2. HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND ETHNIC ROOTS[1]

General features of ethnic identity evolution in the eastern part of Europe

Differences may be observed between Eastern and Western Europe in terms of the ethnogenesis of the peoples and the development of their ethnic identity. In the eastern half of the continent, rather than be tied to the confines of a particular state, community identity and belonging have tended to emerge from the collective memory of a community of linguistic and cultural elements or, on occasion, from the collective memory of a state that existed in an earlier period (Romsics, I. 1998). The evolution of the eastern Slavic and Baltic peoples constitutes a particular aspect of this course. We can, therefore, gain insights into the historical foundations of the ethnic identity of the inhabitants of today's Belarus – an identity that arose in the era of modern nationalism – by examining the states that were formed by other peoples in the same geographic area, changes in those states, the Belarus language, and the various cultural dimensions which have been determined by such factors (Abdsiralowitsch, I. 2009/2010).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, its constituent republics in Europe became independent countries. Among these countries, the Baltic states became members of the European Union (EU) at the time of the 2004 EU enlargement. Much of the region, however, became part of the European Union's neighbourhood, retaining multiple ties to Russia. Today, this post-Soviet region (which was a border zone in earlier centuries too) comprises three countries: Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. Although the people of the region have attempted, in the course of their history, to develop autonomous state structures, their lives have mostly been determined by outside forces with diverse geopolitical interests.

The uncertain political situation of past centuries gave rise – along the linguistic, cultural and political fault lines – to several ethnic groups with uncertain identities, disputed allegiances and divergent political interests. Even now, there exist among the various groups overlaps, differences and conflicts which arose in earlier periods. The characteristic features of the groups have not been placed in a clearly definable framework.

In the eastern half of Europe, the various ethnic groups are at different stages of development in terms of their ethnic identity. The Belarusian people, who speak an eastern Slavic language, occupy a special place among these groups. On several occasions, the attention of international public opinion has been drawn to Belarus, on account of its political system (which does not conform to the standards of the North Atlantic area), the deepening political and social fault lines (which stem from this same difference), and the escalation of these problems in the immediate neighbourhood of the European Union.

Whereas, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, most of the new independent states emphasized their detachment from the former empire, which now lay in ruins, Belarus – its political leadership – sought, from the second half of the 1990s onwards, to establish ever-closer political ties with Russia. This process raises several questions: Why did the political changes and the possibility of independent statehood fail to strengthen community consciousness in a significant part of society? Why was there a weakening

---

[1] The present chapter reflects only the view of the Hungarian author, Zsolt Bottlik. It does reflect neither the view of Belarusian authors asserted in other parts of the present book nor the official Belarusian standpoint nor the viewpoint of the domestic institutions of the Belarusian authors opined in other parts of the present book.

of local (Belarusian) identity by using of Russian language in everyday life instead of Belarusian (Golz, S. 2011; Savitzkaya, N. 2011)?

Early frames of cohesion

In view of the weakness of the regional power centres and the absence of stable local state structures, the territory of Belarus was already regarded as a buffer zone as early as the medieval era. In the region of modern Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, much of the forest steppe area was inhabited by Slavic and Finno-Ugric peoples, who were formed into an organised state (the *Kievan Rus'*) by Viking (Varangian) warriors arriving in the area from the north west. On the territory of today's Belarus, cohesion among the local Slav tribes (e.g. the Drevlians and the Dregovichs) first occurred in the 8th and 9th centuries within the **Principality of Polotsk** (now Polack), which formed a part of the Kievan Rus' (Lojka, P. 2001a).

The Kievan Rus' differed from contemporary state formations in Western Europe in that it was initially no more than a loose alliance of distinct tribes. The adoption of (Byzantine) Christianity in the late 10th century, however, enhanced cultural cohesion. It was this factor that fundamentally distinguished the inhabitants of the area from the western Slavs – the Czechs and Poles – who were living nearby but who fostered closer relations with Western cultural circles (with Rome). After the Great Schism of 1054 the differences became even more marked, as manifested in the official use of the so-called **Church Slavonic language**. Covering such a large area, the state organisation proved insufficiently strong to establish firm central authority. Consequently, the era saw the emergence of partial principalities (lordships) with differing political interests (Lojka, P. 2001b).

In the 11th century, as the power positions of the Rus' weakened and following subsequent attacks by the nomadic peoples of the steppe, the empire disintegrated into partial principalities. In the absence of central power, the state proved unable, in the 13th century, to resist the Tatar (Molgolian) onslaught from the east and, following the fall of its centre, Kiev, it ceased even to exist. This juncture marked the beginning of the differentiated development of the eastern Slavic peoples. Tatar control was weaker in the south-western part of the dissolved state, and so that area, which lay between the Black Sea and Poland, was able to orient itself to the West. In the north-eastern area of the former state, the same period saw the emergence of such local power centres as Vladimir, Suzdal and (subsequently) Moscow, where Western European political and social patterns barely played a role.

In the geopolitical vacuum that arose following the demise of the Rus', the Tatars proved unable to consolidate their power in the long term over the entire area. In the 13th century, the Tatars were driven out of the western areas by the still pagan Lithuanians, who then moved relatively quickly to occupy large areas that had formerly been under the rule of the Rus'. In this way, the territory of today's Belarus came under the rule of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, an evolving state (Sahanowitsch, H. 2001), which then opted to make the local Slavic language variant the "official" language of the Chancellery, thereby integrating the Slavic population of the area and also fostering the heritage of the Rus'. It should be noted that on the territory of Belarus the Slavic dialects have been influenced by Baltic and Finno-Ugric elements, particularly in the linguistic contact zones of the north and west *(Box 2.1)*.

Within the framework of the **Polish-Lithuanian personal union** (est. 1386), the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which adopted Catholic Christianity on the establishment of the personal union and which included the territory of modern Belarus, retained significant capacity for domestic political action up until the 17th century.

In this large country, a centralized power centre could not be established in the long term, but **the advance of Western cultural influence** was a factor from the 15th century onwards. This process particularly affected the local aristocracy. At the same time, the peasant masses continued to adhere to their Orthodox Christianity and to the collective memory of the former Rus'. This distinguished them in terms of identity from the ruling groups (Sahanowitsch, H. 2001).

The so-called Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which achieved regional great power status in the late medieval era, was prevented by its domestic problems from addressing the political and economic challenges of the peri-

od. Accordingly, as a consequence of long-term domestic decline and the growing political dynamism of the neighbouring states (Prussia, Russian Empire, Habsburg Empire), three partitions of Polish Rzeczpospolita took place in the late 18th century (the partitions of 1772, 1793 and 1795). The entire territory of today's Belarus thus fell under the sovereignty of Tsarist Russia, a development that determined the region's history in the era of the emergence of modern nationalism in the 19th century.

Box 2.1 The Rise of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

The conditions for development of the Grand Duchy had arisen by the early 13th century, largely as a result of a change in the broader geopolitical environment, namely a decline in the foreign policy expansions of the Kievan Rus' and of Poland (Bojtár, E. 2011). The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was created by Slavic Principalities (Polack, Turaŭ) and by representatives of Baltic tribes. The founder of the Grand Duchy was Mindaug (1203–1263), one of the most significant princes of the era. He sought to bring together the tribes living in the Lithuanian area of settlement. He achieved this aim using means typical of the era: power, marriage, and financial reward. In the end, he could adopt the title of Grand Duke.

