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NONSENSE OF BORDER AND ONTOLOGIES IN THE MAKING: PRODUCTION OF DIFFERENCE IN THE BELARUSIAN-LITHUANIAN BORDERLAND

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The social sciences have long established that state borders produce, rather than simply reflect, social and cultural distinctions. Rather than examining the distinctions themselves, this article considers how perspectives on new differences are emerging. The state border between Belarus and Lithuania constitutes a distinctive example of a restricted geopolitical border, the external frontier of the EU, which emerged without any historical precedent and is still perceived as an absurdity by the locals who witnessed its emergence. I argue that the operation of the border's bureaucracy produces estrangement through specific spatialised regimes of uncertainty, undermining the reproduction of pre-border social connections. This growing alienation is often interpreted within the logic of the "civilisational projects" – the European one and its Belarusian counterpart – that the border is supposed to represent, sometimes appearing as accounts of substantial incommensurability. In other words, ontologies are produced from nonsense along the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, Lithuania, state border, Europeanness, production of difference

"I know the pieces fit,
'cause I watched them fall away."
Maynard James Keenan

In the summer of 2016, I was doing ethnographic fieldwork for my master's dissertation in Parojus (South-Eastern Lithuania), researching the local Polish ethnic minority. One day, I was invited to join the local folk choir on their tour to Poland, and after a day-long ride, we arrived at a resort in the Tatra Mountains. While most of us went to rest, some men were determined to procure more booze and keep the party going. After an hour, they returned to the place of our stay and were met with the following exchange:

– Finally! Good to see you're back safely, we were starting to worry!
– Ah, relax, man! That was easy, nothing like going down to the disco at Vieraščaki and not having the shit beaten out of you – *that* would be a real challenge!

Vieraščaki is a village seven kilometres from Parojus, separated by the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border since 1991. The person who mentioned it was about 40 years old, meaning he could visit it in his adolescence without obtaining a visa, introduced in 1994. Since then, the scale of trans-border contacts has declined significantly and is nowadays confined mostly to family visits and occasional refuelling with cheap Belarusian petrol. Today's teenagers from Parojus, while having been to places like London and Berlin via low-cost flights from the adjacent Vilnius airport, do not seem to have a clue about how to avoid trouble at Vieraščaki's discotheque.

Back in 2016, in Parojus, the subject of discontinued or hindered trans-border connections emerged vividly, taking different shapes and roles for people of different generations. Inspired by those conversations with my fieldwork companions, the article starts with the presupposition that no particular modern nation-state is a natural phenomenon, and hence none of its borders actually represents any "eternal truths" (Gourgouris 1996; cited by Green 2012, 576). Rather, state borders should be analysed in their historical dynamics, through how their ideational foundations produce and are reproduced by visceral emotions of belonging while their practical operation reshapes human lives, often violently, to reinforce the state's cultural hegemony and domination. Indeed, this assumption is somewhat self-evident in the case of the Belarusian-Lithuanian border, which splits the region in half, where no barrier existed before 1991. This border, arbitrary in its trajectory and commonly seen as absurd by the borderland dwellers, gained geopolitical importance when Lithuania started its path towards European integration, joining the EU in 2004, while the Belarusian state assumed a sort of "anti-European" ideology. This kind of divergence, emerging from the meta-level of state-building, substantially affected the lives of borderland communities, imposing the "civilisational" distinction onto the historically fluid social landscapes.

This article examines what *kind of difference* the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border produces. Instead of addressing the content of the emerging social distinctions, I focus on local understandings of the very nature of the difference itself. To do so, I first outline the historical context of the region, focusing on the preceding structures of mobility, then address both emotional and semantic experiences of living next to the suddenly imposed state border, and finally take a closer look at the ways my interlocutors described the nature of the emerging difference. I argue that while the introduction of the state border was widely perceived as a harmful and absurd intrusion into local lives, its bureaucratic operation progressively fosters estrangement.

The ideological underpinnings of the two conflicting "civilisational projects" that supposedly collide at the border, in turn, contribute to the emerging local perception of profound, seemingly ontological difference resulting from that nonsensical phenomenon.

The research is based on interview and participant observation data from two ethnographic fieldwork trips in Parojus, Lithuania (2016), and Rojsty, Belarus (2018). Consequently, this ethnographic data is situated within a particular timeframe, capturing perceptions of the already well-matured border of the European Union, yet before the dramatic geopolitical escalations of 2020 and 2022. While the initial 2016 fieldwork in Parojus focused on other matters, the motif of trans-border sentiments and disconnections emerged vividly enough to become the focus of a subsequent master's thesis and a second field trip to Rojsty in 2018. Thus, in total, the analysis is based on forty semi-structured interviews with people, mostly older than 40, who witnessed the border's emergence. In this article, I predominantly analyse their "border talk" (Pickering 2006), focusing specifically on narratives of personal experiences of (dis)connection, contextualised through reflections on moral and (geo)political meanings of the border (or lack thereof).

The main locations in question are the small towns of Parojus and Rojsty, located twenty kilometres from each other, yet separated by the state border. Vieraščaki is a large village right between them, featuring a crossing point from the Belarusian side. In each of the towns, as well as in the adjacent villages, the vast majority of the population is Polish and Catholic. Whereas in Parojus Polish is one of the daily languages, alongside Russian, Lithuanian and occasionally Belarusian, in Rojsty and Vieraščaki people mostly speak either Belarusian, Russian or *trasianka* – a diverse mix of the two. Whereas the names of these three locations are given pseudonyms, there are several major cities located relatively closely and related to the research, such as Vilnius (the capital of Lithuania, with a population of more than 530,000 people, a few dozen kilometres from Parojus) and Grodno (a relatively distant centre of the *vobłaść*, a major administrative unit in Belarus, with a population of 330,000, located about 100 kilometres to the west)[1].

