The Vilnius Cultural Borderland as a Location and a Space of Experience for a Young Generation of Polish Youth: Socio-Cultural (Self-)Identification

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Abstract. Locations and spaces possess socio-cultural connotations, which is why they play a significant role in the processes of experiencing and cultural (self-)identification. That is because in the conditions specific for them and in relation to the symbolic attributes, an individual conceptualizes their own rationality, and on its basis their interpretative perspective, thanks to which, through participation in meaningful locations, they (self-)identify culturally. Roots, connection, and identification within a meaningful location constitute, therefore, significant creators of individual identification and the creation of a community. The meaningful location, in the above context, is the Vilnius region, identified by its inhabitants – young Poles – as a meaningful location: a little homeland. Taking into account its specific attributes, one might consider the faces of the Vilnius region: the physical, the mental, and the interactive-communicative ones. There are cultural differences in each of them, which assign the location a certain multicultural and intercultural specificity. As a result, the participation of young Poles in the location results in a multidimensional experiencing (cognitive, emotional, and action-related) of affirmative character, decisive in the formation of their cultural (self-)identification. On the basis of conducted empirical research, three fundamental scopes of the (self-)identification can be defined: the national, the socio-cultural, and the intercultural ones. Young Poles have a significant potential in the area of the formation of a multi-range and multidimensional identity of a borderland, as well as the construction of a community at the point of contact of cultures, citizenships, and multiculturality perceived as a factor in the development of the culture of peace. All of these factors constitute an important reference for education.
Keywords: meaningful location, little homeland, experiencing, cultural (self-)identification, scopes of (self-)identification.

Vilniaus kultūrinis neapibrėžtumas kaip naujosios patyrimo vietos ir erdvės lenkų jaunimo kartoje: sociokultūrinė (savi)identifikacija

Santrauka. Vietos ir erdvės apima sociokultūrinius aspektus ir todėl jos atlieka svarbų vaidmenį formuojant asmens patirtis ir tokiu būdu išgyvenant kultūrinę (savi)identifikaciją. Įvairios specifinės sąlygos ir simboliniai požymiai skatina asmenį konceptualizuoti ir interpretuoti reikšmingas vietas, o kartu kultūriškai save identifikuoti. Todėl turimos kultūrinės šaknys, ryšiai ir sutarimai, siejami su prasmingomis vietomis, tampa tiek asmens identifikacijos, tiek buvimo bendruomenėje kūrimo pagrindu. Reikšmingos vietos, šiuo atveju Vilniaus regionas, jaunosios lenkų kartos atstovų yra įvardijamas kaip mažoji gimtinė. Atsižvelgiant į tai, galima kalbėti apie skirtingus Vilniaus regiono veidus: fizinį, psichinį ir interaktyvųjį-komunikacinį. Kiekvienas iš jų apima tam tikrus kultūrinius skirtumus, kurie gali būti priklausomi tiek nuo tarpkultūrinio, tiek nuo multikultūrinio erdvės specifiškumo. Taigi jaunosios lenkų kartos dalyvavimas Vilniaus regiono erdvėje pasireiškia per įvairialypę teigiamo pobūdžio patirtį

(kognityvią, emocinę ir į veiksmą orientuotą), kuri lemia jų kultūrinę (savi)identifikaciją. Atliktas empirinis tyrimas atskleidė tris esminius šios asmenų grupės kultūrinės (savi)identifikacijos aspektus: nacionalinį, sociokultūrinį ir tarpkultūrinį. Lenkų jaunimas, būdamas Vilniaus regione kaip kultūriniame neapibrėžtume, turi galimybę formuoti daugialypį tapatumą, pilietiškumą, bendruomeniškumą, pasižymintį santykiu su skirtingomis kultūromis ir turi sąlygas išgyventi multikultūriškumą, kuris tampa svarbiu veiksniu patiriant sugyvenimą su kitais. Visi šie aspektai tampa ypač svarbūs ir ugdymo sričiai.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: reikšminga vieta, mažoji gimtinė, patyrimas, kultūrinė (savi)identifikacija, (savi)identifikacijos sritys.