Inherent to the evolution of Lithuanian state and society was an eastward expansion. This development particularly affected the territories of the crisis-ridden eastern neighbour, the Kievan Rus'. The area was inhabited mainly by people of Orthodox faith who spoke an eastern Slavic dialect. Mindaug sought to strengthen the tribal alliance by having himself crowned king, having received the royal insignia from the Pope of Rome. The political nature of this act is shown by the fact that he later returned to his pagan beliefs, when his interests so demanded.

Mindaug failed to make the throne a hereditary one. This was achieved somewhat later on by Gedimin (1275–1345). The latter's foreign policy was similar to that of his great predecessor: in the west, defence against the knights of the Teutonic Order; in the east, the seizure of territory from a strengthening Duchy of Moscow and in particular from the Tatars, while also annexing the principalities that sought the protection of Lithuania. Gedimin's two sons shared power in line with the above strategy. Algerd (1296–1377) took the title of Grand Duke and the responsibility for conquest in the east, while Keistut (1297–1382) defended the country from the Teutonic knights. The son of Algerd, the dynasty-founding Jogaila (Jagełło) (1362–1434), married the queen of Poland, whereby he not only adopted Christianity but also the title of King of Poland. Meanwhile, his cousin Vytaut (1350–1430) became the ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In the meantime, Moscow had scored a decisive victory over the Tatars (Battle of Kulikovo, 1380), as a consequence of which the Metropolitan of Kiev moved to the centre of the strengthening principality. These events resulted in the development of a new power centre with significant influence over the large number of eastern Slavs living in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which reached its zenith during the reign of Vytaut in the 15th century (Bojtár, E. 2011).

The Grand Duchy reached its greatest geographical extent under Vytaut. With a territory of a million square kilometres, it was Europe's largest state at that time. Although a significant defeat was inflicted on the Teutonic Order during Vytaut's reign (1410, Battle of Grunwald, one of the most glorious victories of Litvins which is also the pride for today's Belarusians), the election of a Lithuanian metropolitan ended in failure. In consequence, Moscow became the "third Rome", and the Lithuanian territories with their millions of eastern Slavic and Orthodox inhabitants remained in the Polish, and thus Western, cultural sphere (Rykała, A. 2013). After that severe wars occurred between the Grand Duchy and Moscow (Russian Tsardom) during the 16th century. In the Russian-Polish war (1654–1667, "The Bloody Deluge") half of inhabitants of today Belarusian territory was lost.

The first dimension of Belarusian identity: Language use (up to the 18th century)

The multiple changes in the political backdrop have greatly influenced language use in today's Belarus. Even at the time of the Kievan Rus' a well-defined duality characterised the use of language. The educated classes spoke **Church Slavonic**, while the lower social strata usually spoke local Slavic dialects. At the time of the Rus', the differentiation of the Slavic languages was still an incomplete process (Horalek, K. 1967; Zoltán, A. 2002).

With the southward expansion of Lithuania from the 13th century onwards, the majority of the population increasingly spoke the local Slavic dialects. In consequence, the **language of the chancellery** became a language that was based on these local dialects but which differed from the language of the chancellery in Moscow. It was a language made up of so-called "Old Belarusian" (and to a lesser extent, "Old Ukrainian") elements. This language, referred to as Ruthenian, was not, however, the same as today's Ukrainian or Belarusian languages. Yet it also differed from Church Slavonic, which continued to be used by the Orthodox Church (and which was generally distinct from the language used in everyday life).

Changes in this language situation came about when ties within the personal union became closer, resulting in a strengthening of Polish culture even in the eastern parts of what was then Poland. Polish came to be more extensively used, principally among the nobility and in the immediate vicinity of their courts and in the towns. In the chancellery and thus in the official milieu, Polish increasingly took over the role of Ruthenian with its eastern Slavic elements (Radzik, R. 2002). The use of Polish was also enhanced by the lack of the codification of the Ruthenian language. Even more so than Latin, Polish opened a window to the Western world, where the Catholic Church was dominant. The Union of Brest (1596) encouraged Orthodox Christians to emphasize their special status by reverting to the use of Church Slavonic, which they considered to be the purest Slavic language (Oswalt, J. 2001). Even so, among its speakers there did not arise the stable dual use of language (Ruthenian – Church Slavonic) that characterised people in the Polish cultural sphere (the concurrent use of Polish and Latin).

In the area of today's Belarus, Polish-Ruthenian bilingualism could be observed at the time of the personal union. Since the functional use of the two languages was similar, however, it was the Ruthenian language, with its lesser prestige, that got squeezed out. The use of Ruthenian gradually diminished in the course of the 17th century, and the government ban on its use (1697) encoded in law what was already the status quo. Popular forms of Ruthenian lived on, however, in the peasant milieu of rural areas, as the Polonised nobles used it in everyday life. Moreover, Ruthenian was the language of sermons at Greek Catholic church services (Church Slavonic was reserved for the liturgy).

Later on, when the area of today's Belarus fell under the sphere of influence of Russia, which was expanding westwards at Poland's expense, the official language in use grew increasingly distinct not only from the earlier local dialects but also from the western Slavic variants (Polish) (Ioffe, G. 2003a).

Box 2.2 The Ruthenian language in the early modern era

Born in Polack, the Renaissance humanist **Francišak Skaryna** (1486–1541) was the publisher, in 1517–19, of the first printed Bible translation in the Belarusian language. The language of the translation was based on the Church Slavonic in official use at that time, but it also bore the effects of the regional dialects of the region. In essence, therefore, it contributed to popular literacy in the Slavic world.

The language of Skaryna's bible was called "western Russian" in earlier periods and "Old Belarusian" (or "Old Ukrainian") subsequently. Today, the language variant tends to be referred to in linguistics as Ruthenian, thus indicating the eastern Slavic language that was developed

and spoken as a local variant in the region (and which was present in earlier linguistic relics). This concept emphasizes the differences of "Old Belarusian" (Ruthenian) from the other eastern Slavic languages, but it is also at odds with the idea of continuity with today's Belarusian language (Dingley, J. 2001).

In the 16th century, Ruthenian increasingly became the representative language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as evidenced by several linguistic relics – mainly ecclesiastical ones as well as, subsequently, works on secular subject-matters. The Statutes of Lithuania (1529, 1566, 1588), a collection of civil, criminal and procedural laws, represent the zenith of this development.

When the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth came into being with the Union of Lublin of 1569, the personal union became a real union, and the use of Ruthenian gradually declined. Polonization soon became so strong that the language in use was in effect Polish written in the Cyrillic script. Under such conditions, Ruthenian as an official language was no longer used in writing, and so it survived only in popular use.

The second dimension of Belarusian identity: The Church

In addition to language, another factor influencing the pre-modern sense of community in the field of cultural identity was the **Orthodox Church**. In society and particularly among the lower social strata, this factor was manifested in a degree of detachment from Western culture. Still, the centre of gravity of the Orthodox faith became increasingly distant from the region, a development further enhanced by the presence in the region of the Polish-Lithuanian government administration.

The increasingly powerful Moscow Patriarchate sought to exert control over the Orthodox believers living in the eastern border areas of Poland. The Polish response was to negotiate the **Union of Brest (1596)**, when the Ruthenian Church of Rus' broke off relations with the Eastern Orthodox Church and placed itself under the authority of the Pope of Rome.

Indirectly, this was a means of compensating for the large decrease in the number of Catholics in Poland that had occurred at the time of the Reformation.