1 It is important to note that both Rojsty and Parojus are in the central part of the Belarusian-Lithuanian borderland, at the core of the historical Vilnius region. The situation could be different in other parts of the borderland. Near Grodno, for instance, where I grew up, there are no major cities other than Grodno itself, and the border between Belarus and Lithuania runs through a sparsely populated primeval forest, which historically served as a boundary between Slavic- and Lithuanian-speaking populations. Hence, the legitimacy of the state border is generally perceived somewhat differently, as it roughly corresponds to the linguistic divisions in those parts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Generally, boundaries are one of the most substantial categories we employ in dealing with the social world in its every dimension, including geographical classifications, since making distinctions and categorisations is one of the basic cognitive mechanisms human beings operate (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 170–71; cf. Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004). The very idea of a boundary in general implies the separation of self from other, which lends meaning to identity (Barth 2000, 17–20). A similar understanding can be applied to political borders, seen as a point at which the state's territorial competence finds its ultimate expression (Sahlins 1989, 2). Nation-states use this embeddedness of the idea of boundaries in our everyday cognition to impose the logic of mundane nationalism as a basic operational principle (Billig 1995, 13–26) that presupposes nation-states as the natural unit of cultural classification. Hence, it seems productive to pay attention to how boundaries drawn by distant policymakers are being endowed with meanings and how they are contested as well as defended by different actors in border regions (Pelkmans 2006, 14).

More specifically to the case in question, two contextual frameworks overlap: those of post-socialism and border studies. Some post-socialist borders have already received substantial attention in the social sciences (see Assmuth 2003; Pelkmans 2006; Follis 2012; Megoran 2005, 2006; Pfoser 2015, 2017; Reeves 2007, 2011, 2014; amongst others), and the other borders between Belarus and the EU have also been studied (see Grygar 2009, Joyce 2021, Blavascunas and Cope 2022, Bieńkowska 2023). The Belarusian-Lithuanian border, while also not bereft of scholarly attention (see Cegliński 2005; Bespamyatnykh and Nikiforova 2015; Daukšas 2014; Sasunkevich 2015, 2019), is still somewhat unique in this context, at least due to the sharp contrast between its insignificance before the collapse of the Soviet Union, as it barely corresponded to any other social division, and the geopolitical gravity it has acquired in recent decades.

This article contributes to the field of border studies by focusing on these dynamics, scrutinising the constitutive logic of a rather common process of bordering in a situation where many of its properties are amplified. Following the well-established tradition of studying the borders from below (Paasi 1998, Wilson and Donnan 1998, and many more), I focus specifically on the local visions of the organising logic of structural effects that the operation of the border has on the vernacular perception of difference, rather than on the content of those effects *per se*.

For that purpose, I suggest examining the effects of the border seen as an engine for the *production of ontologies as political projects* (Green 2012)[2]. In other words,

2 De Genova essentially phrased the same thing differently as the "definite metaphysics" of the border (2016, 50).

I aim to see how ostensibly incommensurable ("civilisational") divisions are constructed upon personal experiences of separation and discontinuity, and to see how the imposition of the state border turns similarity and commonness into difference that is supposed to reflect ontological alterity. Therefore, I pay particular attention to the internal logic of the big narratives that underpin the geopolitical dimension of the divide represented by the state border – predominantly, to the ideologies of Europeanness. Importantly, I use words like "ontology" and "ontological" in a broad yet conventional sense, meaning *discourses about* the nature of being, its essence and so forth. The whole conceptual debate related to the so-called "ontological turn" and its rather specific understanding of ontology – arguably, presuming its meaning to be akin to "reality", not "discourse *about* reality" – does not concern me in this work (see Graeber 2015, 15–16 on the importance of this difference). Thus, by "the production of ontologies", I mean the production of a specific perspective upon the emerging difference, the one implying different experiences of being in the world.

Finally, speaking of the particular processes and mechanics of separation, I engage with the affective aspect of the operation of the borders (see Reeves 2011), seeing it through the lens of social reproduction theory. Specifically, I employ the framework of reproductive labour, seeing it as the scope of activities and practices that are aimed at the reproduction of diverse forms of social organisation of different scales (see Fraser 2016, Bhattacharya 2017, Weiss 2021, Dowling 2021). Thus, I analyse morally-driven aspirations to maintain social connections (mostly based on kinship networks) predating the emergence of the state border as socially reproductive labour, which is in turn thoroughly counteracted by the bureaucratic operation of the state border apparatuses.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND PRE-BORDER SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

For most of its history, no political border existed in the Vilnius region, which in the Middle Ages was a Baltic-speaking core of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Ochmański 1990, 43–66; Gudavičius 1999, 33–530), later being a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (sixteenth-eighteenth centuries), the Russian Empire (19th century) and Poland (1921–1939). As the region was heavily influenced by Ruthenian and later Polish culture, respective languages (Belarusian and, to some extent, Polish) became dominant there by the late nineteenth century (Gaučas 1988, 195; Klimchuk 1981, 214), while Polish identity spread amongst the Slavic-speaking masses by at least the first half of the twentieth century (Kowalski 2013, 210–14; see Bardach 1999, 11–20). The current division emerged after World War II, when the region was arbitrarily divided between the Lithuanian and Belarusian Soviet republics.

Throughout the Soviet era, the border was merely a formal administrative line, which served to delimit spheres of governance between the Soviet republics, resulting in different cultural policies, "official languages" and so forth, while implying no restrictions on mundane human mobility (see Light 2012). Both short-term and long-term mobility of the borderland dwellers included Vilnius (as a regional centre) and adjacent villages and towns, regardless of their administrative belonging, especially as the vast majority of the population shared the same ethnicity, religion and cultural repertoire, being predominantly Polish Catholics, just as it mostly remains to this day (Shchiraya 2021, 111–12; see also Kowalski 2013, 214–20, 226–30)[3].