The Vilnius region as a meaningful location and space of experiencing

The Vilnius region is historically and traditionally generated as a cultural borderland in which individual biographies as well as stories of community have taken place. It is, therefore, a location which may be perceived as a homeland, family home, heritage of one's ancestors, a little homeland, or, what is significant, it may be perceived from the perspective of its multicultural and intercultural specificity at the same time. The Vilnius region is, consequently, a location whose territory, land, and landscape have a cultural and cultural connotation. As a result, the history of its state affiliation (Kowalski, 2010, p. 65-84), relationships with nature, the land marked by the presence of ancestors and their cultural heritage, and the relationship with the local environment and the cooperation aimed to conserve it, make it a little homeland, in which cultural differences become familiar and permeate the culture of the borderland. That is because a little homeland is constructed and conceptualised by, according the W. Theiss, intellectual and emotional relationships with one's immediate environment (defined as geographical territory), practical actions undertaken in the environment and for the benefit of this environment, values, symbols, and meanings, as well as local culture, tradition, and forms of social life, the local natural environment, which serve the roles of socialisation and education and constitute the source of identity of individuals and social groups (Theiss, 2001, p. 11). A little homeland, as K. M. Błeszyńska states, is consequently comprised of "three fundamental sets: the physical territory, the socio-cultural space of existence, and the historical time. With the moment of familiarisation, that is, recognition and emotional self-identification of a subject, they acquire the qualities of a Location" (Błeszyńska, 2018, p. 47). Thus, a little homeland is a place that can be attributed a specific physical and semantic value (Judson, 2006, p. 229-245).

Referring to the abovementioned attributes of a small homeland, one can point to the face of the Vilnius region, which saturates its homeland character. One of them is the physical face, connected with the natural environment and expressed in a sentimental relationship with nature, its beauty, its forms and its presence, as well as land perceived in the categories of existence as well as homeland, inspiring actions connected not only with its use, but also its processing constructing a cultural space. If one were to look at the Vilnius region, as Jerzy Remer notices, one would see "before them an open land. With no natural borders. Here and there they might be waters. It is a land untamed. A grandiosity of space. You will not find major mountain ranges there. A great style is found in its thousands of lakes, with the fantastic coastlines. Rivers are also important

to its physical visage. Mainly two of them: Wilja and Niemen. 'The spacious lands of Lithuanian wilderness' are represented by forests, fragments of a past long gone. Such is the Vilnius region from a bird's eye view. Its vastness is its spirit. Vilnius, its only city, is a miracle of nature and culture. (…) The unique composition of the work of the Earth and the work of human hands. Coexistence and continuance in perfect harmony. (…) A city listening to the prayer of its church towers… A city which has become what it is throughout the ages, beckons us with its form" (Romer, 2008, p. 1-11). What is significant is the multicultural and the intercultural character of the city. That is because Vilnius was famous for "(…) the multitude and beauty of its houses of prayer: churches, Orthodox churches, and synagogues, there was also a mosque and a Crimean Karaim temple" (Filipowicz, 2008, p. 180-181).

An important feature of the place is its cultural diversity, present not only in the material elements of culture but also in the symbolic creations connected with the national diversity of its inhabitants. The culture of the place, therefore, as J.Muszyńska notices, "(…) the situation of its diversity serves a function which unifies, provides aims to, and standardises social relations. The common recognition of values as a creation of a place of community requires common compromise and negotiation, assuming the recognition of others as competent partners in interaction" (Muszyńska, 2014, p. 53). Hence, the second stage of the Vilnius region – the mental face, expressed in the sense of rootedness, reflected in cultural (self-)identification – is therefore:

- self-identification, created by an individual in relation to oneself as a person (a subject), functioning in a certain location and its socio-cultural space and in relation to the social group to which one belongs, and, what follows, to each culture, the values and the cultural behaviours recognised by the group, which contributes to the construction of one's own identity;
- identification of other cultures, thanks to which an individual learns about these cultures (their material and symbolic attributes) and defines one's own attitude towards them, which results in a more or less intense permeation of one's own identity with diverse cultural contents in relations with which an individual becomes involved.