The eastern-rite **Greek Catholic Church**, which thus came into being, had the greatest numbers of followers of any denomination in the region. In this way, the broader Catholic Church won many followers in the Catholic-Orthodox contact zone (Tschakwin, I. 2001). At the same time, the provisions of the Union were not universally successful, and there began a process of alienation from the Polish state affecting a part of the population. These developments added to the buffer zone nature – in social, linguistic and cultural terms – of the territory of today's Belarus.

The religious diversity of the populace, which had an eastern Slavic culture but resided in a state with a Western orientation, and the peculiar (non-integrated) language situation, resulted in a particular consciousness of identity. At the same time, this local (Belarusian) identity was rather unstructured, and so it was weaker than the identity of the Poles living in the adjacent areas or, indeed, than the pre-modern identity of the Russians (Ioffe, G. 2003b).

In the 18th century, with the **partition(s) of early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth**, the area of today's Belarus fell under the sovereignty of the Russian tsar. As part of its empire-building strategy, the Tsarist administration sought to promote the integration of the area by assimilating the inhabitants of the western periphery into Russian culture. As far as the various local particularist elements are concerned, it was the coerced fusion of the Greek Catholic Church into the Orthodox Church (1839) that had the greatest effect in terms of distancing the inhabitants of the Belarusian area from the Poles.

Under Soviet rule, religious faith (its institutions and leaders, as well as people who practised their religion openly) was pushed to the margins of society. For this reason, the percentage of atheists in Belarus was the highest in the Soviet Union. After the fall of communism, however, many historical and modern churches were (re-)established (*Box 2.3*).

Box 2.3 The geography of religions in today's Belarus

Since Belarus achieved independence, denominational factors have played a prominent role in the political life of Belarus. According to a 2012 survey, 71.5% of respondents indicated a belief in God. The vast majority of the population (93.5%) identify themselves as belonging to one of the various religious denominations: Orthodox (81%), Catholic (10.5%), Jewish (1%), Protestant (0.5%), Muslim (0.5%). These data stem from the Information-Analytical Centre of the President of the Republic of Belarus. The discrepancy between the denominational composition of the population (93.5%) and the number of believers (71.5%) indicates a particular religious identity of Belarusians which goes beyond actual religious practice. Belarus is a multi-denominational state. There are 26 registered religious denominations and groups in the country. The total number of religious organizations recently reached 3488. In accordance with Belarusian law, 173 of these religious organizations have been recognized as being of general social value (religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, religious educational institutions).

In Belarus there are traditional Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, Old Believers, Protestants) and non-Christian (Islam, Judaism) denominations.

Orthodoxy is the oldest Christian denomination in Belarus. It arose here in the late 10th century with the formation of Polack Diocese (992). The year 1989 saw the establishment of the Archdiocese of the Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Currently, the Belarusian Orthodox Church includes 1612 religious communities, divided in 15 dioceses. The dioceses are also home to 35 monasteries, 12 brotherhoods and 8 sisterhoods. Today, there are more than thousand functioning Orthodox churches, while almost two hundred churches are under construction. Over the last decade 810 religious and other buildings were received by the Belarusian Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church makes great efforts to achieve the spiritual and moral revival of Belarusian society. In cooperation with associations and government agencies, the Orthodox Church holds several events that have already become traditional features of Belarusian life: the St. Euphrosyne pedagogical readings, the International Cyrill and Methodius Readings, the Annual days of Belarusian writing and printing. The Orthodox Church, accounting for more than 80 per cent of religious believers in Belarus, forms the basis of the country's religious life, with denominational stability, tolerance and peace.

The Roman Catholic Church is the second largest religious denomination in Belarus. Catholicism officially came to Belarus at the end of the 14th century. In 1387, the privilege of Jogaila gave rise to the Vil'na (today Vilnius) episcopal see, which covered, among other areas, almost all of the Belarusian lands. In the late 1980s, the canonical legalization of the Catholic Church in Belarus was initiated. In 1989, a Catholic diocese was formed in Belarus. In 1991, on the territory of Belarus, three Roman Catholic Dioceses were created: Hrodna, Pinsk, Minsk-Mahilioŭ. Currently, the Roman Catholic Church comprises 479 parishes, and there are four Roman Catholic dioceses and a Catholic Bishops' Conference, 8 monasteries, 9 religious missions, and two senior Catholic seminaries. The Catholic Church is actively involved in charity work. In this field, "Caritas", which has offices in all the dioceses, plays an important role.

Protestantism began to play a unique role in the political, ecclesiastical, religious and cultural life of Belarus in the second half of the 16th century. Various social forces were involved in the Reformation, and their different political goals led to a reform movement in the Belarusian lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The three main strands of Protestantism in Belarus were Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Antitrinitarism. In Belarus the first Calvinist communities appeared in Brest, Niasviž, Klieck, Zaslaŭje, Minsk, Polack. Since the end of the 19th century, additional Protestant groups have established themselves in Belarus: Baptists, Stundism, Evangelical Christianity, and Seventh-day Adventism. Today, there are 16 Protestant organisations in the

country, comprising around 1,000 religious communities. Among them the most numerous are the Christians of Evangelical Faith.

Under Article 16 of the Constitution of Belarus of March 15, 1994, as amended following the national referendums of November 24, 1996 and October 17, 2004, "religions are equal before the law".

Identity and ethnic space during the Russian Imperial era

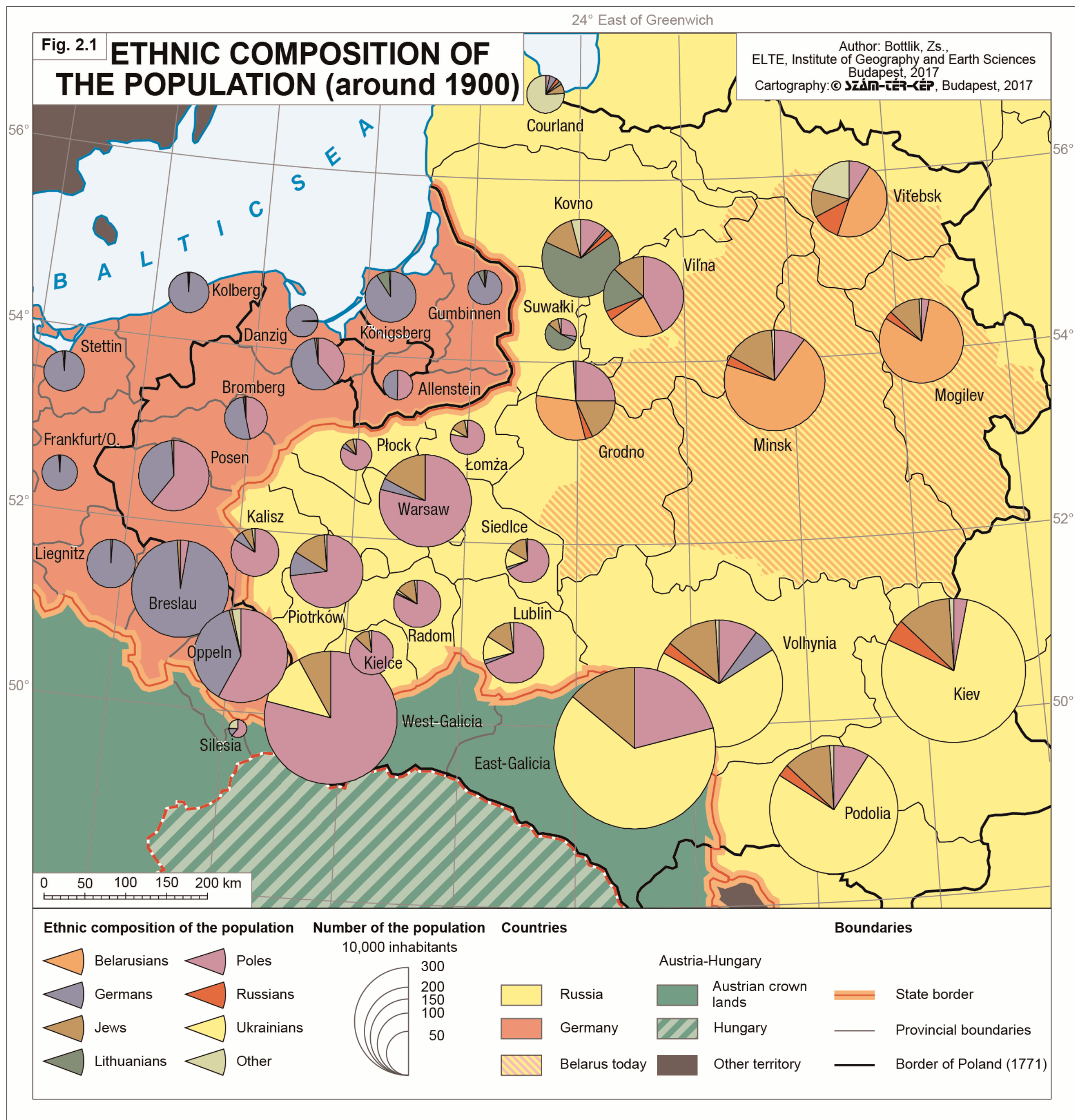
In the first half of the 19th century, imperial Russia encountered the emergence of nationalism in several parts of the empire (principally in Ukraine). In response, as part of the Russification campaign that was a feature of Russian empire-building, an official ban was imposed on the use of Belarusian in all its aspects (book-printing, education and culture) (Brüggemann, M. 2014; Lagzi, G. 2001). The Belarusian national movement, which arose in reaction to Tsarist Russification, emerged relatively late, in the final third of the 19th century. It was a moderate force, offering, above all, a critique of the political regime (Mark, R.A. 2011).

