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GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF ONGOING AND POTENTIAL ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Abstract. For centuries Central and Eastern Europe has been the scene of frequent changes of borders and numerous ethnic conflicts. Contemporary ethnic diversity of this region is much smaller, however, the growing nationalisms of the various societies, mutual mistrust, and the temptation of politicians to use ethnic issues in the regional geopolitical competition pose a real threat to the stability and peace in Central and Eastern Europe. The dynamic political, legal, social and economic changes which have been taking place in this part of Europe for three decades now, which overlay its clear civilization division into the Latin and the Byzantine parts and are intensified by historical animosities, must have had an impact on the situation and the perception of minorities. In contrast to Western Europe, the contemporary ethnic diversity of Central and Eastern Europe is primary the consequence of various, often centuries-old historical processes (settlement actions, voluntary and forced migrations, border changes, the political and economic expansion of particular countries), and in the ethnic structure especially dominate the indigenous groups, migrants, particularly from the outside of the European cultural circle, are of marginal importance. Moreover, national minorities are usually concentrated in the border regions of countries, often in close proximity to their home countries, becoming – often against their will – element of the internal and foreign policies of neighbouring countries.

The main aims of the article are to explain the threats to peace arising from the attempts to use minorities in inter-state relations and regional geopolitics as well as engaging minority groups into ethnic and political conflicts (autonomy of regions, secession attempts) and still the very large role of history (especially negative, tragic events) in the shaping of contemporary interethnic relations in Central and Eastern Europe.

However, the varied ethnic structure typical for this region does not have to be a conflict factor, on the contrary – it can become a permanent element of the identity and cultural heritage of each country.

Key words: national minority, ethnic minority, border region, separatism, ethnic conflicts, international relations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, significant political and geopolitical transformations occurred in Central and Eastern Europe: the fall of Communist rule, the reunification of Germany, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the division of Czechoslovakia. The emergence in quick succession of several independent national states rippled through various ethnic minorities, especially those living in border regions. Political and economic relationships completely changed between the new sovereign states, as well as, to a large extent, between nations separated by borders. A process of expanding European integration was started, which led after several years to the inclusion of some countries in Central and Eastern Europe into the NATO and EU structures, while leaving other outside the zone of political, economic and military integration, thus leading to new lines of division in these new political and legal circumstances.

There are regions in the world with relatively higher political and territorial instability, and the resulting more frequent variations in borders, identified as the *shatter belt* by S. Cohen, an American geographer and geopolitician. The main reasons for the border volatility in such regions are the lack of natural geographic barriers, ideological contradictions, and the incompatibility of political and ethnic borders (Cohen, 1973).

In the area of Central and Eastern Europe, where we could observe numerous border changes over the last 100 years, especially following the First and Second World Wars and the fall of Communism in the 1980s and 1990s, all of the causes listed by S. Cohen could be found. However, the most important determinants of the instability of political borders in the region, especially in the first half of the 20th century, was the direct impact of German and Soviet imperialism, the existence of multinational states, the clear disparity between political and ethnic borders, and the lack of geographical barriers. Then, after 1990, the main elements included ideological (the fall of Communist system) and ethnic issues (the desire to create nation states). All European border changes in the late-20th century were related to systemic transformations, as well as centrifugal and separatist tendencies leading to the dissolution of multinational states (the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia) or, less frequently, integration tendencies leading to the unification of two German states. They resulted in the total overhaul of the political map of Central and Eastern Europe, both by the emergence of several new sovereign states, as well as numerous ephemeral creations (like interim political territories). All of those states have been created by improving their former federal statuses from federal units to independent countries, Apart from many conflicts, the last three decades brought about the peaceful resolution of a couple of border disputes, while some still remain unresolved (Sobczyński, 2013; Bufon, Minghi and Paasi, 2014).

However, these minor border disputes are now much less dangerous for the European peace than the internal separatist conflicts. Just as in the early 1990s, cur-

rent attempts at territorial disintegration and border changes in Ukraine (Crimea, Donetsk, Lugansk), Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) or Moldova (Transnistria, Gagauzia) have a very strong ethnic context, "enriched" by political and military interventions from the neighbouring country (Russia).

2. THE SPATIAL SCOPE

Controversy regarding the spatial extent of Central, Central-Eastern and Eastern Europe have been discussed at length in numerous historical, geographical, political, and geopolitical studies (Eberhardt, 2003, 2004; Rykiel, 2006; Bański, 2008; Komornicki and Miszczuk, 2010; Sobczyński, 2010, 2013). There is no consensus concerning the clear delimitation of the regions, with differences in political and cultural, as well as geographical, historical or civilisational criteria.

The most popular, dating back to antiquity and the Middle Ages, concepts of the division of the European continent, were the divisions into Western and Eastern Europe, representing the division into Latin and Greek, Germanic and Slavic as well as Catholic (later also Protestant) and Orthodox. In all of these concepts, the dominant criterion was the cultural criterion (linguistic, religious, ethnic), and the boundaries were not linear but zonal and altering in time. Politically, the most visible division of Europe was the period of "cold war" in the second half of the 20th century and the division into capitalist democratic countries in the West and communist countries in the East (Eberhardt, 2003, 2004; Rykiel, 2006; Bański, 2008).

A huge diversity, especially political and cultural, extending from Germany and Italy to the Ural, part of which is referred to as Eastern Europe, caused in the 19th, and especially in the 20th century, the emergence of new ideas separating from Eastern Europe a transition zone with features and influences of both the West and the East, referred to as Central Europe or Central-Eastern Europe.