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the old administrative border became that between the two nation-states, and by the 2010s, given divergent political changes, had turned into the border between the European Union and Russia-affiliated and rhetorically anti-European Belarus. During that time, the border regime grew more and more restrictive, as the border "matured" (cf. Baud and van Schendel 1997, 224). Mutual visas were introduced in 1994, requirements for their acquisition were mutually restricted in 2003, and in 2007, Lithuania became a full-fledged border state of the European Union (see Sasunkevich 2015), regulated by the Schengen acquis. Lithuania's accession to the European Union in 2004, therefore, solidified this divergent trajectory, introducing additional discursive layers to both the moral meanings of the border ("Europeanisation") and its security matters. Thus, the border that emerged suddenly along the arbitrary administrative line happened to separate not only nation-states but "civilisational" projects as well.

To perceive difference, there needs to be a knowledge of sameness, and to account for disconnections, connections must exist within a familiar social repertoire: the process of bordering itself is a reaction to the prior fact of human mobility (de Genova 2016, 42). Indeed, many of my interlocutors described the current state border against the backdrop of the situation that predated its emergence. Two of its most important features were the persistent role of Vilnius as a regional centre and slight economic differences caused by different administrative policies implemented in the two Soviet republics.

During the Soviet times, Vilnius, located no farther than 80 kilometres from all the localities involved, maintained a significant symbolic status as a regional centre. One of my older interlocutors, for instance, mentioned how his father was disappointed back in the 1970s that his son started studying medicine in Grodno instead of Vilnius; the latter was "a real capital for his generation, while Grodno was a bit of a foreign land" (m., 60–65 y.o., Rojsty, BY). Similarly, the local priest in Vieraščaki highlighted the centrality of Vilnius for the Catholic religiosity in the region during

3 For the Lithuanian population distribution by ethnicity, see https://osp.stat.gov.lt/en/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=0078cd86-acd6-46a8-9843-623bdf998aba#/ (Accessed 16 June 2025).

the Soviet era. He noted that due to a variety of close connections, Vilnius was by far the most popular destination for urbanisation-related resettlement, and "those who left our village to Vilnius never thought of it in terms of migration" (m., 40–50 y.o., Vieraščaki, BY).

Indeed, Vilnius remained a geographical centre of accumulation of resources in the region during the Soviet era, providing opportunities for education, employment and leisure. Many of those living in Soviet Belarus commuted daily to Vilnius for work, as the suburban bus network was arranged with no regard for the border between the two Soviet republics. Later, many of them received apartments from the enterprises they worked at, thus moving to Vilnius permanently. Amongst my interlocutors, many cases of extended families now separated by the state border emerged because of such resettlement. The dominant role of the Russian (and to a much lesser extent Polish) language in Soviet Vilnius was crucial, as no linguistic barrier could hinder mobility. The border was also crossed routinely for shopping purposes, since different administration regimes led to differences in supply. While numerous Belarusian interlocutors admitted during the interviews that the quality of goods was better in Lithuania, many of those who grew up in Lithuania also saw the difference as an opportunity to compensate for occasional local shortages.[4]

Thus, during the Soviet era, the administrative border between the Belarusian and Lithuanian Soviet republics was non-existent in terms of mobility, even if it enabled a certain number of social practices based on differences in policies. As one of my Lithuanian interlocutors aptly summed up, "We used to laugh back then, passing a border stone, like 'ha-ha, we are entering Belarus now'. But then it stopped being funny" (m., 65–70 y.o., Parojus, LT).

NONSENSE OF BORDER

As I have outlined, after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, for the first time in history, a firm political barrier emerged in the Vilnius region – the border between the two nation-states. In this section, I thus explore the "ordinary affect elicited by the border and boundedness" (Reeves 2011, 906) of the newly emerged barrier. For that purpose, I analyse practical, emotional and semantic

4 Another important difference for some was in policies regarding Polish language and culture. Whereas in Soviet Lithuania (in its Polish-populated south-eastern parts), central authorities provided the Polish community with cultural infrastructure, such as schools, higher education, newspapers, radio and so forth, in Soviet Belarus, the authorities aimed to eradicate Polish culture and language. Hence, some of my interlocutors shared stories of people moving to the Lithuanian side of the border so that their children could study in Polish instead of Belarusian.

experiences of the border by examining the vernacular constructions of its (non) sense and meaning(lessness). As ethnographic evidence shows, while people directly affected by the emergence of the state border struggle to make sense of it, the consequences of its operation are quite substantial, separating families and communities, and generating lasting alienation through diverse bureaucratic control mechanisms.

Practical Economies of Disconnection

An important dimension that affected experiences of disconnection was the economic and legal environment, which shaped rationalities of trans-border mobility. While this aspect was clearly distinguished from moral arguments, rational concerns established the setting for the extant moralities of (dis)connections.

First of all, there was the factor of visa fees. In the 2010s, a Schengen visa cost 60 euros for a Belarusian citizen, and one had to travel to major cities to apply for it. The price could have been a significant obstacle, particularly for people working low-paid state-provided jobs, retirees or single women with children.[5] While it did not prevent people from travelling "in case of need", the very notion of "need" was reshaped along economic rationalities. While living standards in Lithuania are generally higher than in Belarus, and Belarusian visas cost roughly the same, I often heard similar reasoning on the other side of the border. Remarkably, some of my Lithuanian interlocutors reported rather exorbitant Belarusian visa fees (from 120 to 300 euros) that simply did not match reality[6] – quite likely, as a rhetorical move to emphasise the inconvenience of the border procedures.[7]

Visa fees were often seen as something to be compensated for through shopping abroad. While there were people directly involved in trans-border mobility on an economic basis – semi-legal small-scale shuttle traders and smugglers – they were not

5 The average monthly income in the Rojsty district in 2017 was equivalent to 257 euros before taxes.

6 In 2024, Belarus abolished entry visas for EU citizens. Given Belarusian assistance in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, the authorities of the neighbouring EU states actively discourage their citizens from visiting Belarus.