(Self-)identification can, thus, be understood as a process thanks to which an individual not only forms their identity and also perceives a culturally diverse location, conceptualising their own interpretative perspective, placing it, in a manner specific to it, at the point of contact of cultures, contributing simultaneously to the protection and the development of the culture of this location understood in the categories of a little homeland.

The third face of the Vilnius region may be related to the interactive-communicative plane, exposing the relations between the nationally diverse individuals and groups inhabiting the area and expressing the way of the perception of socio-cultural reality at the location, its conceptualisation and the attributed meanings. Communication, therefore, constitutes and comments on reality. "The first relationship reflects the experience of the involvement of an individual within a culture, while the second relationship reveals the power of an individual facing a culture" (Misiejuk, 2018, p. 74). As a result, images

of cultures are constructed and cultural narratives are built; they decide on the status of cultural differences and the attitudes towards them and, consequently, on the opportunity to form the culture of the location and the community present there. That is why the type of interaction and the content of the cultural message create the spaces of mutual understanding and social distance.

The Vilnius region, because of its cultural attributes, can be seen as a place of significance for the individual. That is because always "we grow out of a certain land, we derive the ingredients forming our minds, imaginations, and characters from a social and cultural soil. (…) Without reflection on the roots of one's unique individuality we cannot define ourselves" (Szczepański, 1984, p. 8). As a consequence, the place, its formation, usage, discovery, and valuation by individuals and groups (Lisowski, 2003, p. 114) generates a space constituting a symbol of the particular cultural values connected with the location, and the sentiment towards it can be construed as a factor of spatial behaviours of people and social groups (Lisowski, 2003, p.113). This space, as a result, has also a social character, because it constitutes, according to A. Wallis, a used and formed by a certain community "(…) area in which it combines a system of knowledge, imaginings, values, and rules of behaviour, thanks to which it fully identifies itself with this area" (Nycz , 2001, p. 35). What becomes significant is the sense of rootedness, "(…) expressed in the awareness of the possession of one's own place in the world, specific relations in the past. (…) A lack of an awareness of the past from which one grows is a threat to the sense of one's own identity" (Sołoma, 1996, p. 336). The location and the space which is specific to it orientate, as a result, towards a locality which is "(…) a rule of deciding about oneself, as well as the rule of the socialisation of the young generation. The participation in diverse local actions forms the awareness to a particular group, a particular territory. Locality assumes diversity in the area of culture, in the area of fulfilling social and individual needs, and rejects standardised consumption, as well as uniform mass culture. It emphasises responsibility for oneself and the shared responsibility of an individual of themselves and others" (Muszyńska, 2014, p. 38) in a given location.

In the above context, the participation of an individual in a specific place and its space, at the meeting point of cultures, is conditioned by their own experience acquired in direct contact with the objects forming the socio-cultural specificity of this place, thus determining that its potential behaviour oriented towards these objects becomes significant. What is crucial here is the deep structure of the experience – the rationality – because it is this structure which creates the human space of life and organises the acquired experiences (Kwaśnica, 2007, p. 33), and on its basis individual interpretations are constructed, diverse cultures are read, and relationships with Others are formed (Misiejuk, 2018, p. 79). As R. Kwaśnica emphasises, "the actions aimed to understand the world which people undertake are always codified to a significant extent, they always remain within a certain interpretative perspective, which are decisive in whether the objects shall be contained within our view and according to which intentions and criteria they shall be considered. Rationality defines the boundaries of the space" (Kwaśnica, 2007, p. 33). Experiencing in a given time and space is, therefore, conducted with the use of

language and action and in relation to culture and society (Kwaśnica, 2007, p. 36-39) which constitute the means (language and actions) as well as generators of rationality (culture and society).

