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Ethnic Structure Of Immigration In Belarus In The First Years Of Independence: “Polish Anomaly”?

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Destructive energy released after collapse of big and small empires almost always is a cause of intensive movements of ethnic and religious groups across their territories.

Many representatives of titular¹ nations of empires, who lived in the periphery of empires, return to the metropolis, whereas the representatives of ethnic groups of former colonial peripheries return accordingly to those newly independent states where they acquired the status of titular nations. But in any empire there are also ethnic groups which are titular groups neither in relation to the former mother countries, nor to the new independent states which emerged on the ruins of the former empires. Therefore their representatives have a much harder time trying to decide what to do: a) should they stay to the place where they lived before the empire collapsed? b) should they move permanently to the former mother country? c) should they move to one of the newly independent states? d) should they move outside of the former empire altogether?

The breakup of the USSR in late 1991 made all these questions extremely valid for the ethnic groups which are not titular groups for any of the newly independent states.

As we were reconstructing the ethnic structure of migration flows between Belarus and the countries of post-Soviet space in the first years of independence unexpectedly we received quite intriguing materials about the Poles who moved to Belarus permanently in 1992-1998; there were 7671 of them (which is 1,94% of their total number in the country (See Annex 1). First of all, one is understandably perplexed by the fact that the ethnic group which accounted for less than half per cent of the total population of the Soviet Union in the end of the 80s (0,39%), became the fourth nation by the number of arrivals to Belarus in the years of independence! In fact, if one does not take into account the number of *Belarusians* who moved here permanently (i.e. representatives of titular ethnic group) Poles account for almost 4% of all *non-Belarusians* who entered the country.

Moreover, if we look at the relevant numbers in the table in Annex 1, we will discover that except for the Baltic states the difference between all the other countries and regions in terms of share of Poles there is insignificant. The minimum (0,9%) and maximum (2,0%) values differ only by 1,1%. Thus, the statistics in this case is largely driven by the Baltic states, which is, remember, the smallest region of the former USSR. It is also indicative that this region is the only one where the Poles are *in the third (!) place* by share of migrants who arrived to Belarus (following Belarusians and Russians).

Hence, we are facing an exaggerated increase of the share of Poles among migrants from the Baltic states to Belarus: as the *share* of this *region in the total number* of people who moved to Belarus from the former USSR is a little more than one-tenth (10,7%). On the other hand, if we consider the qualitative data about the Poles who arrived to Belarus from all the other former Soviet republics, the share of the Baltic region in the number of incoming Poles accordingly goes up sharply to 2/5 (39,6%). The increase is no less no more but in 3.7 times! It cannot possibly explained by the disproportional high share of Baltic region in the total number of Poles in the former USSR alone (which according to the population census of 1989 was 28,5%)². Therefore another multilateral statistically expressed measurement of "Baltic model" is revealed in migration "exchange" with Belarus. This is mainly due to Lithuania, where the share of Poles was as high as 7% of the population, and this is the highest value among the Soviet republics (compare to 4.1% of the population in Belarus)³.

¹ "Titular" ethnic group is the group after which a state is named.

² Data Source: Ethnic structure of the population of the USSR. Based on the all-Soviet Union population census in 1989 – M., 1991. p.20, 120, 124, 140.

³ Ibid.

Since Poles are among the top arrivals from the former USSR republics to Belarus - right after Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians⁴, and moreover, this flow is driven by the Baltic region alone, it is logical to assume, that in order to compare some aspects we should be speaking of "Slavic Four" instead of "Eastern Slavic three". Of course, in this case the aspects for comparison become much wider. Though, on the other hand, they will also be limited in some regard. The reason is the difference in status. The *status of Poles* which was significantly different from that of *Eastern Slavs* even in Soviet times, became even more different when independent states were created. The utmost difference is that there are *no states* on the territory of the former USSR, *for which the Poles would be a titular nation*: currently this fact becomes of extreme importance...