Originally, the concept of Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*) was introduced by Germany at the end of the 19th century and covered the real and potential political, cultural, and economic domination of the German State. Usuaully, that applied to the area from the Rhine to the Vistula and from the Baltic to the Balkans. This term was a consequence of the geopolitical and imperial aspirations of Germany at that time. The contemporary definition of Central Europe is clearly political and it was coined after Second World War, when it embraced the communist states in Europe, outside the USSR. After the collapse of the communist bloc in 1989, significant differences were noticed between these countries and the definition of Central Europe was limited to Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, as a more homogeneous and distinctive group from the Balkan states, and integrating with the structures of Western Europe within NATO and EU more

quickly. Currently, this area can be treated, in political, cultural, and civilizational terms, as the eastern borderland of Western Europe (Rykiel, 2006; Bański, 2008).

The definition of Central-Eastern Europe is both cultural (traditional) and political (contemporary). In the traditional cultural approach, Central-Eastern Europe was identified in the 19th century with a vast area between Germany, Turkey and Russia, that is, it covered the Slavic territories (without Russia), Hungary and the northern and central parts of the Balkans. In contemporary, political terms, Central-Eastern Europe, initially identified with former communist countries outside the USSR, and then as a result of the growing conflict in the Balkans and increasingly important political and cultural differences, this definition was limited to Central European countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary), and with the expansion of NATO and the EU, adding Baltic states to this group (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia). This currently leads to blurring the differences between the concepts of Central Europe and Central-Eastern Europe (Rykiel, 2006).

However, one cannot equate the terms of Central-Eastern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. The definition of the latter is much broader, including Belarus, Ukraine and western Russia, whose states, because of their different political, economic, and cultural characteristics, cannot be associated with Central-Eastern Europe (Bański, 2008).

This paper attempts to discuss the current and potential ethnic conflicts using the example of three Central European states (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia), as well as six others that became independent after the dissolution of the USSR (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova). The most precise, common term of regional affiliation of these nine countries is Central and Eastern Europe.

3. MULTI-ETHNIC BORDER REGIONS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Border regions, especially those highly diversified in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, and culture, are often associated with unstable, conflict-prone areas where antagonisms between nations living there occurred and continue to occur. This belief has intensified over the last decades when many regions in Central and Eastern Europe experienced the rise of nationalisms, separatist tendencies, reactivation of historical disputes, and the use of ethnic minorities in interstate political and geopolitical struggles (Rumley and Minghi, 1991; Batt, 2001; Appadurai, 2006).

Multi-ethnic areas, typical for the interstate borderlands in Central and Eastern Europe, are usually located at the verge of two or more ethnic areas. They represent a mixture of indigenous and immigrant populations of different origins (settlers, colonisers, refugees, displaced populations), sometimes from distant countries, but mostly from neighbouring ones. Immigrant populations have gener-

ally inhabited such regions for generations, with recent immigrants being a rarity. These regions are very diverse internally. They may consist of representatives of several nations, ethnic or cultural groups of different origins, level of social and economic development, as well as political status. These groups may occupy their own little territories or live in dispersion. Their mutual interactions may be peaceful or hostile. All multi-ethnic regions are dynamic. Their ethnic structures and cultural characteristics vary depending on a number of factors and demographic, social, economic, and political processes (Koter, 2003).

It is clear that both historically shaped regions of mutual "mixing" of several neighbouring nations or ethnic groups, and areas of modern mass economic and political immigration have to become multi-ethnic. However, there is a clear difference between them, one that may be dubbed *autochthonous multi-ethnicity* and *guest multi-ethnicity* (Barwiński, 2016).

There is a type of multi-ethnicity specificity to Central and Eastern Europe, namely regions where different, often long-lasting historical processes (such as settlement actions, migration, border changes, political, and economic expansions of certain states) shaped an ethnically diverse multicultural society. Immigrant populations have shaped the ethno-religious, cultural, economic, and political landscapes of such regions for so long and so clearly, being "incorporated" into its history, geography, and economy so deeply, that we may talk about *autochthonous multi-ethnicity*, where all ethnicities, both local and immigrant, are now "at home".

In such regions, of course, the social, cultural, and economic diversity of immigrant and local populations was initially very clear. Social differences were exacerbated by the nature of a settlement, as indigenous (mostly rural) population vastly differed from the immigrants (usually urban), in professional, economic, and educational terms. Social relations in such regions were rarely partnerships. As a rule, the group dominant in economic and cultural, though not always population, terms imposed its culture on the indigenous people, e.g. Germans in Poland and the Czech Republic, Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania, Poles in Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Italians and Turks in the Balkans, Russians in the former Soviet republics (Koter, 1995, 2003; Kolossov, 1999; Eberhardt, 2003; Kowalski and Solon, 2008). At the same time it had a huge impact on the social and economic development of those areas, and over time there has been a far-reaching socio-cultural integration, both between the nationalities, as well as integration with the country of residence. That was further strengthened by the settlement of nations living in the diaspora for centuries, but exerting vast influence on the social, economic, political, and cultural lives on the regions they inhabited, mostly Jews and Armenians, somewhat also Roma, Tatars and Karaites. This type of multi-ethnic regions is nowadays common in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, where a number of national and ethnic minorities feel the co-owners and co-hosts of the area they inhabit. Hence the terms *autochthonous multi-ethnicity*.

In contrast, a completely different type of multi-ethnicity may be seen in regions of concentration of economic immigrants, typical for modern highly-developed countries, mostly in Western and Northern Europe. These are highly atomised areas, often limited to "ethnic neighbourhoods" in big cities. This may be described as *guest multi-ethnicity*, as the immigrant population, usually from culturally different backgrounds, maintains far-reaching autonomy and unwillingness to integrate in their country of residence, often after several generations. It also engages with the social and political life of the region to a limited extent. Such communities are treated as external guests by both themselves and "natives".

