian and the Russian, the Belarussian meaning ‘the followers of the Orthodox church who live in Belarus’ and the Russian meaning ‘the followers of the Orthodox church who live in Russia’. In our own terms, i.e. in terms of ‘nationality’, they should be called Belarussian and Russian followers of the Orthodox church.

The ambivalence which is characteristic of the qualification of the natsyas points to the fact that, apart from the order of natsyas/faiths, there must be another order at work in the conceptual system of the population under study. It is the order of natsyas/nationalities:

The Lithuanian and the Polish:

The Lithuanian are also Catholic but another natsya, and they speak another language. [P, M, 63, Cat.]

A [husband]: There’re some Polish here and they talk in Polish and Lithuanian and plain. There’s quite a few natsyas here, as they say.
A [aunt]: Quite a few languages.
Q: And faiths?
A [aunt]: The faith is kind of the same, it’s Polish, and Lithuanian.
A [husband]: It’s Polish faith and Lithuanian faith, alike. There’s no Orthodox people here. There’s just Catholics here, just the Catholic.
Q: Is that another natsya?
A [husband]: That’s right. [P, M, 73 & F, 96, Cat.]

The Polish and the Belarussian:

Q: Are there any Poles in the village?
A: There’s no Pole to be a fair Pole. What kind of a Pole you mean? Fair Poles are over there, in Warsaw, in Poznań, that’s the Polish. And those here, it’s just their
faith that’s not that Rus’. It’s Catholic, and they’re plain Polish. Not that they’re Polish, they’re Polish like. Like another faith. Besides, they’re same Belarussian like ourselves, the Orthodox. [P, F, 77, Ort.]

The Belarussian and the Russian:

Q: What is the faith of the Belarussian?
A: It’s Orthodox faith.
Q: Are there any Belarussian Catholics?
A: Well, how to put it … Well, if, for instance, you were baptised at Catholic church, you’re a Catholic. As regards nationality, it’s all the same, they all write themselves Belarussian, but still, it’s Catholic faith. [B, F, 84, Cat.]
Q: Is Russian and Belarussian the same?
A: I wouldn’t say so, they’re a bit different. Their faith’s the same but their languages are not, nor their natsya. [P, M, 66, Cat.]

We could also record some theoretical considerations:

Faith is faith and nationality is nationality. Natsya and nationality – these are the same. A Pole is still a Pole. For instance, there are some Catholics among the Polish, and then there’s other religions, too. And there are Lutherans, Catholics, and others among the German. [P, M, 84, Ort.]

You say natsya. By natsya I mean Polish nationality, and Russian nationality and Belarussian nationality – that’s all nationality. And faith is altogether different. There may be Orthodox faith, and Catholic faith. You may be Belarussian according to nationality and still a Catholic, and the other way round: you can be an Orthodox Pole. Nationality has got nothing in common with faith. Natsya is just the same as nationality. Polish natsya means Polish nationality. As regards nationality, there are the Polish, the Belarussians, are you getting it? [B, M, 42, Cat.]

To put it in our terms, denomination and nationality are treated as two separate things. In the above passage natsya and faith are two separate things and the stereotype natsya/faith does not hold. At the same time, another meaning of natsya has occurred. The member of natsya so understood is no longer a member of the religious group but, instead, one of the national group in the modern sense of the word.

In that case, it would be illegitimate to say that the communities under study are confined to the meanings of ‘pre-national’, so to say, stage of development. Clearly enough, their ‘pre-national’, or ethnic, view of the world is parallel with the national, or modern view according to which natsya does mean ‘nation’ and the distinction between natsya and ‘faith’ is fully recognised. The latter view is not, however, typical of the population under study. Rather, it is characteristic of individual cases of those who have been around, interested in world affairs, the educated and youth. The vast majority of our interlocutors still considered themselves members of natsyas/faiths. We were lucky to record some extremely interesting conversations in which the two orders: natsyas/faiths and natsyas/nationalities clashed:
A [wife]: We speak Polish, and some Lithuanian. There are mixed people here, there must be some seven Lithuanian villages of our folks, and there’s all the rest, the Polish, and the Belarussian.