7 It should be mentioned that there is a way for Belarusian citizens to circumvent this condition. Possession of the Karta Polaka (Polish Card), a document issued by Polish embassies starting in 2007 certifying one's "belonging to the Polish nation", allows one to apply for a Polish national visa without a fee, and since the mid-2010s, to acquire Polish citizenship within a year in case of relocation. For the purposes of this research, it suffices to say that some of my Belarusian interlocutors had the Polish Card, and their Polish national visas obtained free of charge were mostly used to travel to Lithuania. In Lithuania, the Polish Card is much less popular – and usually obtained for the symbolic purpose of signifying ethnic identity – since there is substantially less pragmatic advantage in obtaining it for EU citizens (see Fedorowicz 2020, 41–43; Gońda and Lesińska 2022).

at the centre of my interest.[8] Yet, concerns about compensating visa expenses were common. For quite a while, shopping in Lithuania was clearly profitable, as a diverse variety of goods was available in Vilnius at better prices. For those from the Lithuanian side of the border, the Belarusian petrol price was quite attractive, half of the Lithuanian price. Since the introduction of the euro in Lithuania (2014), consumer prices there have gone up, and the perception of inflation has grown even more (Jouvanceau 2021, 5–7, 15), thus diminishing the perceived profitability of shopping there for Belarusians.[9] Concurrently, the decline in earnings was mentioned quite often on the Belarusian side, especially by people working state-provided jobs, even though it scarcely corresponded to any "official" economic crisis in the late 2010s. On the other hand, the growth of consumer prices made shopping in Belarus more reasonable for Lithuanians in some cases (e.g., for pharmaceutical products).

Importantly, trans-border mobility was predominantly described as highly contingent upon pragmatic rationalities, even by those prone to emphasise its moral aspects. In many cases, people described the history of their trans-border mobility as relying on opportunities to engage in profitable activities, which led to re-establishing erstwhile neglected familial connections. One of my interlocutors, a middle-aged lady from Belarus, was eager to discuss the detrimental effect the border had on familial connections. Yet, she herself started contacting her Lithuanian relatives again after 16 years of hiatus, only due to the concurrent establishment of the clearer application procedure and a suggestion from a friend to join some trading activity. As she put it herself, "every tenth person here would get a visa to visit their relatives [in Lithuania], and every second one would do it to earn some money" (f., 45–50 y.o., Lida, BY).

Such discursive prioritisation of economic rationality illustrates how the practical constraints of the border make individuals weigh the worthwhileness of maintaining connections against the tangible costs and benefits of mobility. In other words, the operation of the border imposes a logic of calculation where the labour of social reproduction becomes linked to, and often overshadowed by, the economic conditions imposed by the border regime. Even in less illustrative cases, the discourse about trans-border mobility betrayed a certain hierarchical structuring of motivations, in which connections of kinship were subordinated to pragmatic needs. This is illustrated by phrases like: "If I am going there for any need, I naturally try to visit my uncle as well." Regardless of whether the importance of economic rationalities was explicit or not, it was always portrayed as defining the structure of mobility.

8 For an extensive analysis of this small-scale trans-border shuttle trade, which became increasingly unprofitable in the 2010s, see Sasunkevich (2015). The separate issue of organised cigarette smuggling falls outside the scope of this article (cf. Crawford 2016, Grygar 2009).

9 It was and remains very rational, however, to shop in Poland; journeys there for substantial purchases are sometimes undertaken across the Lithuanian border.

Emotions and Semantics of the Border

This way, the border, as an institution that establishes its own bureaucratic environments and signifies the contiguity of two different administrative regimes, has set up its own regime of mobility. Speaking of the emotional experiences of people who witnessed the emergence of this border, the main descriptive tropes were those of absurdity and externality. This extra-local meaning and intentionality of the border was consistently emphasised by my interlocutors: "No one ever asked us whether we wanted this border or not" (m., 55–60 y.o., Rojsty, BY); "in Minsk or Kaunas[10], they don't care about it" (f., 45–50 y.o., Lida, BY).

This incapacity to affect the external will that structures people's living conditions shaped attitudes towards the meaning of the border. It was widely treated as an institution of particular absurdity, in terms of both its bureaucratic procedures and the reasons that were supposed to lie at its foundation. Interestingly, even after twenty-seven years of living in two different states, the subject of the preposterousness of the border was often a topic for occasional small talk. I had multiple opportunities to overhear such small talk, for example, standing in line at the bus station in Rojsty, especially from people older than 40. In other words, the state border was considered unnatural by those who experienced its emergence. "No one wanted it, the border that severed the living body" (m., 65–70 y.o., Rojsty, BY), as one of my interlocutors in Belarus emphasised: the border *made no sense*.

Those tropes of unnaturalness preponderated in descriptions of the state border: a homestead where "a house [happened to be] in Belarus and a barn in Lithuania", "a lake separated between the two states" – all were instances of separation of what must not be separated naturally. The irritating absurdity of the border was often expressed through reference to its visible manifestations – its tiresome bureaucracy and long lines at the scarce crossing points. As one of my Belarusian interlocutors noted, "I could hear my cousin's dog barking from across the border, but to visit her I'd have to spend several hours [waiting at the crossing point]" (m., 60–65 y.o., Rojsty, BY). While almost everyone had those ridiculous stories to share, there were also urgent cases mentioned, when the inexorable logic of the border resulted in humiliation and embarrassment (cf. Bespamyatnykh and Nikiforova 2015, 98). Several people, for example, mentioned that they had to miss funerals of close relatives due to long queues or issues with visas; in one case, it was a story of two sisters unsuccessfully begging the border guards to let them bury their mother. Beyond mere inconveniences, these instances represent substantial emotional injuries to the people

10 Note that Kaunas (the second-largest Lithuanian city) is mentioned here as a metonymy for "Lithuanian authorities", not Vilnius (the national capital). It seems that my interviewee did not feel like using proximate, still familiar, and still quite multi-ethnic Vilnius to express meanings of externality.

affected by the border regime, as the working of the state apparatus directly impedes the ability to fulfil moral familial obligations.