Currently, we can distinguish over 20 multi-ethnic regions inhabited by at least three different nationalities in the part of Central and Eastern Europe under discussion. This list is certainly not complete (Table 1). Unfortunately, there is no possibility of referring to reliable, objective and comparable statistical data concerning the contemporary national structure of the inhabitants in concerned countries and border regions. This is mainly due to the different methods of population censuses and the calculation of national diversity in Central and Eastern Europe, thus there is a lack of comparability of ethnic statistical data. In addition, large temporal differences (sometimes exceeding 10 years) in carrying out the last censuses in the countries of the region or even a lack of data, e.g. in the case of Ukraine, where due to political and military crises, the last census was carried out in 2001 and now its results of the nationality structure are completely outdated.

Table 1. List of multi-ethnic border regions in Central and Eastern Europe

No.	Border region	National/ethnic groups
1	Eastern Estonia	Estonians, Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians
2	Latgale (Eastern Latvia)	Latvians, Russians, Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians
3	Eastern Lithuania	Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, Belarusians, Karaites
4	North-western Belarus	Belarusians, Russians, Poles
5	Grodno Region	Belarusians, Poles, Russians
6	Polesia	Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Tatars
7	Warmia and Masuria (former East Prussia)	Poles, Ukrainians, Lemkos (Ruthenians), Germans, Masurians
8	Gdańsk Pomerania	Poles, Kashubians, Germans, Ukrainians
9	Northern Carpathians	Poles, Ukrainians, Lemkos (Ruthenians), Gypsies
10	Polish Silesia	Poles, Silesians, Germans, Gypsies, Ukrainians
11	Czech Silesia	Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Silesians, Moravians, Germans
12	Moravia	Czechs, Moravians, Slovaks
13	Spiš	Slovaks, Poles, Germans, Gorals
14	Southern Slovakia	Slovaks, Hungarians, Gypsies

No.	Border region	National/ethnic groups
15	Eastern Slovakia	Slovaks, Gypsies, Ukrainians, Ruthenians, Hungarians
16	Eastern Galicia	Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, Armenians
17	Transcarpathian Ruthenia	Ukrainians, Ruthenians, Hungarian, Romanians, Russians, Slovaks
18	Bukovina	Ukrainians, Romanians, Moldovans, Russians, Poles, Germans
19	Crimea	Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars
20	Donbas	Ukrainians, Russians, Belarussians
21	Transnistria	Moldovans, Russians, Ukrainians, Romanians
22	Southern Moldovia	Moldovans, Romanians, Gagauz, Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians

Source: own work (extended and updated) based on Koter, 2003, p. 15.

Fig. 1. Multi-ethnic border regions in Central and Eastern Europe
Source: own work based on Eberhardt, 2003 and Koter, 2003.

A massive resettlement of people after the Second World War, later migration, and the emergence of a number of nation states in the 1990s significantly reduced, but not levelled altogether, the ethnic diversity in various countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The current political borderland zones (Fig. 1) are still highly ethnically diverse, and most ethnic minorities living in them come from dominant nations in neighbouring countries and have been present in the region for centuries.

The political and cultural diversity in Central and Eastern Europe coincides today not only with national or ethnic borders, but also with religious divisions, clearly deepened by the borderland location of a region, at the border longitudinally dividing Europe – between the western (Latin) and eastern (Byzantine) Christianity. This confirms the social and cultural transformations occurring in the world. The processes of globalisation, and the political and economic unification of Europe and the world are accompanied by the growing awareness of civilisational differences, especially in terms of religion (Huntington, 1996; Bański, 2008).

Running roughly along the eastern borders of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, the division line based on the tradition of western Christianity and the influences of Orthodox culture is the most persistent division line in the European continent. Since 2004 it has been further reinforced physically (by technical means of border protection) and legally (visa regulations), now serving as the external border of the EU, which means that the Baltic states and the Central European states may now be treated, in both cultural and political senses, as the eastern march of Western Europe, while the eastern border of the EU becomes the main division line in Europe. It is currently a barrier between completely different political, economic, legal, and social realities. It differentiates not only formally, but also in culturally, mentally, and economically. It may certainly be considered one of the strongest civilisation barriers in modern Europe.

In Central and Eastern Europe, we are now dealing with the overlapping and mutual strengthening of political, civilisational, religious, and ethnic differences, occurring most intensively in the borderlands of individual countries. The situation is similar to the processes in the Balkans. It occurs also in Western Europe (for example: Spain, Belgium, Scotland, Northern Ireland) and the processes might be the same, but the way of solving it is completely different.

4. ETHNIC MINORITIES AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR MOTHERLANDS AND FOREIGN HOMELANDS

Because of political, ethnic, and historical circumstances, the relationships between individual ethnic minorities living in Central and Eastern European countries and their countries of residence and the so-called foreign homelands dif-

fer widely and have varied consequences. One characteristic of this relationship is that they mostly settle in close vicinity to state borders. This is undoubtedly relevant when analysing the interstate relations, though calling ethnic minorities *bridges* in interstate relations has become diplomatic canon and a rhetorical figure of political correctness. In political practice, due to the historical events and the needs of current internal politics and geopolitical interests, the role of a given nationality in the mutual relations between the country of residence of a minority and its foreign homeland may be vastly different, and do not have to involve bridging (Barwiński, 2013).

R. Brubaker (1996) pointed this out by using the concept of *triple relational dependency* to analyse the ethnic structure of Central and Eastern European countries. According to the theory, ethnic relations are rarely limited to just the relationship between the majority and the minority, but very often foreign homelands play a role in their shaping, which makes them tripartite in character. The importance of minorities' cross-border contacts for ethnic relations in a given country depends on their character, intensity and the attitude of the dominant group towards them. Close relations within the ethnic community strengthen minority identity, while their weakness or lack thereof fosters assimilation processes. In turn, the lack of acceptance from the majority for the relationship between the minority and its foreign homeland may spark conflicts.