The Russian state, having implemented its policy of Russification, permitted the use of the term Belarusian dialect (language). It did not allow, however, the operation of Belarusian-language schools (Trepte, H-C. 2004). At the turn of the 20th century, the Belarusian territories strove for autonomy. In this struggle, a modest achievement was the appearance, in 1906, of the first press publication in Belarusian. In this process, however, Belarusians tended to stress their differences (in terms of identity) from the Poles. In contrast, in relation to Russians, they were inclined to exhibit a passive stance or a sense of detachment. Despite these developments, one cannot speak of a firm and well-defined Belarusian identity in this period (Brüggemann, M. 2014).

As a result of the aforementioned trends, the population had a complex ethnic composition (*Figure 2.1*). The first full population census in Tsarist Russia took place in 1897, and respondents were asked about their native language and religious affiliation. At that time, almost the entire area of today's Belarus was covered by the governorates of Minsk and Mogil'ov (today Mahilioŭ), and in part by the governorates of Grodno (Hrodna, Bel.), Vil'na, and Vit'ebsk (Viciebsk, Bel.). In view of the fluctuations in people's identity, the mapping of the data on native language and religious affiliation is difficult. Moreover, in many cases, social status was an additional determinant of the language identified as the mother tongue in the questionnaires (Zeraschkowitsch, P. 2001).

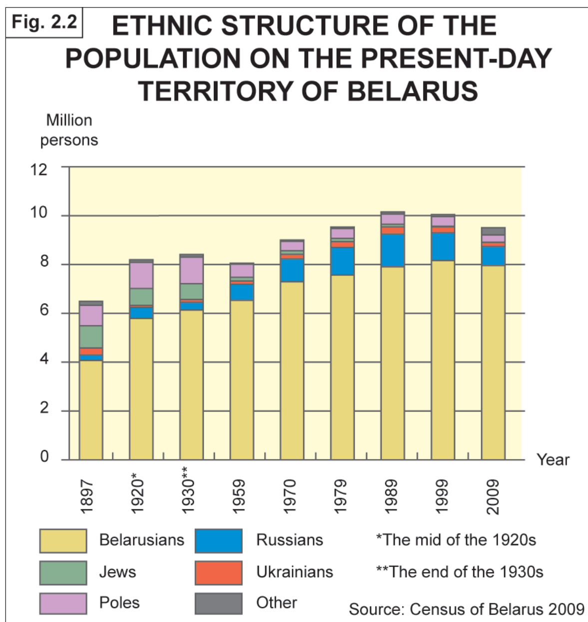
At the time of the **1897 population census**, around 6.5 million people were living in the area of today's Belarus, and the number of Belarusian speakers (4.7 million) and the number of Orthodox Christians (4.6 million) appeared to correspond. However, if we subtract from the number of Orthodox Christians the Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking populations (287,000 and 281,000), then we find that in this area there were around 700,000 non-Orthodox Belarusian-speaking people who were Catholics. Moreover, the number of Roman Catholics (880,000) was significantly greater than the number of Polish speakers (156,000), which again leads to an approximate figure of 700,000 Belarusian-speaking Catholics. Based on the data, it would appear that – on account of their social status – many people who were Catholics and thus had Polish cultural ties, indicated Belarusian or Russian (rather than Polish) as their native language in the census. All of this appears to correspond with the data of the Polish statistician Włodzimierz Wakar (Wakar, W. 1917), according to which there were around 830,000 Poles living in the area under investigation (a population share of 13%). This meant that, after the Jews (910,000; 14%), the Poles constituted the second largest minority in the area at the turn of the century (Eberhardt, P. 2001) (*Figure 2.1*).

As far as the spatial ethnic composition is concerned, a significant share of the nobles and the well-educated – the latter being concentrated in urban areas – defined themselves as Polish. The Jewish population and Russian native speakers – the latter being principally employed in the state administration – were urban dwellers. For this reason, their ethnic distribution varied little



at the level of the governorates. People with a Belarusian identity (of varying strength) inhabited rural areas with a low population density. They usually defined themselves merely as "locals" (*tuteyshy*) (Abushenko, V. 2004). In many instances, when asked about their religious affiliation, they would respond that they were Polish or Ruthenian believers (Trepte, H-C. 2004).

In the hinterlands of major urban centres in the western part of the region (Grodno, Vil'na), a process of Polonization could be observed even in peasant society. This explains the higher number and population share of Poles in the western governorates (the Vil'na and Grodno governorates) (*Figure 2.2*). Between Brest and Dvinsk (today Daugavpils), Poles inhabited a contiguous settlement area in the rural area that lay along the River Neman (Nioman in Bel.). In the eastern areas, however, the effect of Russification was stronger, which explains the slightly greater Russian presence in the eastern governorates (Mogil'ov, Vit'ebsk). Although Polish cultural ties were weakened by the lack of Polish statehood and schools and by discrimination against the



Polish language, the presence of such ties (with their roots in the past) acted to slow down the process of Russification. This factor, however, prevented the development and subsequent strengthening of Belarusian identity in the eastern areas.

Since the linguistic criteria (the language data) cannot provide an accurate picture of the ethnic situation in the period, it is necessary to examine the religious composition of the area. Orthodox believers were concentrated in the central, eastern and southern parts of today's Belarus, while Roman Catholics tended to live in the Polish-Lithuanian and Polish-Belarusian contact zones, where there was a greater affinity for Polish culture and language (Eberhardt, P. 2001).