These abundant experiences of precarity and indignity affect the emotional modality of relations between members of extended families across the border. As one of my Lithuanian interlocutors noted, the recurrent experience of waiting in queues for 6–8 hours killed all the possible joy of family holidays; his friend, present at the conversation, agreed, noting that through the years his family gradually started inviting Belarusian relatives less and less frequently, knowing they would most often be unable to come. Effectively, as he said, "I don't even know the children of my cousins anymore" (m., 40–50 y.o., Parojus).

Thus, the existing border between Belarus and Lithuania was widely seen by the people of the generation that witnessed its emergence and maturation as a border that makes no sense. The only source of idioms that locals had on hand to account for its existence was geopolitical rhetoric, which was often claimed to have nothing in common with any order of things that would concern local interests. This view was formulated by one of my middle-aged interlocutors from Parojus:

> So, the border is pure politics: *there is nothing human in it*. Two different political blocs, you know – a socialist bloc on the one side and a capitalist bloc on the other, as they call it. (m., 40–50 y.o., Parojus)

Production of Dissimilarity

As I have shown, the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border is preponderantly seen by people living next to it as making no sense and not reflecting any precedent reality it is normatively supposed to represent. The routine operation of the border's bureaucracy, however, shapes both practical and emotional aspects of human mobility by utilising the institutionalised precarity of an individual subject at the border to produce specifically organised landscapes of (un)familiarity and solidify the logic of (non) belonging. As it seems, the tiresomeness of border procedures produced the effect that is supposed to justify their existence – the land beyond the border was made less and less familiar. Once framed as border-crossing, natural human mobility is subjected to bordered social formations, through which difference is produced (de Genova 2016, 48). The biopolitical power of the border (cf. Megoran 2012) is exercised by making the process of getting to and being on "the other side" uncomfortable, tiresome and sometimes humiliating. By introducing the specific regime of controlled calculation of the worthwhileness of certain emotional experiences related to the border crossing (cf. Foucault 2007, 20–21), the state power is exerted and mutually reproduced through enabling some actions and precluding some others, operating

through "'*dispositif*' of (in)security" and exhaustion (see Miggelbrink 2016, 141–44; cf. Aydemir-Kundakcı 2024). Notably, my interlocutors seemed to be acutely aware of those effects, effectively recognising the border as overwhelmingly non-indexical – that is, as one that makes realities rather than reflects them, serving as an interface for a novel and alienating classification system, rather than an outcome of other human activity (cf. Green 2012, 578).

To counteract those effects of the border, as it seemed, required very concrete labour of social reproduction, i.e., labour that is located outside the sphere of capitalist accumulation and aimed at physical, emotional and moral reproduction of certain subjects of productive labour as well as of social forms and relations of various scales (see Fraser 2016, Weiss 2021, Dowling 2021). In this case, by labour of social reproduction, I mean the practical work put into maintaining pre-border connections – notably, predominantly based on kinship ties and thus normatively assigned to the private domain – against economic and logistical odds, to ensure reproduction of morally significant relations that preceded the imposition of the state border[11]. This labour, mounted against the bureaucratic operation of the state border, is essentially unsuccessful – people on different sides of the border gradually become strangers to each other. The diverse array of consequences of the bureaucratic operation of the border and its states makes cross-border mobility tiresome, impractical, sometimes overtly humiliating and often scarcely affordable in both emotional and material terms. The dissonances between pragmatic rationalities and social reproduction render kinship-based sentiments and demands appear excessive and emotionally charged; thus, the labour of maintaining connections, while motivated by the sense of moral obligations, is forcefully rendered as a matter of voluntaristic choice, and quite a taxing one (cf. Weiss 2023, 300–301, 305). Notably, while meagre profits gained through cross-border shopping or small-scale trade can hardly qualify as "capitalist accumulation", the emphasis on the primacy of economic factors for trans-border mobility is significant, both practically and discursively, reflecting the consequences of subordinating specific kinds of labour reproduction to economic rationalities.

The border's operation in this regard[12] can be termed as slow violence – "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011, 2; cf. Campbell 2022). By disrupting and reshaping the pre-border logics of social navigation (see Vigh 2009), this slow violence

11 For a not-exactly-similar yet somewhat comparable example of labour aimed at reproducing mobility possibilities and organised along the contours of national borders, see Tkach 2021.

12 Naturally, there are many other aspects of national borders where they exert very explicit and overt violence.

of the border imposes a certain belonging within the overall "national order of things" (Malkki 1992, 25), enacting a "principle of dissimilarity" (Mbembe 2021) through obscure workings of border apparatuses (cf. Feldman 2012). In this way, difference is produced in places where there used to be none.[13]

ONTOLOGIES IN THE MAKING

In the following section, I examine how people locate, perceive and evaluate the difference that emerged during the twenty-seven years of the existence of the state border; in other words, what properties are attributed to what kind of difference using what kind of rhetoric. The interest in "how people see what is on the other side" does not presume, in this case, an examination of the concrete content of each "other side". Rather, I scrutinise the binary perspective itself: what properties of the human condition are seen to be crucially shaped by the very emergence of "the other side" and the fact that previously intimately familiar people started belonging there. Since the most important and primary feature through which the emerging difference was discerned was the belonging to one or the other nation-state, the majority of conversations about this divergence were framed as discussions about those states, comparing differences in policies and ideological projects they were inspired by. In other words, the discursive landscape of the border was shaped by polarised imaginations of political space (cf. Pfoser 2017, 28).

Civilisational Projects

Today's Belarusian-Lithuanian state border, as an external frontier of the European Union, has become a point of collision for political projects that my interlocutors frequently described in terms that could be paraphrased as "civilisational": the European one and its Belarusian antagonist. While the border itself was overwhelmingly seen as an absurd phenomenon, the grand narratives of those projects offered a framework through which my interlocutors often made sense of the differences that emerged from decades of separation. To understand how those grand narratives affected local perception, one must first outline the underlying assumptions of the competing "civilisational" projects.