Support provided to ethnic minorities by their foreign homelands may include political and legal, social and cultural, economic, as well as military activities, which was clearly visible in the Russian involvement in Ukraine. Their scale depends on the strength of the ties with their compatriots abroad and the real possibility of influencing their situation, resulting both from their own political and economic, as well as military potential, and the kind of relation with the state the minority currently lives in. The motivations for such activities may vary from symbolic support of maintaining communication with the homeland to inciting ethnic conflicts, separatist movements, and border changes. For ethnic minorities, support received from their foreign homeland is an important factor in maintaining national identity in psychological, as well as organisational and material senses. Yet a lack of such support may weaken the ties with the homeland (Hastings, 1997; Mandelbaum, 2000; Budyta-Budzyńska, 2010).

Other factors that complicate the trilateral relations between the ethnic minority, its motherland and its foreign homeland in Central and Eastern Europe include the diverse political status of certain states, membership in various economic and military organisations, disproportions in population, economic, and military potential, frequent tragic historical experiences in mutual relations, as well as different processes of systemic transformation, which may result, among others, in different political relations between neighbours.

5. ONGOING ETHNIC CONFLICTS

In the area of Central and Eastern Europe under discussion, we can currently identify at least three regions affected by conflicts which may be described as ethnic, i.e. one in which the ethnic structure of an area is one of the reasons for the emergence and escalation of the conflict, while the nations inhabiting such a region are active parts in it. In addition, they are characterised by the use of violence, armed forces, political, and military interferences from a neighbouring country, state authorities losing control over a region, the desire to change state borders, and, thus, the annexation of a territory or secession. They may all be described as separatist regions, with their separatism inspired by Russian or, wider, Russian-speaking population. These regions are Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk provinces) and Crimea in Ukraine, and Transnistria in Moldova.

Contemporary Ukraine is very clearly divided into – generally speaking – the eastern and western parts. This division is historically and culturally conditioned, it is a consequence of the centuries-old affiliation of Western Ukraine to Poland and Austria-Hungary, and eastern part to Russia, and related with that national, religious, cultural and social, and economic processes. Currently, it appears as a diverse sense of Ukrainian national and linguistic identity of the inhabitants of the eastern and western parts of the country, a different national structure, other political and electoral preferences, domination of pro or anti-Russian attitudes. In addition, there are clear economic differences (industry and natural resources are located mainly in the eastern part of the country) and a very high strategic and geopolitical importance of Ukraine, both for Russia and the EU.

As long as Ukraine under president Yanukovych maintained a pro-Russian policy, authorities in Moscow did not decide to take radical steps against their neighbour. However, a political turn in a large portion of the society, and then in the new authorities of Ukraine, towards the EU, as well as the postponing of the Russian-Ukrainian cooperation becoming closer, encouraged Russia to strengthen their zones of influence in the regions of Ukraine where it was still possible. The political vision of integrating Ukraine with the EU and of limiting the influence of Russia in the Black Sea region forced Moscow into very risky operations. The fears of the Russian minority and Russian-speaking Ukrainians concerning the patriotic turn in Ukraine, including the position of the Russian language and culture, as well as the traditionally strong pro-Russian sympathies of the majority of Crimeans and millions of inhabitants of eastern Ukraine, were the driving factors of such intentions (Bachmann and Lyubashenko, 2014; Slyvka, 2017).

The annexation of Crimea and the attempted detachment of Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, followed by their federalisation with Russia or takeover by Russia in other, less formal way, may lead to the total and permanent loss of control by the authorities in Kiev over the eastern part of their country. Paradoxically, this sit-

uation may in the future be beneficial to the geopolitical situation of Ukraine. The regions being broken off from the country are mostly inhabited by Russian-speaking population (not only Russians) with clear pro-Russian political leanings, as opposed to the national Ukrainian authorities in Kiev, and decidedly reluctant towards the EU and NATO. In the longer term, this may increase the political and national unity of the country, as well as facilitate its integration with the political, economic, and military structures of western Europe. But we should be aware that eastern regions of Ukraine, at present being under the conflict, were one of the most developed and industrialized parts of Ukraine.

It may, however, be assumed that Russian politics will aim at further destabilising the situation, fuelling armed conflict and the lack of regulation in the political and administrative status of separatist regions, which may effectively inhibit the European aspirations of Ukraine. Russia is not seeking to formally annex Donbas, as it did with Crimea, but will continue to fuel the conflict in order to pressure the Ukrainian authorities to abandon their pro-western aspirations and decide to integrate Ukraine with Russia within a Moscow-controlled organisation, such as the Eurasian Union. The refusal to do so will result in a permanent loss of control over the eastern, industrialised and resource-rich part of the country, as well as the progressing political and economic destabilisation of Ukraine (Mitrokhin, 2015; Katchanovski, 2016; Besier and Stokłosa, 2017; Slyvka, 2017; Vitale, 2017).

Moldova is another post-Soviet country torn by local separatisms. It is a historical part of Romania, annexed by Stalin, who also changed its borders to add, among others, a strip of ethnically Ukrainian land in the left bank of the former border river of Dniester. Moldova's break-away from the USSR, its declaration of independence and, above all, its closer ties with Romania in the early 1990s, pushed the Russians and Ukrainians in the left bank of the Dniester (Moldavans only amounted to approx. 40% of the population), to proclaim the Republic of Transnistria, independent of the authorities in Chişinău. The separatism of Moldavan Russians has been effectively politically supported by their foreign homeland, with a military support coming from the Russian 14th Army stationing there. The Republic has an unusual shape, since it extends over approx. 200 km along the river, forming a strip of land no wider than 25 km, but narrowing several times to under 5 km, with no sea access, and borders with Moldova and Ukraine. It is not officially recognised by any state, and its system, though constitutionally republican and democratic, is a *de facto* continuation of communism with some attempts at introducing elements of market economy. Despite these limitations, it has been functioning as a separate geopolitical entity for over 25 years, though it is politically and economically dependent on Russia. Transnistria is a classic example of successful secession and a state existing *de facto*, but not *de iure* (O'Loughlin, Kolossov and Tchepalyga, 1998; Sobczyński, 2010, 2013; Devyatkov, 2012).