Speaking of the Baltic states the great non-homogeneity of Poles' presence in separate states cannot be ignored. While their share was generally very high in Lithuania as it was noted above, and in Latvia it was quite notable (2.3%), in Estonia it was mainly insignificant - less than 0.2%, that is even lower than the average value in the former USSR. Hence, the share of Estonia among incoming Poles from the Baltic states to Belarus in the given period was quite insignificant, only 4.7%.

Therefore, "Baltic states" in this regard include, strictly speaking, almost exclusively Lithuania and Latvia, which generated *over 95% of the total number of migrant Poles* from this region to Belarus. At the same time, it also indicative that even in Estonia the total number of the Poles who moved to Belarus accounts for 2.5%, which is much higher than in any other state of the former Soviet Union (except for Baltics)! Still, the situation in Latvia and Lithuania is cardinally different. In the first one Poles accounted for 6% of all the migrants who moved to Belarus, and in the latter case, their share was as high as 12,1%, which can be recognized as phenomenally high in any possible meaning!

In order to really appreciate these results, it would be reasonable to "illuminate" them with the data reflecting the pronounced characteristic features of the Poles from the Baltic states. In particular, in terms of culture and language they are different from the Poles in the other areas of the USSR. Thus, among the latter, only 13.3% of them said Polish was their native language according to the census of 1989, while for the Poles from the Baltic states this indicator was much higher: it is just a little short of three fourth (73,6%)⁵. As you can see, the difference is drastic... Almost one third of the rest of the USSR (32.8%) said Russian was their native language, while in the Baltic states the share of such people is not even one-fifth (18.2%)⁶. Also, the share of those who defined "other languages" as their native languages is more than six times (!!!) lower among the Baltic Poles: 8.2% compared to 53.9%⁷.

These facts are a downright derision of the linear "logics" which is so often applied by the analysts. Indeed, doesn't it look *blatantly illogical* that representatives of the *least Russified* part of the Polish community in the former USSR accounted for the *exceptionally high* share of Poles among those who moved permanently to Belarus - the republic which is actually *the most Russified!* And in the light of these "logical" statements isn't it even absurd that such a significant number of Poles prefer, so to say, "quasi-Soviet" character of Belarus to the temptation of the European Union-related perspectives which appeared in the Baltic horizon. It is to note that in this period since Lukashenko came to power in 1994, there occurred a consecutive complete change of the political system, the direction of economic development of the state changed radically, there was an inversion of all the major ideological and spiritual values and priorities, which ended in "velvet" installation of authoritarian regime. Privatization was suspended, and the new development direction was structural reconstruction of the national economy in order to increase the competitiveness. Despite these radical changes, there was no actual change in the statistical migration trends.

⁴ Applied to Ukraine accordingly such number of Poles would make 40,000, and applied to Russia - around 110,000. These numbers are talking for themselves!

⁵ Data source: Ethnic structure of the population ... p.20, 120, 124, 140.

⁶ Data source: Ibid.

⁷ "Other languages" here mean non-Polish and non-Russian. Calculated based on: Ibid.

These trends, being so well and expressly defined, most certainly show that Polish community did not feel quite comfortable in the Baltic states in the 90s, to put it mildly. This is true even for Lithuania, the state policy of which is known to be much softer than that of Latvia and Estonia. Moreover, the Poles from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia felt so uncomfortable there that as a result of disproportionately high (compared to the ethnic structure) level of representation among those who left the Baltic states, the latter supplied a great share of these nationals among those who moved to Belarus from the former USSR republics during the years of independence.

Such significant share of Poles has an important effect on the national structure of migration from the Baltic state to Belarus in general. In particular, once they are added to the Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians, the share of Slavs among those who moved to Belarus from the Baltic countries becomes as high as 95%. This is virtually identical to the same indicator for migration from Russia and Ukraine - 96,5%, while the ethnic structure of these differs significantly: while the share of the four Slavic nationalities in the population structure of Russia and Ukraine is almost nine tenth (88,2%)⁸, in the Baltic states as of late 80s this share was even less than one third (30,9%)⁹. Certainly, these values are beyond comparison.