The case of Belarus is somewhat more complex. It is difficult to answer what kind of civilisational project the Belarusian state represents, as Lukashenka's regime

13 It is important to note, however, that during my fieldwork, this mundane production of difference operated through the "normative" bureaucratic procedures. After 2020, when the border was rapidly militarised, the official rhetoric on both sides (especially on the Belarusian side) started employing tropes of the imminent armed conflict, framed in geopolitical terms.

does not really have a consistently formulated state ideology (see Yakouchyk 2019). There is quite a bit of literature that phrases its de facto appearance in various ways, all in the spirit of something like "neo-Soviet" (e.g. Zarycki 2014, 20). It is not entirely false, but it does not feel true either, at least for me as a person who grew up in Belarus. In this article, I denote the official ideology of the Belarusian state as "anti-European", mostly due to the reactive nature of the state discourses. Anecdotally, a much-ridiculed quote from Lukashenka himself describes this kind of attitude quite aptly: "I won't lead my state towards the civilised world."

In the case of the "European project", things are somewhat simpler, as it is explicated in public discourses and a myriad of documents of the EU institutions (e.g. European Union 2012). In Lithuania (and, perhaps, everywhere else in post-socialist Europe), "Europeanisation", however diversely understood, was and is a project permeating social fields and wedded into many personal lives (see Vonderau 2007). That is to say, the main political aspiration of the whole nation as a collective moral subject (as it was purportedly intended by politicians and used in political discourses) was "to become European", implying a vaguely defined set of values such as human rights, individual freedoms, democratic political organisation, high living standards and so forth (cf. Subotić 2010). Yet, the project of Europeanisation does not have to be articulated as a coherent ideological framework to have a profound effect (cf. Dzenovska 2018, 7).

Although personal experiences of relations with different state institutions, ideological stances and preferences varied across my interlocutors, some people in Belarus liked their state and some did not, and it was the same with Lithuanian citizens: the general idiomatic array for deliberations on the subject, as well as the logic along which they were organised, was pretty much the same. It is through these geopolitical narratives that people who otherwise scarcely felt that they belonged to the projects of either nation-state, both to a different degree underpinned by the notions of homogenising nationalism, tried to make sense of the border and the entities the division between which the border officially represented.

Importantly, the political project of Europeanisation has many similarities with practices and projects of individual ethical self-cultivation (see Foucault 1988), albeit at the scale of the collective moral subject of the nation. Discourses of "transition" (Burawoy and Verdery 1999) and conditionality of accession (see Grabbe 2002, Czina 2024) enhance the ethical aspect – it is a project of formation of the subject deserving of inclusion. By "ethical formation" in this case, I mean something akin to "conscious acting on oneself either in isolation or with others so as to make oneself into a more morally appropriate and acceptable social person, not only in the eyes of others, but also for oneself" (Zigon 2008, 165); but again, extended to the collective level of the nation. In the political context of Central and Eastern Europe,

the project of Europeanisation is often rhetorically constructed through negation of the ethical point of departure (*homo sovieticus* etc.), relying on the structure of discourses at the core of which lies a set of orientalist assumptions (see Zarycki 2014, 1–15 *et passim*). As a normative and civilising project (Dzenovska 2018, 12), it was and is, in a sense, a collective attempt to overcome what was perceived as the "civilisational incompetence" of Central and Eastern Europe (Sztompka 1993). Hence, its orientalist assumptions cemented thinking in hierarchies (Böröcz 2006), and while hierarchisation of cultures or races is not usually accepted in the broadly defined liberal discourses, hierarchisation of countries according to their economic performance, innovativeness and attractiveness is socially acceptable and is not seen as a reproduction of stereotypes or inequalities (Zarycki 2014, 6). Indeed, contested projects of remaking people and institutions in the name of political liberalism were an integral part of the "post-socialist transition", often appearing from the position of moral superiority (Dzenovska 2018, x). Thus, the morally formative nature of the political project of Europeanisation contributed to the localisation of its hierarchies at the level of fundamental human differences.

Rhetoric of Difference and Effects of Ethical Formation

While my interlocutors did not passively adopt those grand narratives, the logic of the nature of difference that they suggested shaped how people articulated their experiences and perceptions of the "other side", despite varying ideological stances and preferences. Besides the sheer effect of alienation, my interlocutors frequently noted the moral divergencies along the border. To paraphrase, not only did "we" not know "them" well enough anymore, but there was also some contrastive ethical formation taking place "over there". Some of those in Belarus noted how they gradually started feeling alienated in Vilnius, as "there's Lithuanian [language] everywhere nowadays" (f., 45–50 y.o., Lida, BY), including the daily speech of their nieces and nephews. One of my Lithuanian interlocutors, in turn, noted that familiar people in Belarus looked at him more and more suspiciously as the years passed, thinking (stupidly, in his view) of him as "a NATO citizen" (m., 50–55 y.o., Parojus, LT).

However, the most popular set of idioms to discuss those ethical projects of post-Soviet transition (or refusal thereof) was the exposure of their failed promises. The "European" project, perhaps due to the brilliance of its original promises, was the most frequent object of such critique. Some of my Belarusian interlocutors were particularly prone to caustic remarks about what they saw as real consequences of "becoming European": depopulation, neglect of urban development and inadequate salaries – all allegedly characteristic of Lithuania. As one of my Belarusian interlocutors summarised, "One guy from Parojus told me that Europe didn't give them much. It just showed them a promise and then gave nothing" (m., 65–70 y.o., Rojsty, BY). Similarly, many

of Parojus's dwellers – even those generally sceptical of the "European" project – noted that Belarus was increasingly lagging in terms of infrastructural developments. Simultaneously, there were many people highly critical of *their own* countries. As a friend of the aforementioned interviewee stated during the same conversation, "[Yes, but] surely, no normal person would want to stay in Belarus, especially a young person with some brain" (m., 60–65 y.o., Rojsty, BY).