6. POTENTIAL ETHNIC CONFLICTS

In addition to these three examples of ethnic conflicts, characterised by the use of military force, separatism, the desire to change the borders, and the interference of neighbouring countries, the area of Central and Eastern Europe under discussion also includes many regions, usually in the borderlands between countries, that may soon become core areas for further ethnic conflicts. This does not mean armed conflicts, although that cannot be excluded. Scenarios may vary – from declarations by political leaders and growing antagonism between the dominant nation and the minorities, through demands for autonomy, the emergence of separatist tendencies, to the formation of ephemeral geopolitical entities, and attempts at changing state borders. Ethnic conflicts may also be limited to psychological operations (creating the atmosphere of threat and fear) or involve symbolic violence (e.g. the devastation of relics, cemeteries, monuments, as well as the destruction of spiritual culture, customs, traditions).

This article attempts to identify regions in which ethnic conflicts of various types and intensity may occur (Fig. 2). When identifying them, the following criteria were adopted:

– location and geographical features in border regions;

– clear national diversity of residents, and, in particular, the residence of a national minority that is part of a dominant nation in a neighbouring country;

– a sense of discrimination among a national or ethnic minority caused by the actions of state and local authorities (including limiting political, linguistic, educational, and cultural rights);

– the reluctant or hostile attitude of the dominant nation towards minorities what results in a sense of danger among the minority group;

– negative, often tragic, historical experiences of mutual ethnic and political relations of the dominant nation and the minority group;

– destabilising influence of the authorities of a neighbouring state (among others: using the national minority in current foreign and internal policy, fuelling local and regional conflicts, and supporting separatist movements and organizations).

Not all of these factors must occur simultaneously. Internal ethnic conflicts (within one state) most often arise from the sense of discrimination and threat of the minority group by the dominant nation or the country of residence, and are the result of historical resentment, prejudice, and cultural stereotypes, as well as an element of the current political competition between the country of residence and the foreign homelands of individual nationalities (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2010). The location of multi-ethnic conflict areas in border regions, often inhabited by ethnic minorities being part of the dominant nation in the neighbouring country, may very easily transform such disputes into external and multinational conflicts (Moraczewska and Janicki, 2014).

One state very susceptible to such a threat is Ukraine (Fig. 2). This is mainly due to the weakening of state structures caused by the entanglement in a conflict with

Russia, as well as the wide ethnic, religious, economic, cultural, social, and mental differences between regions due to historical and geographical circumstances (Korostelina, 2008; Sobczyński and Barwiński, 2013; Besier and Stokłosa, 2017).

Fig. 2. Ongoing and potential ethnic conflicts in border regions of Central and Eastern Europe
Source: own work.

6.1. Eastern Galicia

Owned by Poland from the mid-14th to the late-18th century, then by Austria and again Poland in the interwar period, it is inhabited by the part of the Ukrainian nation most aware of its identity and distinctiveness, with the greatest tradition

of fighting for independence, and strong nationalist tendencies. It is currently the most pro-European and the least pro-Russian part of Ukraine, with multigenerational tradition of *opposition to Polishness*, serving as the cradle for anti-Polish organisations. This region, in every respect (national, cultural, mental, social, historical, economic) differs significantly from eastern Ukraine. It is mostly inhabited by Polish minority, as well as Armenians and Russians. It is a community with a rich sense of Polish identity, with clear national and religious separateness, brutally affected by the terror of Ukrainian nationalists in the 1940s. The current Ukrainian-Russian conflict understandably intensifies nationalist attitudes in the Ukrainian society, especially in western Ukraine. The glorification of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (also by the authorities), and the emphasis of nationalist symbols in the public space is common in Eastern Galicia, even though in the current political situation directed against Russia and Russians, not Poland and Poles, it is very negatively perceived by the Polish minority, increases the sense of threat, and the growing distrust in the Ukrainian society and state. Poles in Eastern Galicia are demographically and politically too weak to oppose Ukrainian nationalism. Polish government is also not eager to actively support and defend the Polish minority in Ukraine since it supports Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. Some activities, however, mostly from local authorities in Eastern Galicia, are increasingly annoying for Warsaw. As a consequence, and paradoxically, the most pro-European and anti-Russian region of Ukraine, directly bordering Poland, is also the most anti-Polish, as far as the attitudes of part of its population and local authorities are concerned, and the Poles living there are feeling more and more threatened and undesirable.

6.2. Transcarpathia

It stands out from the modern Ukraine with its completely different political history – several centuries of affiliation with Hungary (till the end of the First World War, in the frame of Austro-Hungarian Empire), then Czechoslovakia (during the interwar period, to 1940), Hungary again during the Second World War and, starting in 1945, with the USSR, and after 1991 to Ukraine. Its cultural and ethnic distinctiveness (with numerous Hungarian, Romanian and Ruthenian minorities), as well as its shortest, along with Crimea, political and legal affiliation with Ukraine, are clearly visible. During the last 25 years, Transcarpathia experienced several appearances of autonomy movements from the Ruthenians (or, more specifically, the activists of Ruthenian organisations), though with no foreign support and little activity from the Ruthenians themselves, their operations did not bring any permanent effects. Yet such effects may potentially come from the operations of Hungarian authorities. The Hungarian minority is the most active and well-organised ethnic group in Transcarpathia, with a strong sense of national and linguistic

autonomy, repeatedly making demands for the autonomy of the region (Kocsis and Kocsis-Hodosi, 1998).