A [husband]: There’s no Belarussian here at all.

A [wife]: So, how, you say, we speak ourselves?

A [husband]: Plain.

A [aunt]: There are Belarussian folks here, there’s no Poles here at all.

A [wife]: Why say not? Take Raduń parish – aren’t they all Polish, but all of them?

A [aunt]: Oh, dear, but aren’t those villages Belarussian?

A [husband]: What are you talking about, aunt? Take Bolciszki, or Woldociszki, they’re plain Polish, all of them. Don’t say rubbish, there’s no Belarussians here at all. Grodno side is where they are, the Belarussian. [B, M & F, 73, & F, 96, Cat.]

Trying to find out whether our interlocutors did or did not distinguish between denomination and nationality, we asked them a variety of questions which confronted our categorisation of nation and denomination with that of natsya/faith. These are some of the most typical answers that we received:

Q: Are there any Catholics of other natsyas?
A: Well, natsya, the Catholic natsya, it’s Catholic. Say, the Orthodox natsya – it’s Orthodox. Such are the natsyas here: the Catholic one and the Orthodox one.

Q: But, are there any Catholics of another natsya?
A: There’s no such Catholics. Any Pole believes Polish faith and Polish priest – that’s a Catholic. The Orthodox believe in Orthodox priest and in theirs. [P, F, 70, Cat.]

This is just another example:

Q: And what was the natsya of the Orthodox folks?
A: That’s their natsya, the Orthodox natsya. [P, F, 70, Cat.]

And yet another definition:

Q: Are there another people who follow the same faith as yours yet of another natsya?
A: Rus’ Catholic? There’s no way. [P, F, 50, Cat.]

So, we are back again to natsyas/faiths, and the vicious circle is closed.

‘Why this way?’ and ‘What next?’: some new research questions

The material presented above suggests that we are dealing with a process of change, namely, the passage from natsya to ‘nation’. This conclusion immediately provokes some new research questions, although adequate answers will depend on continued ethno-sociological studies of the border area of our interest. Let us, then, formulate some of these questions in a way that will guide further research.

The generational aspect of change

All students of the transition from folk (ethnic) to national identity must deal with questions of generational determination and differentiation. Our preliminary hypothesis in this matter was that the ethnic or pre-national
consciousness of those who live in the world of natsyas is characteristic of elderly people with two to four years of schooling before the war, which taught them to read and write and count, and who have spent all their lives in a village community isolated from the wider world. It was our assumption, too, that the younger generations, and especially children and youth from Belarussian schools, where the new nation-state’s educational policy is being put into practice, would be ‘nationalised’ people who identify themselves as members of one of the three self-conscious nations (Belarussian, Polish or Lithuanian) that aspire to attract the ‘locals’ in the borderland under study.

Our hypothesis has been verified negatively. Our conversations with the people, and time spent together with them made it clear that many of our elderly interlocutors are not isolated in their traditional world of natsyas, and that the modern world of nations interferes with it. What is more, the similarly unclear distinction between the natsya-faith and natsya-nation orders equally concerns the younger population of the villagers.