Thus, different temporal orientations were of importance, as the "European project" was unanimously perceived as a departure from the previous condition, whereas the essence of its Belarusian alternative was seen to be a refusal of such a departure. This way, personal attitudes towards change often determined ideological stances that resulted either in nostalgia (for the past) and resentment (towards the novelties) or in frustration with the stagnation and absence of progress. As most of my interlocutors were at least middle-aged, it was perhaps somewhat natural that I heard more criticism towards the "European" political project. What is important here, however, is not the statistical disposition of opinions along the border, but their structural similarity, embodied in the failed aspirations of one of the two projects, the arbitrary collision of which constituted the border itself.

Often, such criticism extends into the moral sphere, framing the emergent difference as a harmful deviation. Such, for instance, was the stance of one of my interlocutors from Rojsty, who lamented the choice of his Lithuanian relatives, a young family unwilling to have a second child: "They want to live for their own pleasure, they say! That's the kind of bullshit they want to live by now, they are now Europeans!" (m., 65–70 y.o., Rojsty, BY). This comment frames personal and familial choices through a geopolitical lens, referring to the perception of moral formation rather than to numerical reality, as birthrates have been declining very similarly in both Belarus and Lithuania[14].

The topic of moralities of kinship emerged particularly often to illustrate the negative effects of the politics of ethical formation. The latter was aptly exemplified by one of my middle-aged Lithuanian interlocutors:

> Well, I can travel to Europe to work there. To earn some money. My brother works in Norway, for instance. That's nice; he can earn really big money. But his children are growing up without a father – is this good? That is what Europe has brought us. Families are falling apart, you know. First the border, then this. (m., 50–55 y.o., Parojus, LT)

14 See https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SPDYNTFRTINLTU (Accessed 17 June 2025) for Lithuania and https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SPDYNTFRTINBLR (Accessed 17 June 2025) for Belarus.

A very similar account of the border as a factor of substantial change in relations between familial morality and pragmatic reasoning – in a sense, an account of a perceived neoliberal rationalisation of the "European" terrain – is provided by Alena Pfoser (2017, 39 *et passim*). Similarly, it can be seen through the imposition of certain tropes of kinship and rootedness as a part of the internalisation of nation-state ideologies (Alonso 1994). That is, a forceful change in symbolic location and imposition of a common moral ontology of the collective subject – the nation – goes together with the abrupt severing of previously established ties phrased in terms of kinship as well.

Ontological Differences, Real and False

Such a condition creates a difference in "ways", a difference out of necessity. The moment the "ways" as a means of adaptation are perceived to be naturalised, they become a property of an ontological kind, of more substantial features of a person than mere learned habits to behave in this or that way due to functional necessity. Out of the cold, uninvited and forcefully imposed absurdity of the state border, a very real and meaningful difference emerged. Vernacular conceptualisations of that difference can also be rephrased as those of ontological difference, referring to distinct and sometimes problematically commensurable ways of being in the world.

Particularly, the notion of "them" being "different people now" dominated the descriptions on both sides of the border. Take Wiesław, a middle-aged entrepreneur from Parojus:

> I don't have many friends in Belarus, but we have business connections with them. *They are different people now, and they think differently now*. There are always problems with them, in terms of business, with their bureaucracy. And in general, they have a very different approach to human relations. (m., 50–55 y.o., Parojus, LT)

This notion of "different thinking" does signify a more substantial difference than that merely contingent on the environment. Nevertheless, it is precisely mundane practices established by the state's bureaucratic apparatuses that induce the emergence of this perception of the incommensurable difference. Nina, a woman in her thirties from Lida (Belarus), described her vicarious experiences of connections with "the other side". As I reached Nina through her second cousin from Parojus, she persistently referred to me as if I were a Lithuanian national, despite my expressly Slavic name and surname. This detail suggests that it was not ethnic, but precisely civic distinction – as she assumed that I was a Lithuanian citizen of whatever ethnicity – that mattered for her in the context of that classification:

> My husband works for a Lithuanian firm, and you know, it's not always easy for him. Sorry, don't take it personally, but I mean, with you lot […] *your brains are organised differently and weirdly* […] I mean, if you establish an enterprise in Belarus, you must understand that things are not done here in the Lithuanian way, but only in the Belarusian way. (f., 35–40 y.o., Lida, BY)

Quite importantly, I do not mean that people on different sides of the border see the difference between themselves as ontologically cemented in stone. Rather, I argue, there is a *process of formation of difference that is supposed to be ontological*, and people alongside the border are acutely aware of the gravity of its effects.

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Notably, those fundamental changes were often seen as contradicting the "true nature" of the people in question, as an abnormal deviation, contorting the essence of otherwise comprehensible human beings; a false ontology, so to speak[15]. It was particularly so when recent geopolitical clashes were discussed, which by 2018 meant the first stage of the Russian war in Ukraine, back then localised in the Donbas region. As one of my relatively older Lithuanian interlocutors noted, recalling his times in the Soviet Army spent in Ukraine:

> [Ukrainians] have deviated now, as their authorities at some point went very wrong. But I always adored Ukraine, and I hope they will sort things out. (m., 55–60 y.o., Parojus, LT)

Although those events in Eastern Ukraine and the more recent full-scale Russian invasion constitute a very different subject, they are mentioned here for a reason. After the occupation of Crimea (2014), the discursive field of "big politics" gained increasing prominence and sensitivity; this was also due to its inflamed use by Russian television, which enjoyed popularity on both sides of the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. The main idiom for accounting for these events in Russian state media was that of "betrayal"[16] (Yurchak 2014). Similarly, Neringa Klumbytė indicates, describing discursive fields of Lithuanian politics, that many of those who supported a pro-European trajectory tended to see the Soviet period as a "historical parenthesis, that is, as a deviation from the normal, as lost years" (Klumbytė 2011, 844; cf. Subotić

15 That is to say, a way of being in the world that is evaluated as "false" or "unnatural".

16 Ukrainians allegedly betraying Russia and thus deserving military subjugation, that is.

2011). Thus, once again, descriptions of the geopolitical ("civilisational") trajectories in terms of fundamental inner change prompted an understanding of their effect in ontological terms, even if as something inherently false.