The third dimension of Belarusian identity: Soviet Rule

The **collapse of the Russian Empire (1917)** greatly increased the political potential of the Belarusian national movement, which had gained influence and strength in the first decade of the 20th century (Smalianchuk, A. 2007). The same year (1917) saw the formation of the Belarusian National Council. In March 1918, when German troops occupied the western regions of today's Belarus, there was a resurfacing of the cultural duality that had roots in the area. In the German-controlled area, the modern Belarusian language was born in the spirit of linguistic pluralism *(Box 2.4)*, for the invaders had an interest in strengthening those facets of identity in the local culture that differed from Russian culture (Bieder, H. 2001). The Belarusian People's Republic – with Belarusian as the state language – was short-lived, but all political forces (including the Bolsheviks) had to reckon with it. Thus, in the Soviet Union, following a period of consolidation, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was formed. After the **Peace of Riga (1921)**, which concluded the Polish-Bolshevik war and divided the area of today's Belarus into two parts, the BSSR covered no more than the area of the former Governorate of Minsk, albeit it was subsequently expanded to cover the Mahilioŭ-Viciebsk region. Importantly, however, for the first time in their history, the Belarusian people of the region were placed within exact state borders of a country named after them.

Box 2.4. Modern variants of Belarusian – *Taraškievica, Narkamauka*

Taraškievica is the name given to the first codified version of the modern Belarusian language. This standard variant was based on the Vil'na dialect, and the first descriptive grammar was published in 1918 (Knappe, E. *et al*. 2012). The volume's editor was the politician and linguist **Branisłaŭ Adamavič Taraškevič**, who is therefore regarded as the creator of modern Belarusian. He was born in 1892 into a Catholic peasant family in the village of Matsiulishki (now Mačiuliškės). The village lay in an area that now belongs to Lithuania but at the time belonged to Russia. Like other speakers of the local eastern Slavic language, he attended high school in Vil'na, which functioned as the region's cultural centre. He then attended university between 1911–1916 in Saint Petersburg (Petrograd between 1914–1924). It was there that he began to write a Belarusian grammar.

After the publication of the first Belarusian grammar, favourable trends in the early decades of the 20th century assisted the development of the modern Belarusian language (Bieder, H. 2001), albeit the territory of today's Belarus belonged to two political spheres of interest. Following the German occupation of the First World War, the western half became a part of Poland, while the eastern areas were annexed by the Soviet Union.

Conditions for the further development of the Belarusian language were more favourable in the eastern areas until the end of the 1920s. In the early years of the Soviet Union, the official minority policy – ***korenizatsiya*** ("nativization" or "indigenization") – resulted in a strengthening of "*Belarusianization*" or *albo-ruthenization* (Vaškevič, J. 2009). Minority languages were protected to a certain degree (in addition to Belarusian, the other official languages were Russian, Polish and Yiddish), but Belarusian became the primary means of communication. The 1930s, however, saw the return of Russification, and the first step in this process was the new codification of the Belarusian language. The resulting literary norm, ***Narkamauka***, brought the Belarusian language significantly closer to Russian. An aim of domestic policy in the Stalinist era was the unification of Soviet society, and so there was no room for *Taraškievica*, the manifestation of Belarusian self-determination. Consequently, this language variant was completely abandoned, and its inventor, Taraškievič, who had become active in politics, was murdered during the Great Purge in 1938 (Golz, S. 2011).

Although the two language variants do not differ significantly, *Taraškievica* has since become the symbol of a free Belarus (reforms, democracy and the market economy), while *Narkamauka* is more neutral. Use of the latter, however, tends to indicate an orientation towards Russia.

After the Peace of Riga, the western areas of today's Belarus (called **West Belarus** by Belarusians and *Kresy* or Eastern Borderlands by the Poles) were ruled by Poland until the collapse in 1939. As part of a process of **ethnic homogenization (Polonization)**, Belarusians living in these areas were assimilated, repressed (*pacyfikacja*), disrciminated or at least pushed to the margins of society especially after the mid-1930s. Moreover, efforts to reduce the deprivation of the Belarusian-inhabited areas and develop regional agriculture failed. The Belarusian national movement (which in many instances had the backing of the Soviet authorities, e.g. the *Hramada* was closely linked to the illegal Communist Party of West Belarus) was insufficiently strong to determine events.

In contrast, in the **Soviet-ruled areas**, the 1920s saw a decline in the Polish influence of earlier periods and a **strengthening of Belarusian identity**. This trend was most observable among urban intellectuals. Improvements in the living conditions of peasant farmers strengthened the use of the Belarusian language in their communities, and this process was enhanced at state level with the foundation of schools, theatres and libraries (Marples, D.R. 1999). Further developments included the establishment of a university with Belarusian as the language of tuition in 1921 and the foundation of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences in 1926 (after 1936 Academy of Sciences of the BSSR, since 1991 National Academy of Sciences of Belarus). From 1927, the Belarusian language was given precedence over the other minority languages of the region (Yiddish, Polish and Russian). "Belarusianization" (or *albo-ruthenization*) thus went together with Sovietization, resulting inevitably in a distortion of the already delayed development of Belarusian national identity (Šibeka, Z. 2002). At the same time, the suppression of the influence of the churches in society led to a weakening of Belarusian identity particularly among the lower social strata (Bieder, H. 2000).

The consolidation of the **Stalinist regime in the 1930s** fundamentally altered the conditions for the further development of Belarusian identity. Not only did Stalinist policy on the nationalities and on language become more aggressive towards the minorities, but also peasant society – the bearer of the Belarusian language – was completely crushed by the forced Sovietization of rural areas, the liquidation of the *Kulak*s (higher-income farmers), and Stalinist collectivization. The local ecclesiastical and secular elites, which had mediated national

sentiment, were almost completely destroyed. Moreover, by intensifying the **Russification** campaign, the Soviet authorities gave a boost to the presence of the Russian language both in government administration and throughout the education system. In the interwar period, the cultural and linguistic impulses received by the Belarusian national movement did not allow it to formulate additional goals or to take a political stand for such goals (Ackermann, F. 2011).

Under the terms of the **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**, in September 1939, the Soviet Union annexed West Belarus. Although the Soviet occupation brought with it the unification of the Belarusian-inhabited areas, Stalinist repression was immediately imposed on the western part of the country. Indeed, 330,000 inhabitants were deported to Siberia. Among the deportees, in addition to the Poles and Jews, there were also Belarusian intellectuals who advocated Belarusian national identity. The Soviet authorities gave support at most to Belarusian folk culture and folk traditions, doing so under their own auspices.

By the late 1930s and despite Polonization, the socio-economic situation was far more favourable in West Belarus than it was in Soviet Belarus. Indeed, after the Soviet annexation of West Belarus, border controls were maintained at Negoreloe (Nieharelae, Bel., border station of the Soviet Union to Poland until September 17, 1939) as the two parts of the country differed so greatly in terms of social development. Thus, although the whole of Belarus layed within the Soviet Union, it is erroneous to speak of a true unification at that time.

After June 22, 1941, the area of today's Belarus became a target for the Wehrmacht, as Germany launched its attack on the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa). The German invasion began at the new border of the Soviet Union, which had been pushed forward to the Brest Fortress only two years earlier. Today, the Brest Fortress symbolizes Belarus's western gateway. The Nazi *Einsatzkommando* squads then proceeded to murder almost the entire Jewish population of Belarus; in 1942–43, around half a million Belarusian Jews fell victim to the Holocaust. There were about 6–700,000 military casualties (incl. partisans) and around 1.6–1.7 million civilian casualties (incl. Jewish population) between 1941 and 1944. 25% of population of today territory of Belarus died during Second World War, which is the highest ratio among Soviet republics (Erlikman, V. 2004).