When we asked children (10–12 years of age) to identify themselves, their answers were either nation (‘Religiously, I am a Pole, nationally – Belarussian’) or natsya-conscious. (Q: ‘Are you Polish or Belarussian?’ A: ‘I’m written Rus’. Mum is a Pole and Daddy is a Rus’. And my faith is Rus.’). The traditional notions of natsyas-faiths still persist and have impact. During our first visits to the villages near Grodno we were surprised when, for example, a young woman over twenty, a daughter of a Starover (Old Believer) father and an Orthodox mother, coming from Vilnius in Lithuania, and married to a Catholic in a Belarussian village declared: ‘I am a Catholic now, so I’m a Pole.’ Today, after having spent more time with the community, we understand that when an Orthodox grandmother summaries her granddaughter’s first communion (in a Catholic church): ‘Our Nadya will be a Pole now’, she uses the concepts of the natsya-faith order. And Nadya, who comes from a mixed Orthodox-Catholic family, goes to a Russian-language school, speaks Belarussian and Russian at home, and does not know a single Polish word except prayers, is brought up in the network of these concepts. The school competes with these concepts, of course. However, the nation-forming influence of the school has significantly diminished in recent years. Lukashenko’s establishment has withdrawn Belarussian textbooks in history, literature and language and changed the curriculum.

Thus, further studies should focus on the question of the character, range and generational effects of changes in formation of national consciousness.

*Natsyas, i.e. religious groups in the process of change: from pre-modernity via communism to the nation-state*

The next question that arises from the problems under study concerns the transformation of the natsya-faith phenomenon from pre-modernity until
today. In addressing this question one must not ignore the historical and social specificity of Belarus. In many respects, Belarus is a less modern country than other Eastern-Central European countries. This seems to be one of the factors of the continuing persistence of pre-modern or a-national consciousness in Belarus.

Belarus lost its sovereignty at the end of the eighteenth century. Since then, the states it belonged to and borders, as well as cultural influences ranging from the Latin Occident to the Byzantine Orient, have changed several times. As a result, the process of nationalisation began much later in the case of Belarussians than in other Eastern-Central European countries and it has not yet come to an end. For centuries Belarus has remained a provincial country, first within the Republic of Poland-Lithuania, and later as part of Russia, Poland and the Soviet Union. It remained untouched by certain cultural influences from both Europe and Russia, as well as by the European industrial revolution and capitalism. Feudal and post-feudal social structures persisted in Belarus until the beginning of the twentieth century. The contemporary class structure of Belarussian society, largely plebeian and lacking a sizeable middle class, together with a history of feudal and authoritarian state structures have contributed to national indifference on the part of the people. With its weak indigenous intelligentsia and strong habits of allegiance to the bureaucratic elites of ‘homo sovieticus’, Belarussian society remained and still remains to some extent under the influence of class rather than national ideologies. What is more, the specific features of borderlands – and not only the district of Grodno but the whole of Belarus can be classified as a borderland (whether language, cultural, religious or ethnic) – affects the process of identity formation and, in comparison with mono-cultural communities, hinders the formation of national identities.

Belarus’s historical lack of sovereignty, provinciality, lack of a modern social structure, and the multicultural character all explain the survival of the pre-modern phenomenon of natsya-faith. The question of the origin or causes of this phenomenon is not as interesting to the anthropologist as the problems of its amazing persistence in our times, during and after communism.

Together with communism, the kolkhoz system with its characteristic repressions entered Belarussian villages. The state took property – land, barns, farm animals and agricultural tools – away from peasants, who were forced to work for no reward, while kulaks were sent to the Gulag. Our interlocutors remember these events very well. They do not, however, remember the kolkhoz system as the greatest source of harm done to them. After all, the kolkhoz was, in a sense, a modernised version of the manorial farm which they do not find unfamiliar. Their worst memory is of assaults on the most essential, core group value of these communities: ‘the closure of the faith’. Religious persecution, whether of the Catholic or Orthodox religion, consisted of shutting down churches or turning them into stores. Priests were arrested and taken away, village crosses and chapels destroyed, religion at school banned. Communists are identified with the Antichrist by the
inhabitants of Belarussian villages. Their religion-centred world view makes them see communists as agents of the devil and their ideology as the ‘party faith’. To the question ‘Who are communists?’, our interlocutors frequently answered:

They don’t regard God or

They don’t believe in God. When that Lenin came he made communism and regarded nothing else, neither religion nor nothing, only the communist party. You have to believe in Marx-Engels, he said, as it was him who established the party. It was a religion of Marx-Engels. [P, M, 70, Cat.]