It is quite indicative that even in case of Kazakhstan which was the leader among non-Slavic and non-Baltic states based on the Slavic migration to Belarus, the share of the four nationalities above, even though insignificantly, is *lower* than in case of the Baltic states - 93,4%. However, the total share of the Slavs in the population of the first in the given period is 44.7%, meaning that, no matter what, it is 1.5 times higher than that in the Baltic region¹⁰.

Thus, "Polish dimension" of the migration allows us to identify several new quite important aspects and dimensions of some most interesting and largely epochal phenomena in the Soviet Union. We think that these aspects are essential for specific understanding not only of the migration itself, but also of more general social and political processes.

Due to the "Polish dimension" we discovered the "ethnic components" of migration to Belarus from different countries and regions of the former Soviet Union in the very new and unexpected light. In particular, we discovered particularly clearly one very important feature of the ethnic structure of those who come from the Baltic countries; it is essentially different from the ethnic structure of those who arrive from the other regions of the former Soviet Union. In order to get a clearer understanding of its essence we study again the non-Slavic countries and regions, which register the highest share of Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians among those who move to Belarus. Table in Annex 1 demonstrates that these are Kazakhstan and Middle Asia countries. The total share of "Eastern Slavic three" among those who moved here (to Belarus) is almost 89% (88.7). Therefore, taking into account the drastic disparity between the number of incoming and outgoing migrants, one can make express statement about migration from these five states to Belarus for seven years of independence, as a version of a kind of "Eastern Slavic comb-out".

On the other hand, the related proportions and trends in the Baltic states are largely indicative of not only "Eastern Slavic", but simply "Slavic" ethnic comb-out: 95% is a strong number to demonstrate this fact! The share of Belarusians in the total number of those who moved to Belarus from the Baltic states in the years of independence was 53,4% (see Annex 1), Russians - 29,3%, Poles - 7,5% and Ukrainians - 4,7%.

Therefore it results that the chain of alogisms described quite easily leads to a very "logical" generalizing conclusion. It can be stated that migration from some newly independent post-Soviet states which practice, if one may say so, "civilized" comb-out of the unwanted population, based on

⁸ Data source: Ethnic structure of the population ... p.28, 30, 78.

⁹ Data source: Ibid. p. 120, 124, 140.

¹⁰ Data source: Ibid. p 102.

objective measures, both quantitative and qualitative ones, can represent to a much greater degree *ethnic comb-out even compared to the migration from the areas* of much more acute political, military, and ethnic *conflicts*.

Such "logics" clearly can be quite frustrating. Most importantly, it provides a valuable opportunity to understand specifically the principal "non-linearity" of the processes and phenomena at the current stage. At the same time it makes a researcher identify and understand their unordinary nature.

Annex 1

Ethnic structure of migrants who moved to Belarus permanently in 1992-1998 from CIS and Baltic states

	Total:	Including:											
		Belarusians		Russians		Ukrainians		Poles		Jews		Other	
		Abs.	%	Abs.	%	Abs.	%	Abs.	%	Abs.	%	Abs.	%
Total	378579	175079	46,2	137922	36,4	35659	9,4	7671	2,0	1098	0,3	21150	5,6
Among which from:													
Russia	213086	105400	49,5	85883	40,3	10754	5,0	3067	1,5	665	0,3	7317	3,4
Ukraine	57487	24267	42,2	13036	22,7	18034	31,4	632	1,1	154	0,3	1364	2,3
Baltic states	40671	21723	53,4	11936	29,3	1921	4,7	3035	7,5	95	0,2	1961	4,8
Moldova	4376	1668	38,1	1135	25,9	508	11,6	40	0,9	23	0,5	1002	22,9
Trans- Caucasian reg.	14945	4578	30,6	4557	30,5	655	4,4	153	1,0	60	0,4	4932	33,0
Kazakhstan	27308	11279	41,3	11190	41,0	2504	9,2	546	2,0	31	0,1	1758	6,4
Middle Asia	20706	6164	29,8	10185	49,2	1273	6,1	198	1,0	70	0,3	2816	13,6