The **wartime partisan resistance movement** served in a way to strengthen Belarusian identity. Although the partisan resistance could only function as an underground movement, it had a degree of autonomy within the Soviet power structures on account of the foreign occupation. Belarus became the main fighting arena for the Soviet partisan movements during the Soviet Great Patriotic War. It was during this period that the country's "partisan republic" image arose (Ioffe, G. 2006). Meanwhile, however, the Germans established the Generalbezirk Weißruthenien and, in 1943, the Belarusian Central Rada, which was a collaborative puppet government. Evidently, this entity did not enjoy broad public support, but its flag was the same white-red-white tricolour as that of independent Belarus in 1918 and in the early 1990s. All of this raises further political debates about Belarusian identity (e.g. discredited symbols).

When the Second World War ended, the Allies "pushed" Poland westwards, whereby its former eastern territories, including West Belarus were ceded to the Soviet Union (becoming parts of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic). The borders of Belarus in the west differed only marginally from those of late September 1939 (i.e. after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). Indeed, the differences affected only a few raions in the vicinity of Białystok, which had been awarded to the new Poland.

After the political consolidation of 1945, a Polish-Belarusian population exchange occurred as part of a migration process that fundamentally altered the ethnic map of the new West Belarus areas. The significant decline in the number of Poles living in Belarus was a consequence of the war and the subsequent repatriations (Lagzi, G. 2001). In the course of these developments, it has been estimated that nearly 400,000 Poles moved from West Belarus to the new Poland (the official figure is only 275,000). Meanwhile, 37,000 persons of Belarusian identity found a new home in Soviet Belarus in the first wave of migration, as did 70,000 additional persons in subsequent waves. Concurrently and particularly in the 1950s, there was an inflow of Russian native speakers, who filled the demographic vacuum caused by the wartime human losses. On account

of the Sovietization of the newly acquired territories, most of this migration was directed at the major urban centres of the region (Eberhardt, P. 2000; 2001; 2002) (*Figure 2.1*).

After the Second World War, the official Soviet position identified the aims of the national movements with those of the Fascist aggressor. Such attitudes struck another blow to Belarusian identity, which was already weak. Meanwhile, the industrialization of the areas that had formerly belonged to Poland, the collectivization of agriculture, and the repression of groups in society that clung to religion, resulted in a worsening in the situation of speakers of the local Belarusian dialects. In the western areas of Belarus, on the other hand, a higher natural increase of population made up for the wartime losses, and so the number of Belarusian speakers increased (*Figure 2.1*). Yet their Belarusian identity was still uncertain and many of the local communities had been broken up. Many people migrated to the Russian-speaking towns, where, in the evolving process of post-war Soviet industrialization, they became members of the urban working class, which was losing its identity.

The **post-war Soviet censuses** (1959, 1970, 1979, 1989) showed a significant increase in the number of Russians (and Ukrainians) and a modest increase in the number of Belarusians. In part, the figures reflected a significant "cross-over" between the two groups. Alongside an intensification of Russification, the period also saw the emergence of *Trasianka*, a mixed language that arose after a campaign emphasizing the similarities of the two literary languages (rather than their differences) and owing to the spread of Russian language tuition (*Box 2.5*). The use of *Trasianka* did not favour the further standard development or widespread use of Belarusian, which was actually the official language. In consequence, the differences between the two languages became blurred, and much of the Belarusian population came to view Russian as a higher form of their own dialect rather than as a foreign language. Unsurprisingly, between 1959 and 1989, the share of Russian language users among ethnic Belarusians more than doubled, increasing from 13 per cent to 28 percent.

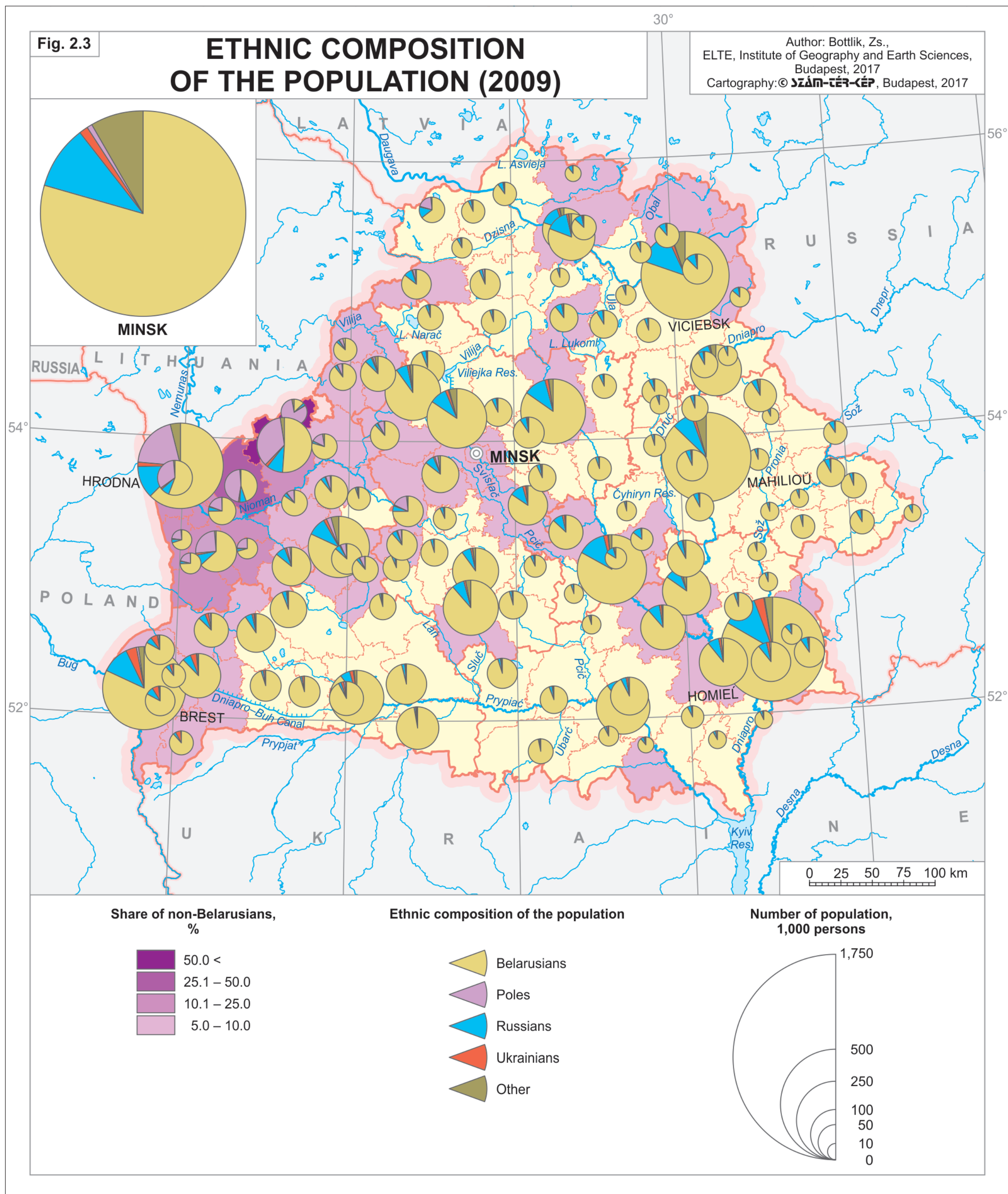
These processes were enhanced by the concept of the "new Soviet people", which gave precedence to social cohesion rather than to ethnic group consciousness. The concept fell on fertile soil in Belarusian society, with its fluctuating sense of identity. The effect was greatest in the small-town milieu (Šibeka, Z. 2011). Meanwhile, the linguistic assimilation of the Jewish and Polish communities, both of which had declined numerically during wartime, was due more to their distorted social structure and their narrow strata of intellectuals (Ackerman, F. 2006).