Language, at the point of contact of cultures, serves two basic functions. First of all, it serves communication taking place between representatives of culturally diverse communities, creating the opportunity to construct direct relationships between them. What is important here is the specificity of the language – whether it be the language of one of the national communities, or whether it takes on a "mixed" form, as well as the selection of the language, whether it has been forced or naturally selected as a result of everyday contacts. What needs to be emphasised is that the sense of the community of a location stimulates its inhabitants do remove barriers in communication and to develop a method to communicate without problems. Secondly, language serves a cognitive-symbolic function, because it makes it possible to define and name the objects creating the socio-cultural reality, to fill them with meaning, to assign and transfer meanings, to valuate and assess the objects, as well as guaranteeing their survival. Nevertheless, the scope of its use is defined by action, which is a universal means of experiencing the world. As R. Kwaśnica states, "every action has its own logic. It is reflected in its aims and the appropriate rules of establishing meaning, i.e., the rules and the criteria of making the world understandable thanks to these aims. The logic of action defines the interpretative procedure, according to which the world is perceived and included in our experiencing" (Kwaśnica, 2007, p. 37). If, then, this action is undertaken in a given location and its space, the specificity of the location conceptualises the aims and the meaning of this action. As a result, the actions of individuals define the objects of relation and the internalisation of their contents and meanings. It defines, therefore, its specific area of socio-cultural (self-)identification.

It ought to be noted, at the same time, that the selection of the means of experiencing does not only depend on the individual, but it is also conditioned by social and cultural actuality of its existence. That is because society creates "institutional frames of action within which some actions (models of competences) turn out to be functional and, in this regard, desirable, and others dysfunctional and, as a result, undesirable. (…) Culture provides individuals with a universal tool of experiencing the world – language – and a universal means of experiencing the world – action" (Kwaśnica, 2007, p. 38). Therefore, language and action, as well as the desirable models of competences, which are culturally and socially conceptualised, play a significant role in the process of the construction of rationality in three basic perspectives:

- the axiological perspective, created through an order of values, defines the axiological orientation of an individual, that is, their meaningful values, deciding on the actually realised intentions and goals, serving regulatory roles in the actions undertaken by an individual, which are reflected in their aims and meanings;
- the ontological perspective, constructed by the categories of the description of reality defining interpretative dimensions and criteria according to which an individual recognises and evaluates objects creating a cultural reality, other people, oneself, and the knowledge which one accumulates;

- the epistemological perspective, constructed through interpretative assumptions, thanks to which an individual is aware of the ways in which reality exists and the ways in which it is discovered and understood (Kwaśnica, 2007, p. 30).

Combined, these perspectives create an individual interpretive perspective according to which an individual recognises a location and participates in it, and, as a result, understands their situation and provides the surrounding reality with meaning. On the other hand, the sides organise the process of the cultural (self-)identification of the point of contact of cultures.
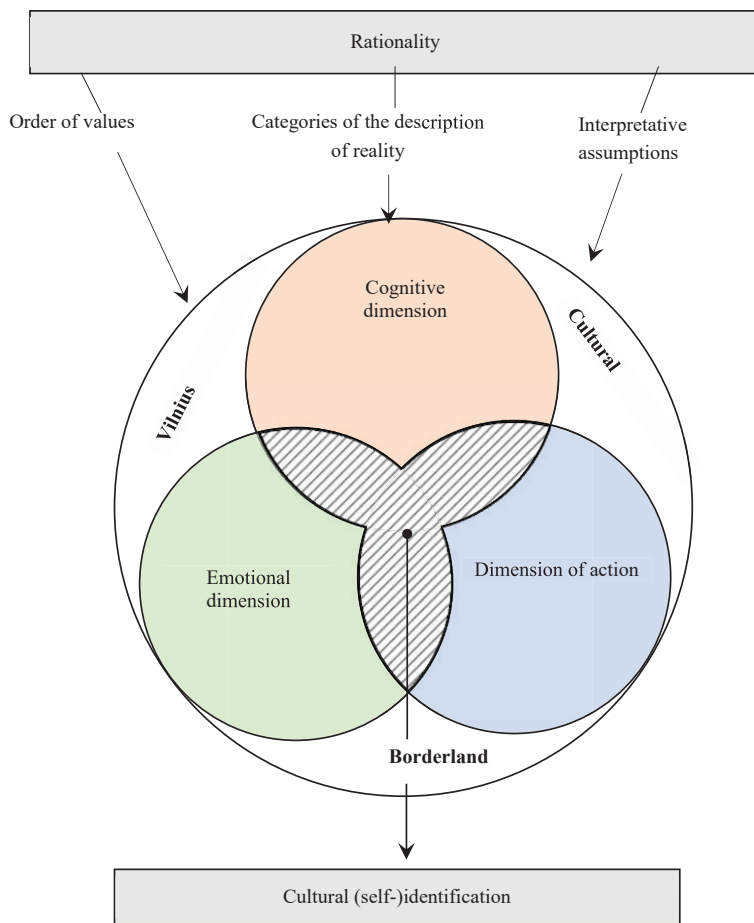

Figure 1. Dimensions of experiencing in the process of cultural (self-)identification in the Vilnius borderland of cultures.
Source: own study.