Hungary can give, according to the national law, Hungarians living abroad a second (Hungarian) citizenship to anyone who apply for it and whose ethnic roots might be proven as Hungarian. In 2014, during the political and military conflict between Ukraine and Russia, president Viktor Orban demanded dual citizenship for Hungarians in Transcarpathia, as well as autonomy for the region. Based on historical territorial claims and further activation of local Hungarian minority, the government in Budapest may use the current weakening and the engagement of Ukraine in its conflict with Russia in the eastern provinces to attempt to destabilise this small, extremely western (geographically speaking) region of Ukraine, isolated by the arch of the Carpathians. Active support for the Hungarian minorities in Slovakia, Ukraine and Romania, frequent use of nationalist Hungarian rhetoric and, above all, numerous pro-Russian speeches and gestures of Viktor Orban make such a scenario more likely, albeit difficult to imagine in the current geopolitical circumstances.

6.3. The Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia)

The independence of the Baltic states, despite their complicated ethnic structures, was proclaimed, unlike the Balkans or the Caucasus, without ethnic wars. Apart from a good economic situation, one of the reasons for that could be the relatively short residence and immigrant nature of the most numerous minority, namely Russians. Therefore, in the 1990s, in the societies of the Baltic states, there were still no historically motivated animosities, myths or symbols that so effectively divide the multi-ethnic, indigenous communities of Balkans, Ukraine, Caucasus and other places. The fear of ethnic minorities of the dominant majority is also significantly smaller than in other regions of Central and Eastern Europe (Kaufman, 2001; Kowalski and Solon, 2008; Janicki, 2009; Mole, 2012; Vitale, 2015).

This does not change the fact that the majority of Russians living in the Baltic states was opposed to their independence. Despite the 25 years that have elapsed since, a large portion of the Russian minority are still stateless, as they boycotted the legal way towards citizenship, which involved, among others, passing an exam in Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian language, which they know very poorly, if at all, and which significantly limits their ability to integrate (Duvold and Berglund, 2014). In addition, the contemporary political events, and especially the attitude towards the Russian intervention in Georgia and Ukraine, clearly deepened the divisions between Russians and Balts, significantly contributing to the increase in mutual distrust and a sense of threat.

The Baltic states are an example of the occurrence of an ethnic conflict, which is mainly the result of instrumental use of a minority in politics by the

country of residence, as well as the country of origin (foreign homeland). Russia systematically, since the early 1990s, has interfered with the internal affairs of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia under the pretence of protecting the rights of the Russian minority. In turn, the authorities of Baltic states often blamed the representatives of the Russian minority of disloyalty, hostility, as well as autonomy or separatist pursuits, due to the influence from Moscow among the minority. Such accusations were often valid. Russia still considers these states as their zone of influence, a part of the post-Soviet space, proving multiple times that it can effectively interfere with the internal affairs of sovereign states by sparking and strengthening ethnic conflicts (Zvidrins, 1998; Levinsson, 2008; Gaponenko, 2013; Duvold and Berglund, 2014; Vitale, 2015). In the case of potential further deterioration of the situation in Ukraine, this may lead to strong reactions from the governments of the Baltic states, which may consider the Russian minority agents of a hostile country and deport them or limit their rights. This will certainly be met with a strong counter from Russia.

The situation in Lithuania is slightly different, as the Russian minority is small, with Polish minority, concentrated in Vilnius and the rural regions of eastern Lithuania, playing the same role that Russians do in Estonia and Latvia. It was opposed to Lithuanian independence and, in the face of its proclamation, tried to establish an autonomous region. Despite 25 years have passed, it remains the minority most conflicted with the Lithuanian state. Many problems experienced by the Poles in Lithuania are exaggerated by Polish organisations, as well as Lithuanian media and authorities, then used by both sides in their political propaganda. However, some problems exist objectively. Before the Russian aggression in Ukraine, negative relations between Poles and Lithuanians were one of the main Lithuanian conflict topics, but now Russian foreign policy became a far more pressing issue. For Polish organisations, the maintenance of the atmosphere of conflict and threat, the escalation of demands and requests, is still one of the main methods of increasing their influence and support among Poles living in Lithuania, in order to effectively persuade them that Polish organisations are the only institutions that care for their interests and protect them against Lithuanisation (Kowalski, 2008; Leśniewska, 2013; Leśniewska-Napierała, 2015; Norkunaite, 2016).

The behaviour of the Polish community in Lithuania in the early 1990s was, among others, the result of the wrong policy of local Polish leaders, which in turn stemmed from their incorrect assessment of the geopolitical situation in Central and Eastern Europe. Decisions made back then continue to reverberate in the Lithuanians' distrust in the Polish community. Sadly, the political mistakes of the early 1990s may now be repeated in completely different geopolitical circumstances.

For several years now, the leaders of the biggest Polish organisations in Lithuania have been leading a clear and consistent pro-Russian policy, which involves,

among others, close coalitions with Russian minority's political parties, criticism of Vilnius' and Kiev's policies concerning the conflict in Ukraine, while supporting Putin. Such operations are calculated, among others, to increase support from Russian electorate for Polish political parties in local and parliamentary elections. This current election strategy may in the long term be extremely costly in political terms (Barwiński and Leśniewska, 2014; Leśniewska-Napierała, 2015; Janusauskiene, 2016).

In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, which is perceived in Lithuania as a direct threat of Russian aggression, pro-Russian political activities of the leader of Polish minority are met with extremely negative reactions from Lithuanian authorities and the society, thus increasing mutual antagonisms and distrust, and causing new divisions to appear. There is also a risk of Russia using the Polish minority in Lithuania, especially Polish political and local government activists, to conduct operations against Lithuania, in order to destabilise its internal situation.