Identity forming and its uncertainties since the independence

Since independence the demographics of Belarus have been characterized by population decline, which is a typical feature in Eastern Europe. Thus, the fall in the total population has been caused by the combined decrease in the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian populations (Rowland, R.H. 2003). Although political developments in the 1980s activated formerly repressed national feelings in several regions of the Soviet Union and the Belarusian language began to be used in schools, the changes here were mainly due to shifts in the external circumstances rather than to internal developments, a detachment from the Soviet regime, and an emphasis on local particularity (Lagzi, G. 2001).

Based on the ethnic data from the most recent census in 2009 (*Figure 2.3*), Belarus is not a homogeneous nation-state, as only 83 per cent of its 9.5 million inhabitants belong to the "state-constituting" Belarusian ethnic group. The country's 800,000 Russians comprise the largest minority, with 8.2 per cent of the population. In addition, there are sizeable Polish (294,000; 3.2%) and Ukrainian (158,000; 1.6%) groups.

Concerning the **ethnic spatial dispersion**, a further observation is that the Russians tend to live in the major urban centres, while the Poles live in areas that formerly belonged to Poland and were most influenced by Polish culture (*Figure 2.3)*. The distribution of the Russian population is relatively even; they comprise more than 10 per cent of the population in 19 raions, of which one is a municipality and six are predominantly urban. Without exception, the largest Russian communities – those with more than 15,000 persons – are in urban areas. The Ukrainians are concentrated in the region of Brest, principally in two districts where their



population share exceeds 7 per cent (Kamieniec 7.4%; Malaryta 7.2%). There are, in addition, significant Ukrainian populations in the seats of the regions, and in two such cities (Brest, Homieĺ) the Ukrainian population exceeds 10,000. It should be noted, however, that neither of these two minority groups (i.e. the Russians and Ukrainians) form an absolute majority of the local population in any region.

The ethnic space of the Poles living in Belarus, whose identity has strengthened since the collapse of communism, is fundamentally different (Iwanow, N. 1994). Among the various minorities, the concentration of the Poles is

greatest – forming a virtually contiguous area of settlement – in the Hrodna region (Eberhardt, P. 2000). Among the 13 raions where the Polish population share exceeds 10 percent, only one lies in the Brest region and one in the Minsk region. Their concentration along the Lithuanian border is such that it forms a contiguous Polish area of settlement in the Voranava and Ščučyn raions. Poles make up an absolute majority (80%) in the former and a relative majority in the latter.

Among the other groups, the first that should be mentioned is the Jewish community, with 12,000 persons. Jews have been living in the area of today's Belarus since the 15th century. Other significant minorities are the Roma (7,079 persons), who live mostly in the Homieĺ region, and the Germans (2,474 persons). Other minorities include groups originally from other former Soviet regions who have mostly been living in Belarus for many generations. In addition to smaller communities of the population groups living in the neighbourhood of Belarus (Lithuanians: 5,087; Moldovans: 3,465; Latvians: 1,549 persons), there are also significant population groups from the Russian steppes (Tatars: 7,316; Chuvashes: 1,277 persons), from the Caucasus region (Armenians: 8,512; Azeris: 5,567; Georgians: 2,400 persons) and from Central Asia (Turkmen: 2,685; Uzbeks: 1,593; Kazakhs: 1,355 persons). The presence of small Chinese (1,642) and Arab (1,330) communities adds further colour to the country's ethnic composition.

Box 2.5 *Trasianka*

Trasianka is a "mixed language" used in the area of today's Belarus. It is a fusion of Belarusian and Russian language elements. Trasianka has less prestige than Belarusian and considerably less prestige than Russian. The word itself means the low-quality hay that is produced by mixing fresh grass with last year's dried hay. Since the 1980s, the word has been used to refer to this mixed language. In the buffer zone formed by the Belarusian territories, the use of mixed language has a relatively long history. The reason for this phenomenon is the concurrent use of local dialects alongside whatever was the official language (Polish and subsequently Russian), while a further contributory factor was their varying status/authority (Hentschel, G., Kittel, B. 2011).

In Belarus, the development of a mixed language, a characteristic feature of multilingual societies, can be traced principally to the social changes of the post-war era. The period saw large-scale rural-urban migration on account of the economic policies of the Soviet authorities. Increased industrialization led to a greater demand for labour in urban areas, and new workers were recruited from rural areas where labour was in surplus supply owing to the collectivization of agriculture. In addition, a large number of people migrated from the inner Russian areas to the peripheral regions. Accordingly, people arriving from rural areas who spoke local dialects and had no knowledge of Russian had to adapt to the use of the Russian language, and in this they were not always fully successful.

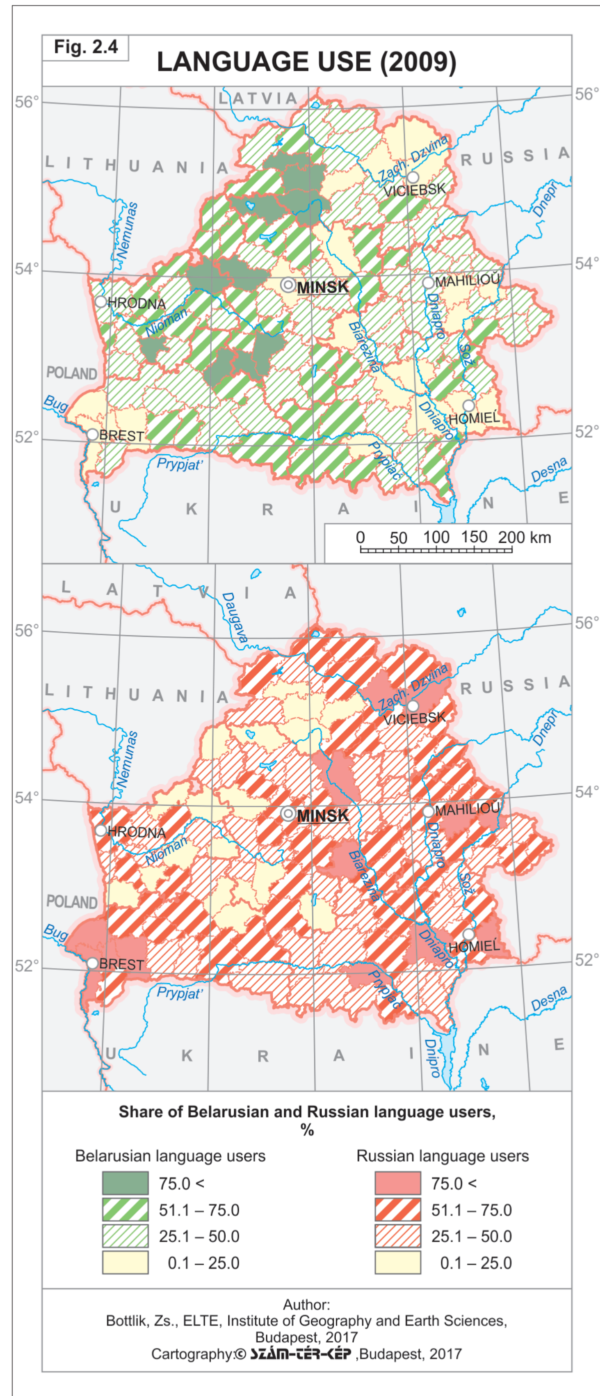
It should be noted, however, that efforts to adapt were not mutual. Further, in terms of status, both Belarusian and *Trasianka* lagged behind Russian. The more two languages resemble each other, the greater is the likelihood of the development of a mixed language. This is particularly true in the case of Belarusian and Russian. Over time *Trasianka* was standardized, and today it is the first language of many people. For this reason, its use is not determined by spontaneous processes; rather, it is spoken over several generations in accordance with more or less accepted conventions (Kittel, B., Lindner, D. 2011).