Addressing, therefore, the location of the Vilnius region as a cultural borderland, one can define the basic dimensions in which the elements of rationality are present, which are appropriate to a particular individual, and through which the space of the location is perceived, constituting the basis of cultural (self-)identification (figure 1). The first of

the dimensions is cognitive, as part of it is language/languages, and as one's own actions collect knowledge about the Vilnius region, its history, culture, the nationally diverse cultural heritage, traditions, language/languages, the cultural communities inhabiting the region, commonality of histories, etc. It collects the knowledge taking into account the perspective of one's own national community, the Vilnius region as a little homeland, as well as Lithuania as a motherland. The second dimension is of an emotional character and it pertains to the evaluating and valuating attitude towards the elements specific to the Vilnius cultural borderland. It is reflected first and foremost in the acceptance of the culture of the Vilnius region and identification with it, with the willingness to waive certain elements of one's own culture, to include elements of the heritage of different cultures within the reach of which one resides in one's own culture, as, consequently, to the willingness to co-create the culture of the borderland (Szerląg, 2018, p. 32).

The stimulation to initiate such actions is to be found in the sense of community at the Vilnius point of contact of culture, which is determined by a common everyday life, common history, care for the future, the recognised Christian values, common culture, tolerance, understanding, and the common motherland (Szerląg, 2013, p. 209). Although each of these have various degrees and scopes of influence, they generate a positive emotional attitude and inspire individuals to seek a cultural consensus, (re)constructing locations and their spaces.

The final of the dimensions – the dimension of action – is expressed in the various forms of activity in the socio-cultural conditioning of the location, which are aimed to investigate, understand, and assign meaning to the material and symbolic objects form-ing the reality of the place, as well as getting to know people and communities of diverse cultures residing there, as well as initiating and maintaining relationships with them. This activity is to be understood also as actions taken for the benefit of the location itself, its development, protection, and nurturing its culture.

If one were, therefore, to understand these dimensions in a complimentary manner, one would arrive at individuals' affirmative experiencing, allowing them to function within a time and a place in which cultural differences do not isolate individuals within the boundaries of their own cultures, but rather allow them to transgress these boundar-ies, not only in the process of constructing their own cultural identities but also of the cultures of the place and the community of the point of contact of cultures.

The socio-cultural (self-)identification of young Poles in the Vilnius cultural borderlands

Experiences in a place like the Vilnius region and its multicultural space raise the ques-tion of the specificity of the (self-)cultural identification of the young generation of Poles. In particular, what the scopes and dimensions of their socio-cultural (self)identification are. The specificity of the (self)socio-cultural identification process is important not only in the process of constructing one's own identity in the reality of a multicultural society, but also in the process of shaping a sense of cultural belonging, interaction at the meeting point of cultures, attitude towards different cultures and their representatives, followed

by building an intercultural community. Orientation towards the young generation of Poles results from the following premises:

- they belong to the national minority, the largest in the Lithuanian society (Gyventojai pagal tautybę, gimtąją kalbą ir tikybą, 2011, p. 1),
- experiencing their own diversity, in the conditions of culturally diverse Lithuanian society, construct their own identity and attitude towards other cultures,
- through education, they should be intentionally involved in the process of building an intercultural community.

The above outlined area of empirical exploration was tackled by the author, who, in 2017, conducted empirical research (in the form of quantitative research), using the method of a diagnostic survey and the technique of a survey conducted among 106 teenagers from Polish families, which was aimed to define the scopes and the dimensions of (self-)identification of this generation functioning in a situation of national diversity.

These scopes and dimensions have been distinguished taking into account such categories as: national and cultural affiliation, language, social relations, socio-cultural activity, significant values, identification with cultural heritage and cultural community.