Along with the belief of disloyalty of the largest ethnic minorities (Russian and Polish), the fear of an external threat to state sovereignty does not bode well for the resolution of ethnic problems accumulating for the last 25 years in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

Further developments in the Baltic states will mostly depend on the character of ethnic policies of the authorities of these states, as well as the foreign policy in Russia. If the authorities limit the formal and legal activities perceived as discriminatory by ethnic minorities (especially those concerning language), and decide not to escalate the hostilities between state nations, Russians and other minorities, and Russia concentrates on their operations in Ukraine, there should not be any intensification in this conflict, especially not military in nature. The fact that the Baltic states (unlike Ukraine or Moldova) belong to NATO is of paramount importance, as any potential military operations on their territories might cause unforeseen repercussions (Janicki, 2009).

6.4. Silesians in Poland

Ethnic conflicts may also occur when a group heretofore considered regional begins gaining awareness of their own distinctiveness and voice national ambitions. The recognition of a regional group as a nation, or at least an ethnic minority, has some very serious legal, social, and political consequences since, among others, national and ethnic minorities enjoy wider political, administrative, financial, linguistic, and cultural rights than regional groups (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2010).

This type of situation exists in many regions of Europe, including Poland, where the political and national aspirations of regional groups, mainly Silesians and Kashubs, correlated with the dynamic growth of their populations and diver-

sity, has been intensively growing since the beginning of the 21st century. This tendency is met with opposition from political and administrative authorities, as well as a portion of the Polish society, who negate the national distinctiveness of regional groups, especially the most numerous one, i.e. Silesians.

During the last census in 2011, Silesians dominated the structure of minority communities in Poland in terms of population. More people declared Silesian nationality than any other non-Polish ethnic and national identifications (almost 850 thousand Silesians, of the total of under 1.5 million people declaring non-Polish nationality). That confirmed their dominant position from the previous census in 2002, but the growth in numbers was largely caused by the politicisation and promotion of Silesian nationality, as well as increased activity of Silesian organisations. As a result of the effort by Silesian activists and multiple court appeals in 2012, an Association of People of Silesian Nationality was registered, which still did not resolve the formal and official recognition of Silesian nationality, if only because at the end of 2013, the Supreme Court found that Silesians cannot be considered a separate nation (Barwiński, 2014).

Silesians are a typical example of a borderland community, in this case between Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany. The sense of Silesian national autonomy was shaped as a result of geographical, political, and economic references to the historical big and the small (regional) homeland of Silesia, marked by changing national affiliations and the resulting cultural influences of three main nations – Poles, Germans and Czechs. The influence of these cultures intersected most often in the area of Upper Silesia, where the population identifying as Silesians is now concentrated. The choice of their own national option by Silesians is also influenced by the attitudes of their Polish surrounding (both authorities and the society), which exhibit a lack of trust and understanding, thus increasing the mobilisation in the community (Heffner, 1998; Szajnowska-Wysocka, 2003; Rykała and Sobczyński, 2016).

That increased sense of distinctiveness and national identity, as well as the increasing declarations of Silesian nationality among Upper Silesians, has not changed its legal status. Despite the fact that Silesians meet all the conditions prescribed by the Polish law for a community to be recognised as an ethnic minority, and, according to the latest censuses, are the most populous minority group in Poland, they are still not an officially recognised ethnic minority and the Silesian language (used by over 530,000 people according to the census) still does not have a regional language status, unlike Kashubian (approx. 108,000 people). This is solely dictated by political reasons, the ignorance of the authorities and their reluctance to perceive regional groups in national categories, despite clear auto-identification of Silesians. Such a situation causes growing frustrations, a sense of marginalisation, and rejection, which result, among others, in increasing demands of national autonomy of Upper Silesia. This may lead in the future to some radicalisation of Silesian attitudes and, furthermore, to the emergence of isolation-

ist and separatist movements in this most populated and industrialised borderland region of Poland. As we have seen numerous times in history, in this case the politicians' actions may have the opposite effect.

6.5. Hungarians in Slovakia

There are some 0.5 million Hungarians living Slovakia, constituting the largest national minority, concentrated geographically in the south of the country, along the Slovak-Hungarian border, where many administrative units dominated by Hungarians are located. Such a distribution is a consequence of the centuries-old affiliation of this region with Hungary, as well as border arrangements following the First World War. Therefore, the Hungarians in Slovakia are a typical example of a national minority constituting a fragment of a neighbouring nation, which had previously conquered and dominated the nation, among which it today resides. In such a situation the relations between the majority and minority are usually not good. Mutual animosity is prevalent, as are recollections of past harms, numerous negative stereotypes, and the fear in the dominant nation that the minority lacks loyalty for their country of residence and is being used by their foreign homeland (Koter, 1993, 1995). Such fears are to a large extent justified in the case of Slovak authorities and the society. The Hungarian minority is numerous, territorially concentrated, has a very strong sense of national identity and autonomy (especially linguistic), is well organised, with a high social position and awareness that there is a real foreign power that is able to take care of their interests (Gyurcsik and Satterwhite, 1996; Kocsis and Kocsis-Hodosi, 1998; Istok, 2003). Therefore, since the early 1990s, it has been active numerous times with demands of autonomy, as well as others, while Budapest was persistent in their support for such claims. The situation of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia has been continually the main reason for diplomatic disputes between Bratislava and Budapest for years. The mutual perception of reality by the Slovaks and Hungarians has not been significantly changed by the political integration of the borderland as part of the European Union and the Schengen Agreement (Malova and Vilagi, 2006). The main causes are the progressive growth of nationalist and populist sentiments in these countries, reflected in the radicalisation of attitudes in both and among their authorities. For both Hungarian and Slovak nationalists, the Hungarian minority living in the borderlands is a convenient element in their political games (Lugosi, 2011).