The fall of communism, in turn, was often reduced by our interlocutors to the event: ‘Gorbachev opened the faith again.’ Churches were opened up, restoration and building were started, and the Polish and Rus’ again practise their religions openly, as they did ‘in the grandfathers’ and great-grandfathers’ times’.

It seems that the answer to the question: Why did communism appear to have such a limited impact on the world of natsyas-faiths? can be found in the further study of two aspects of the answers that we heard: first, in the system of values and mentality of the local village communities, which may shed some light on both their immunity to communist ideology and the degree to which they proved vulnerable, and, second, in the social practice of communist administration which not only did not promote civic attitudes, but did the opposite.

An Independent Republic of Belarus has existed since 1991. The following comments by the inhabitants of borderland villages express typical attitudes towards the new state:

Honestly, it’s all the same to me. Is it Poland, Russia or Belarus . . . All that matters is that you can live well. [B, F, 64, Ort.]

No matter what government, we will conform. Anyone is good for us, the Russian, the Belarussian, Pole or American . . . Only that you can live all right matters. [P, M, 65, Cat.]

Our interlocutors perceive the state as a structure that appears and changes from time to time absolutely irrespective of them. Their historical memory (limited, in the case in folk communities, to the memory of the oldest generation) provide an excellent basis for such a view. They have been living in Tsarist Russia, then in Poland, under Soviet and, then German, occupations, then again in the USSR, and, only recently, in Belarus, without ever leaving their home villages.

I am Belarussian now, in my passport, since Belarus took us . . . And before I wasn’t, before I was a Pole. [P, M, 66, Cat.]

This is how one of our interlocutors used his own example to explain to us the principle of changing formal inscriptions in the rubric headed ‘nationality’ in passports that were changed along with changing states.

‘Passport identification’ seems to be the only way of identifying Poles and
Rus’ with the state that they inhabit. Contrary to identification with natsya-faith, no emotions are involved here. This kind of identification is perceived as a purely administrative demand that must be obeyed. The attitude towards the state and its institutions is traditionally deferential, just as it was at the times of ‘the good Tsar’. Authority means ‘them’ and not ‘us’. Bonds with the state remain predominantly habitual, and not ideological.

Whether the youngest and future generations in the villages of Grodno district will repeat after their parents and grandparents: ‘states are changing and we persist’ or declare: ‘we are citizens of the Belarussian state and members of the Belarussian nation’, depends, in the first place, on the development of the political and social situation in this region of Europe.

Addendum. Faith in man: the relativity of differences

Our Lord created all people to be people. (Mr Antoni of Papiernia)

What difference does it make? We are all children of one planet ... It doesn’t depend on us, whether Polish or Rus’. Let his soul be good, God’s with him. (Mrs Nina of Szpilki)

One of the most important things that we have learned from the inhabitants of the villages of Lida region is the belief that the importance of ‘national’ identity is relative. When asked in terms of our own classification to define their sense of national identity, they brought us to the level transcending natsyas. At that level, differences between faiths were no longer of any essential meaning. The ‘Polish’, ‘Lithuanian’, ‘Jewish’ were replaced by the human:

Q: What natsyas are living here?
A: All of them. They are mixed people, Rus' and Polish like ... You can’t tell ... After all, the Lord is one for all. We’re nice to one another. All the people are the same, aren’t they? ... There’s no difference between them, there’s no reason why they should be different. [B, F, 80, Ort.]

There must be some faith in everyone. Were one Orthodox or Muslim, once one believes and follows the truth, one won’t do no harm to nobody. [P, M, 70, Cat.]

Q: How do different faiths differ between themselves?
A: To my mind, I think there’s just one Lord in heaven and they pray to him. Faiths, you say? So many countries, so many customs. If we believe one faith, it’s most beautiful to us and so is theirs to them. [P, F, 68, Cat.]