These notions of "false ontologies" reveal peculiarities in the perception of difference: the border-produced divergence was naturalised and accepted to be of substantial gravity; however, it was not yet seen as natural by the borderlanders, at least in 2018. In other words, those two "different worlds"[17] (a not very frequent, but persistent trope that I heard during my research), in the views of at least some of my interlocutors, should not really be different; there was no "eternal truth" behind the division. Rather, it was described as forcefully ingrained in local cosmologies and yet fundamentally absurd and abnormal.

CONCLUSION

The Belarusian-Lithuanian border stands as a distinctive example amongst other post-Soviet international borders. Initially drawn as an arbitrary administrative line after World War II, it traversed the historical Vilnius region, separating the two Soviet republics, neither corresponding to any antecedent cultural divisions nor imposing any mobility restrictions on the locals. Since 1991, however, the border has progressively matured, inhibiting human mobility through tightening visa regimes and cumbersome crossing procedures. While the younger generation of borderland dwellers sees it as a given fact of reality (Bespamyatnykh and Nikiforova 2015, 100), for those who witnessed its emergence, the border that cut right through their social networks and patterns of mobility was seen as an absurd thing, still making no sense as of 2018.

Although drawn randomly and seen as nonsensical, the border, signifying a novel belonging to the two independent states, began to produce difference through the production of alienation and estrangement, via the "slow violence" of the nation-state's biopower. Cumbersome bureaucratic procedures structure various social spaces and mobility-based activities according to different regimes of uncertainty and even humiliation, reshaping local worlds and (re-)territorialising communities along the externally imposed contours of the nation-states. Such border-produced estrangement works towards the eradication of once-existing emotional connections between friends and relatives. If "things happen in the course of conversation" (Orsi

17 Similar phrasing appears in an academic text on the comparable context, the one concerning the border between the Republic of Cyprus and the de facto state of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus: "Crossing was forbidden to Cypriots, who had *begun to develop quite different worlds* (emphasis added) on either side of that line" (Bryant 2016, 21).

2007, 174), then there are simply fewer and fewer things happening *across* the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. As the socially reproductive labour of maintaining pre-existing social and emotional connections is divorced from other social routines, it is ultimately rendered explicitly onerous and unsustainable. Consequently, two distinct normative life-worlds are being produced, and an otherwise absurd divide is surreptitiously naturalised, even if not accepted as normal.

Crucially, this border is also a place where two distinct "civilisational" projects collide: the European one and its reactive Belarusian alternative, both (but especially the former) underpinned by notions of ethical formation. To become European, in other words, means to stop being (post-)Soviet, assuming civilisationally framed allegiances to a certain set of values. This geopolitical framework provides a toolkit to account for post-socialist transformation and divergent trajectories assumed by the two states in question, and vernacular discourses of the emerging difference seem to be rich in ontological rhetoric exactly due to the ethical intensity of that normative geopolitical framework.

This ontological dimension is most vividly expressed through notions that might be called "false ontologies", where perceived differences in "thinking" or "brain organisation"[18] are seen as essential, but unnatural deviations from a once-shared "true nature". The border thus imposes a certain discursive order that organises the terms in which spatial and political dynamics are contemplated. Naturally, this sort of discourse must not be used for analysis; instead, it must serve as a normatively imposed ideological background for vernacular terms of practices. This kind of perception of difference does not entail either communicative problems or a coherent "image of the world" with any static slots for ontologically different "others". Rather, it reflects the relational dynamics of how this logic of incommensurability is appropriated and internalised – ontologies in the making, that is.

To account for the nature of change, it is necessary to establish what alters and what endures (Green 2016, 212). Within the dynamic of trans-border relations at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border, peculiarly, almost everything has changed, and almost everything has remained the same, depending on the vantage point. As the discussed "civilisational" projects offer certain trajectories of collective ethical formation, the relational dynamics within each of them remain constant, even as the social environment changes, thus framing the dynamic within each project as the only natural kind of change. The change on the "other side", in turn, is seen as deviation; "*they* are different people now", not *us*.

The state border as an institution thus produces a division that presupposes thinking of itself in terms of ontological difference. This article demonstrates that things

18 Interestingly, words such as "mentality" or "mindset" seldom occurred in my ethnographic explorations, even though they would clearly fit into the overall framework.

commonly recognised as absurd, idiotic and externally imposed can still have profound effects, which, through the attrition of mechanisms of social reproduction, are naturalised by the very same people who recognise their utter absurdity. In this way, very real ontological differences are produced out of commonly recognised nonsense.

Post-scriptum

This text was not a hopeful one in 2018, nor is it such in 2025. As time has passed, things have only become worse – a gruesome lesson in the inexorable absurdity of nation-states. In 2020, a series of novel restrictive measures at the border came with the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them only escalated after the brutal suppression of the Belarusian protests in the summer of 2020 and the state's further assistance to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Already in 2021, the Belarusian-Lithuanian border became a site of extreme emotional intensity, as many Belarusians who fled from political persecution had to cross the border through forests and swamps, hoping for shelter in Lithuania. Simultaneously, the summer of 2021 was the beginning of the "refugee crisis" staged by the Belarusian state, as it facilitated flows of migrants from the Global South, promising them passage to the European Union. Amongst others, Lithuanian border guards met them with pushbacks, unlawful from the standpoint of international law, thus denying their legal right to seek asylum. Those very people were often forced by the Belarusian special forces and riot police onto the EU border infrastructure; some of them died in the forest, trapped between the border guards of both states. Although with somewhat lesser intensity, this "refugee crisis" on that border continues to this day, and some Belarusians still cross this border "illegally" as well, fleeing from repressions.

If there can be hope, then it is in the inevitability of change, whether natural or not. The Belarusian-Lithuanian border as we know it nowadays is a part of the "story so far" (Green 2012, 575; cf. Massey 2005, 12), just as any other state border is at any given moment. As the Persian Sufi adage goes, "this too shall pass".

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