On the basis of the collected empirical material and its analysis it can be stated that in the case of the investigated Poles this (self-)identification is present in three main ranges (figure 2). The first of them is of a national character, because it is linked with the sense of national belonging, which ought to be treated as a fundamental motive regulating the social actions of an individual (Batory & Brygoła & Oleś, 2016, p. 76) within one's own national group, as well as in relation to other national groups. In the case of the generation of young Poles, the sense is twofold. On the one hand, they self-identify as Poles, and on the other, as Polish Lithuanians.
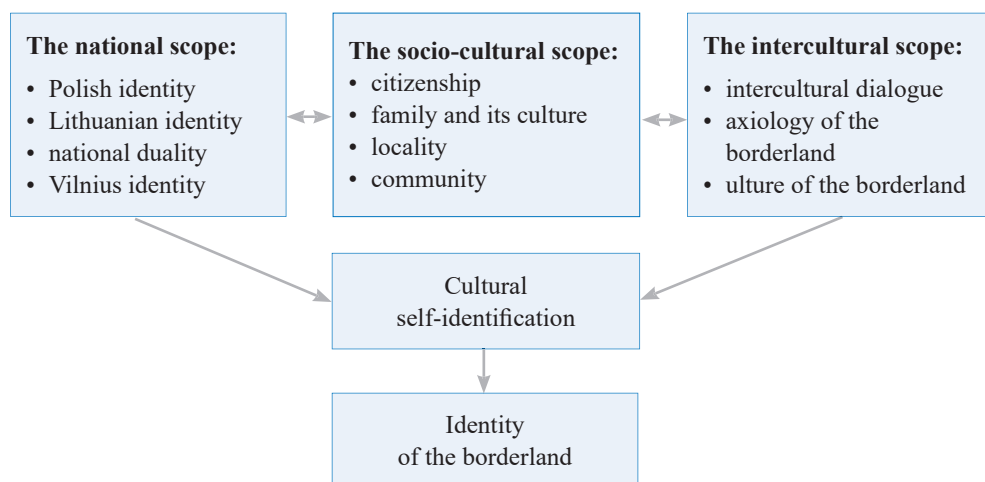

Figure 2. The scopes and dimensions of the (self-)identification of the young generation of Poles in the culturally diverse space of the Vilnius region.
Source: own study.

They are characterised, therefore, by a national duality (Szerląg, 2013, p. 2006) which, among them, is the dominant form of the sense of national identity. They relate their Polish identity to, first and foremost, the family environment, in which the heritage of Polish ancestors, their language, tradition, and faith are nurtured. Lithuanian identity, in turn, is connected with the place of birth and life, as well as the life as citizens of the Lithuanian state, with using the Lithuanian language, Lithuanian traditions, Lithuanian social and cultural contacts. It is in a major minority of the members of the young generation of Poles that Lithuanian identity is presented as a decisive factor in national identity. What is significant is that the space in which they believe the permeation of Polish and Lithuanian identities takes place is the Vilnius cultural borderland, which they treat as a little homeland. It can be assumed, therefore, that the scope of national (self-) identifications of the young generation of Poles has the character of three motherlands, because they relate to Poland – the Motherland, the Vilnius region as a small motherland, and Lithuania as their motherland, as well. They coexist in the consciousness of this generation and they permeate each other forming a space of homeland (self-) identification.

It ought to be noted that this scope influences the next scope of the (self-)identification of young Poles, that is, the socio-cultural one. As the research has shown, it is also of a multidimensional character. The first of the dimensions is linked with citizenship, and in particular with the awareness of the duties of the citizen of the Lithuanian state, expressed in respect to the Lithuanian motherland, patriotic stance, and being an active citizen. This area of relations of identification is noticed by the young generation of Poles, and it is perceived as an important dimension of their functioning as citizens. Yet another dimension in the defined scope is related to the culture of the family, in particular to family acculturation. In a predominant majority of Polish families there are two models:
- the national-intercultural model, as part of which orientation towards one's own national culture takes places, with concurrent openness to other cultures;
- the hybrid model, reflecting the mixing of cultures within family life (because of the national diversity of family members, as well as the generational perspective, and as a result of remaining in direct everyday contacts with representatives of other cultures), the result of which being the creation of a new culture, present in the everyday life of the family in defining, among others, cultural models of behaviour, values, and cultural orientations, or the specificity of socio-cultural relationships at the point of contact of cultures (Szerląg, 2018, p. 33).