Whoever you may be, Christian, Lutheran, Evangelist, it’s all the same, all of them belong to one God, Jesus Christ, one Lord ... Once a man, whoever it should be, a natural man, he won’t even break a little tree in vain. That’s what I count a religious man. [P, M, 84, Ort.]

Talking with the people of Lida, and sharing their daily life, we never forgot the warning that Mrs Nina of Szpilki once gave us:

It’s too hard to tell all those faiths and people ... I think it would be better if all that establishment, all those sophisticated people left us alone. Let people be what they
were born to be, just let them be good and nice to one another. What difference does it make: we’re all the children of one planet, we’re all the children. [B, F, 65, Ort.]

It was Mrs Nina and other ‘locals’ who prevented us from believing that we knew better. We would like to thank them all.

**Conclusion**

The main argument of this research may be summarised in the statement that the members of the folk communities of the Belarusian–Polish–Lithuanian borderland conceive and categorise social reality in a different way from members of nationalised and urbanised societies – that is, according to religious, and not nation-state, criteria. Inhabitants of kolkhoz villages in the district of Grodno divide people into *natsyas*, i.e. religious groups. There are two main *natsyas*: Catholics (called also Poles) and Orthodox (called Rus’ or Belarusians). Other examples are Jews, Muslims and Baptists. The *natsya*, a concept specific to traditional folk societies, should not be confused with ‘nation’, a political term of the modern world.

The language of everyday communication used by people belonging to several different *natsyas* is the same – they all speak Belarusian dialect, so called ‘plain language’. But they pray in various languages: the Catholics in Polish and/or Lithuanian, the Orthodox in Old Church Slavonic and Russian. So it is the language of prayer which is the criterion which distinguishes one *natsya* from another. That is why the terms Catholic *natsya* and Polish *natsya* are synonymous: the members of this *natsya* pray in the Polish language. Similarly, the Orthodox or Rus’ *natsya* is defined by the fact that its members pray in the Rus’ languages.

Although they still live lives very similar to their ancestors’ as regards their traditional folk culture, and they think in a mythical way, the kolkhoz peasants of Grodno district are not completely isolated from the external world. Therefore, they are confronted with the modern concept of ‘nation’. This produces turmoil in their worldview and confusion about their identity. What we saw in the Belarusian villages was a process of change.

The borderland where our material was collected is an excellent field for studying the development of Belarusian, Lithuanian and Polish national identities, as well as for identifying some general mechanisms in the passage from ‘folk’ to ‘national’ identities.

**Notes**

1 The notion of ‘local community’ is equivalent to the term of an ‘ethnic group’, ‘folk group’, ‘sacral society’, and ‘local society’. The terminology is based, among others, on Ohrebški (1936a,b) and Pawłuczuk (1968).

2 The notion of ‘borderland’, as defined by Staszcak (1975: 63–73), does not imply a borderline but rather a region.
3 The villages under study belong to the province of Grodno of the Republic of Belarus. In the years 1920–39 they belonged to the province of Nowogródek of the Second Polish Republic. During the years 1793–1918 they belonged to the Grodno government (until 1842) and the Vilnius government of the Russian empire; at the time of the First Republic of Poland to the province of Vilnius.

4 The term ‘self-conscious nation’ was defined by Weinsberg (1992: 1) as ‘A grouping of people united by their national consciousness, as constituted by three kinds of bonds: a common name, a commitment to different historical traditions – both genuine and fictitious – and national-liberatory aspirations.’

5 The term of ‘subject under study’ is understood here according to the definition by Wyka (1993: 25, 51): ‘In every case the researcher and those under study find themselves in a relation between subjects . . . In the research the subjectivity of the researcher does not imply distancing and “objective” observation of the object. On the contrary, the attitude of the researcher requires intentionally apprehending it in many various ways . . . As a consequence, an alternative sociology gives up the term “object” as related to the persons who participate in the research, and replaces it with the notion of “subject” or “partner” in the research interaction; the subject under study.’