The Slovak-Hungarian conflict concerning the Hungarian minority proves that historical events may significantly shape contemporary politics as well. Although no one in Budapest speaks out about the possible annexation of southern Slovakia by Hungary, just as no one in Bratislava claims that Slovakia is afraid of such an event, both governments act as if these were the motives behind their actions.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Ethnically motivated separatist tendencies, along with the prevalent growth of na-
tionalist sentiments, are currently the main reason for conflicts (including military
ones) in Europe, as well as formal and informal border changes, both the latest
ones (the Balkans, Transnistria, Kosovo, Crimea, eastern Ukraine), and poten-
tial ones, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), United Kingdom
(Scotland), Belgium (Flanders), or Spain (Catalonia). It can be assumed that many
European regions that are highly ethnically diverse are bound to play an increas-
ingly destructive political role in the following decades. However, the crucial con-
flict factor is not the simple distribution of ethnic minorities or the fact of the sheer
existence of an ethnically diverse region, but how the minorities are treated by
politicians, both in their country of residence and of origin, as a bargaining chip in
interstate relations, as well as the political ambitions of minority leaders.

In the 1990s, one of the main factors that destabilised the situation in the Bal-
kans was the distribution of Serbian population in former Yugoslavian states, by
then aspiring to independence, as well as the political and military support from
Serbia. In the first decades of the 21st century, a similar role, albeit in clearly
different geopolitical and military circumstances, is played by the Russian pop-
ulation living in large numbers in former Soviet republics and being used by the
authorities in Moscow for Russian political, geopolitical, and economic purposes.
The Russian minority in Ukraine, in the Baltic states and Moldova is a convenient
pretext for Russia to interfere in the internal affairs of these states, and to exert
pressures on international public opinion.

Ethnically motivated separatist movements and the changes in European bor-
ders in the 1990s were happening within the territories of individual countries and
were in fact transformations of their internal structures. The annexation of Crimea
by Russia in 2014 was the first case of a border change in Europe at the expense of
a neighbouring country after the post-Second World War delineation of borders.
In addition, it was the first post-WWII forced annexation of a territory of a Euro-
pean state. This is an extremely dangerous tendency, which is also totally contrary
to international law.

Equally dangerous is the new method of conducting ethnic conflict, success-
fully applied by Russia in Crimea and Donbas, the so-called *hybrid war*. It in-
volves pro-Russian separatists starting an armed conflict with the participation of
Russian special forces as "green men" (well-armed and trained soldiers without
any distinctions, concealing their state affiliation), followed by hidden military
involvement of Russian land and air forces. Apart from Ukraine, Russia may also
use such tactics in the Baltic states, Belarus, Moldova or Kazakhstan.

The events in Ukraine, earlier in Georgia, clearly show the huge role that the
area of the former USSR plays in Russian foreign policy, as well as Russia's de-

termination to protect their interests in the region, even at the cost of significant deterioration of political and economic relations with the West. One of the geopolitical objectives in modern Russia is the restoration of the influence in the former USSR republics, and one of the ways to achieve that is to use the Russian minority living there. A large portion of Russians, as well as Russian authorities, believe that one of the most important tasks should be to defend the rights of Russian speakers against the hostile, at least in their opinion, operation of institutions and administrations in the countries they live in. Russians are getting more and more convinced that the majority of the world, Europe especially, is hostile, aggressive and determined to destroy Russia. Such a message dominated Russian-speaking TV channels, but also in Russian social media, also popular in Ukraine or the Baltic states. The vulnerability of the Russian minority, as well as other minority groups, to Russian propaganda, with its resulting radicalisation, poses a real threat of destabilisation of the socio-political situation, especially in countries bordering Russia.

The temptation to use the representatives of one's own minority living outside of the motherland is obviously not limited to Russian politicians. This may also be seen in Hungary, as well as in Polish-Lithuanian or Polish-Ukrainian relations over the last 30 years. The use of ethnic minorities in borderland regions by politicians is extremely dangerous and conflict-prone. Often such activities are designed to distract their own people from internal problems. Searching for enemies and problems abroad, and fuelling nationalist sentiments serves to consolidate the society and boost support for the authorities. National minorities have remained for many years one of the favourite subjects for populist politicians in times of political or economic crisis.

We can only hope that politicians realise that creating ethnic conflicts usually does not serve the representatives of ethnic minorities. But do the politicians even care for ethnic minorities? They most often simply use their situation for their own gains.

Then again, ethnic conflicts, usually undesirable and destabilising, especially from the point of view of state authorities and the dominant nationality, may from the minority's perspective play a positive role of uniting, integrating and mobilising a group, according to the rule that "nothing unites like a common enemy". By becoming, over time, part of the national mythology and common heritage, crises and conflicts reinforce and activate the sense of autonomy, identity, and internal integration. Moreover, ethnic conflicts are often not the result of discrimination against ethnic minorities, rather the contrary: the awareness of their influence and opportunities. A threat of conflict is maintained on purpose, as it is a form of pressure on the dominant group, or the authorities in a given country or region. The threat of destabilisation of the existing political, social or economic order is a way to achieve additional rights and privileges by a minority community. The result is not about the conflict itself, but rather the creation of a permanent threat of one.

The threat of rebellion is a tactic of struggle for privileges (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2010). We should also remember that minorities have a natural tendency to escalate their demands and exaggerate their problems, a kind of hypersensitivity, functioning in the so-called "besieged fortress" syndrome.

One solution for many real and potential conflicts is to move away from any form of discrimination, guarantee full right for all minorities (including linguistic and political ones) and, in some cases, granting autonomy, not only cultural, but also administrative and territorial. However, territorial autonomy is associated with legitimate concerns in some governments and dominant nations of federalisation, which would lead to more intense separatisms and territorial disintegration. The recent history of Central and Eastern Europe provides a great number of proofs to support such a thesis. Therefore, full loyalty of ethnic minorities towards their countries of residence is another prerequisite for stabilisation. In the part of Europe where history still divides rather than unites nationalities, these are truly difficult to achieve at the same time.

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