Therefore, the young generation of Poles, thanks to socialisation within the family environment, acquires socio-cultural competences, thanks to which they transgress the boundaries of their own culture, they become open to cultural diversity, and they present an affirmative attitude towards cultural differences.

What is also crucial to the cultural functioning of families and forming of the identities of their members is the local community, to which they are connected because of their place of birth and residence, the common history of the location, a common language, common cultural heritage, common values and traditions, religion, as well as social relationships, which are accompanied by a sense of community. The factors consolidating

the local community are shared interests and everyday problems, good neighbourhood relations, care for the future, tolerance, and understanding (Szerląg, 2013, p. 209). Combined, they form the community, which is characterised by cultural openness. In this context it ought to emphasised that the young generation of Poles are tolerant of different cultures and ready to learn new contents from them and reconstruct their own identities. That is how they participate in multiculturality, creating the scope of cultural self-identification. According to them, the intercultural dialogue facilitates the learning of and understanding other cultures, as well as openness towards them, the ability to transgress the boundaries separating cultures, nurturing and protecting the common cultural heritage, understanding diverse values and readiness and ability to include them into their own system of values or the values making possible an international understanding, consequently forming the axiology of the borderland. Its scope includes the following categories of values:

- super-national values – respect for the common cultural heritage, cooperation in spite of cultural differences, intercultural dialogue and understanding;
- intercultural values – respect towards the Lithuanian motherland, patriotism, and civil activity (Szerląg, 2018, p. 33).

These values present the community of the borderland, with the accompanying tendency to build a culture of the borderland, that is, a culture of a super-national and community character (Szerląg, 2018, p. 32).

Taking into account the outlined cultural scopes of (self-)identification of the young generation of Poles at the Vilnius cultural borderland, it can be stated that its result is the construction of a multi-scope and multidimensional identity of the borderland. That is because when one is brought up "(…) within a point of contact of cultures one is used to a diversity resulting not only from the number of the present cultures, but also from their permeation, inclusion of foreign elements, and the intensity of the cultural hybridisation. Then constructing one's sense of identity one becomes aware of their own cultural identity, its tradition, values, and meaningfulness in the functioning within a world of diversity. (…) One is tolerant and open to diversity, accepting it and recognising its equal rights to be dwell in the common space" (Błeszyńska, 2018, p. 51-52).

Conclusions

Based on the results of empirical research, it should be stated that the (self)cultural identification of the young generation of Poles, which takes place through their experience in the multicultural space of the Vilnius region, is multi-range and multidimensional.

1. Young Poles identify with the Vilnius region, perceived from the perspective of its Polish as well as Lithuanian character.
2. They have a sense of rootedness in the Vilnius region, which they identify as a little homeland, exposing its nationally diverse cultural heritage, a shared historical past, common fates, and relationships with it.
3. They identify themselves primarily with the Polish cultural heritage, but also with the cultural heritage of the Lithuanian homeland.

4. Bilingualism (using Polish and Lithuanian), positive social relations and socio-cultural activity of young Poles make them feel familiar in the culturally diverse local community.

5. They construct their own identity through experiencing in the multidimensional space the Vilnius cultural borderland, expressing an affirmative orientation towards the location and the nationally diverse community formed at a point of contact of cultures.

6. Their national, socio-cultural, and intercultural self-identifications indicate their openness to other cultures and their readiness to build a culture of the borderland.

7. Recognition of super-national, intercultural, and civil values may constitute a significant basis for the formation of desirable socio-cultural competences.

The interpretative perspective expressed by them, in all its scopes and dimensions, reflects engagement in the discovering of the Vilnius region and its space as well as themselves in them, and constructing the place together and providing it the meaning of one's own identity and community at a point of contact of cultures. It is significant educational capital, thanks to which that which is meaningful in the regional dimension may become a transmitter of that which is important in the super-regional, civil dimension, as well as in the context of education oriented towards citizenship, integration, or multiculturality perceived as development towards peace.

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