6 The errors that I have in mind can be found in the literature on the subject, e.g.:

1. Confusing the national perspective of the researcher with the pre-national (folk, ethnic), perspective of the local group. Some authors project their own national identity on the ‘local’ Poles, Lithuanians and Belarussians. As a result, instead of describing the group under study, they describe the ‘postulated nation’ (or, as Weinsberg (1992: 2) defines it: ‘A group of people considered part of a self-conscious nation by the members of the nation irrespective of the identity or the lack of identity of the group itself.’) This makes it hard to distinguish such descriptions from national ideology.

2. Lack of historical perspective. For example a tacit assumption that the ‘Polish’ population of the villages of the former Polish north-eastern regions consists of people who are as self-conscious nationally as the researcher himself. At the same time, it is assumed that they have been there, together with some equally self-conscious ‘Lithuanians’ and ‘Belarussians’, forever, as if their view of the ‘mythical order’ should be taken for granted.

3. The lack of recognition of linguistic questions specific to border regions. Hence, some linguistically incompetent anthropologists believe that in the region under study the Polish language had been the common language of the peasantry ‘since time immemorial’ and that it was eliminated only during the Soviet period. The process of linguistic Polonisation of the region of Vilnius has been analysed by Turska 1939.

4. Unreflectively accepting language as the key criterion distinguishing nationalities and nations. According to our findings, in the region under study denomination (understood as natsya) rather than language should play the role of the key criterion.

7 The terms ‘Belarussian’ and ‘Rus’ are used in several meanings by our interlocutors, e.g. synonymously: ‘follower of the Orthodox church’, or, alternatively: ‘citizen of Belarus’ and ‘citizen of Russia’, respectively.

8 The same was stated by Obreński who specialised in ethnic relations in Polesie before world War II: ‘Poles as an outside group, nationally crystallised and commonly using national categories, tend to define the population of the Polesie in similar, historically and socially constructed terms, if only because they can not do otherwise. Our frequent discussions of the question whether the population of Polesie should be considered Ukrainian or Belarussian, and what their actual identity is, are nothing other than, probably a more sophisticated, form of our characteristic nation-oriented categorisation of the social world, a naive yet common one’ (Obreński 1936c: 442).


10 It is characteristic that Weinsberg does not identify common language as a defining feature of self-conscious nationhood. Furthermore, he says: ‘If it is assumed that national language should be one of the dogmas of a self-conscious nation, this does not necessarily imply that the
language actually used by the whole group of people at the moment should determine their membership in a given self-conscious nation. Even if we accept it as a matter of principle, we can still point to exceptions from the rule of this or that kind' (Weinsberg 1992: 3).

11 The word moujik derives from the Proto-Indo-European man, as Polish maśz (Brückner 1970: 327).

12 In the region under study, the ambivalence is characteristic mainly in the parish of Pielasa, in the Polish–Lithuanian borderland. The world seems simpler only several kilometres to the south, with the Orthodox having only Polish-speaking Catholics as their neighbours. Here is an example of a typical conversation on the common denomination of the Polish and Lithuanians:

Q: What’s Polish faith?
A: It’s no Polish faith. Such Polish faith, well . . . The Lithuanians and all of us here go to church together. No matter, Lithuanian or Polish, go to church. And there are no Jews, here, nor Gypsies, I’ve never seen one. And Lithuanians, as they are here, they come. And the Polish come. It’s all the same, they are Lithuanian natsya and we are Polish. What can you do? [P, F, 70, Cat.].

13 In numerous studies, the sociologist Ryszard Radzik (1991, 1996, 1997) has analysed the historical, social and cultural conditions of the nation-forming process in Belarus.

14 Danuta Życzyska-Ciolek, a member of our research group has written more about the attitudes of our interlocutors towards the state, authorities and political changes in Belarus (see Danuta Życzyska-Ciolek, 1996).

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