Until the 1980s *Trasianka* tended to symbolize the common fate of Russians and Belarusians. Following the political changes of the early 1990s, it became a manifestation of certain political orientations. For those who understand the language, it sounds a bit like Russian spoken with a Belarusian accent (Ioffe, G. 2006). It is difficult to determine how many people speak *Trasianka*. In eyes of most of Belarusian and Russian native speakers *Trasianka* represents an irregular mixed language.

In Belarusian identity consciousness, which has been described as delayed or belated, local identity-forming factors have remained the main determinants. Wars and the political purges elicited by Soviet ideology acted not only to marginalize or destroy the bearers of the national idea; they also impacted on language use.

In the passage of time, political intentions have led to changes in the language use of the population on several occasions (Brüggemann, M. 2014). Differences in the census data from 1999 and 2009 reflect Belarusians' uncertain identity. On the one hand, the data showed a significant increase in the population share using Russian. On the other hand, such a substantial shift seems unrealistic in the course of a single decade. The aforementioned uncertain identity may lie behind this discrepancy. Or it may simply have been caused by transitory political factors. "Defections" on such a scale are made possible by the proximity of the two languages. The difference between the current official forms of Belarusian and Russian is not particularly great. Consequently, as in earlier periods, the expression of ethnic identity is not primarily the native language, a fact reflected in the language use of Belarusian society (Burlyka, I. 2004).

Regarding **native language and language use**, differences may be observed in the various areas of the country (*Figure 2.4*). Generally, it can be stated that among people who self-identify as ethnic Belarusians the number of Belarusian native speakers is higher than the number of actual users of the language. The use of Belarusian is higher in the villages, where local linguistic peculiarities are generally more isolated from the urban areas. Further, more people identified Belarusian as their native language than did use the language. Meanwhile, in the towns (excluding the district of Brest) the population percentage using the Belarusian language is more or less equal to the population percentage of Belarusian native speakers. Evidently, a majority of ethnic Belarusians give precedence to the Russian language, largely owing to the historical, cultural and linguistic historical factors discussed above and partly owing to the fact – itself a consequence of the aforementioned factors – that Russian has received since the 1995 four-question referendum (on state symbols, integration with Russia, status of Russian language and constitutional changes) official status in the country (Bieder, H. 2003; Törnquist-Plewa, B. 2005).



Those districts where a majority of the population give precedence to the Belarusian language in the course of everyday life are concentrated above all in the less urbanized north-western areas of the country. In the past, these regions were more closely tied to the Polish power centre and/or belonged to interwar Poland. In

these areas, we find, in the field of language use, tangible evidence of attitudes that functioned as counter-points to Western (Polish) culture in earlier centuries and to Russification during the Soviet era. At present, therefore, the observable differences in language use indicate above all the country's transitional cultural (linguistic and ethnic) nature (Savitzkaya, N. 2011). At the same time, however, Belarus's noticeable pivot towards Russia in the social dimension and in its economic orientation means that it is still not possible to emphasize language-based differences. Generally, therefore, language use is a kind of political statement (*Box 2.6.*) (Golz, S. 2011; Alexandrova, O., Timmermann, H. 1997).

Box 2.6 The symbols of the independent state

Belarus left the Soviet Union in 1991. Independence was accompanied by the explicit return of the (former) national myths and symbols (as was generally the case in post-Soviet societies). Generally speaking, in the post-Soviet region these processes – amid the political changes that followed the collapse of communism – strengthened collective identity as envisaged and directed by the state.

In Belarus, similarly to most of the new countries, the state symbols (return of the national flag, coat of arms, and anthem used in 1918) changed suddenly. At the centre of this development was an emphasis on the memory of the Polack Principality and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (both of which embodied earlier forms of statehood), on cultural proximity to Western Europe, and on the autonomy of the Belarusian language. At the same time, however, there was only meagre public support for the political system that was manifested in the old/new coat of arms and flag of the post-Soviet era. Their durability (or fixed nature) did not only depend on societal traditions but was also greatly influenced by the economic situation at the time. Social discontent at the time of the political and economic transition – a period of crisis – is linked with a critical stance towards the new political system (Radzik, R. 2006).

Even so, many people did not necessarily associate the Soviet symbols with the old regime and with communism. Rather, they associated them with the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War (Scharf, R. 1999). In the given economic milieu, it is unsurprising that there was a failure to consolidate the idea of national independence on the aforementioned pillars. For this very reason, from 1994 onwards, the focal points of historical memory gradually shifted from the first Belarusian state to the Great Patriotic War, in which the Russian nation featured as a fraternal people. This process also meant a return to the Soviet style symbols after the 1995 four-question referendum, which the government at the time then emphasized in all areas of the media (Temper, E. 2011). In this respect, a good example of the anomalous situation in Belarus relates to Independence Day, which, unlike in the other post-Soviet states, is not celebrated on the anniversary of the date of independence from the Soviet Union (August 25, 1991), but is tied instead to the liberation of Minsk from German occupation (on July 4, 1944) (Marples, D.R. 2005).

The transitional nature of Belarus in terms of politics, culture and language (a characteristic which has accompanied it throughout its history) impacts today on its national symbology. The symbols used in the period 1991–95 and those are currently used reflect different political stances – a proximity to Western cultural circles and to the EU or an attraction to Soviet times and to Moscow.

In summary, it can be stated that the identity-forming factors that are characteristic of the eastern half of Europe and their weaknesses and deficiencies, as well as the predominance of various alien power structures based on other ethnic groups, have rarely favoured the development of Belarusian identity. A historical overview of the ethnic spatial dispersion reveals that, in the

20th century, the ethnic composition of the inhabitants of the area of today's Belarus slowly but surely moved towards (Russian) homogenization. Even now, however, the country cannot be considered a homogeneous nation-state.

In the geopolitical buffer zone that arose in an area that was surrounded by peoples with strong national identities and consolidated state structures, the prevailing circumstances prevented in the long term both the formation of an independent state and a strengthening of dimensions representing a separate linguistic and cultural status. In the absence of a firm national identity, Soviet ideology and human ideals gained a strong footing. Unsurprisingly, therefore, in the past two decades, politics and society in Belarus have tended to envisage the national independence that was attained after the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union as an opportunity for turning to the former power centre in the east rather than as an opportunity for consolidating local ethnic identity.

Consequently, there has been a weakening of the multiculturality that was manifested in the ethnic spatial structure of earlier periods and which had strong historical roots. At the same time, these changes are reflected principally in the current language use of the population and can be observed first and foremost in the traditional geographical and social dimensions (provincial/rural-capital city, east-west, poor-rich).

Easter in Belarus. The country is the meeting point of the Eastern Orthodoxy and the Roman Catholicism. (Photo: Konkoly-Thege, G. 2013)