

*Tomasz Szyszlak*<sup>\*</sup>

## **Cultural Security of the Russian minority under conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian War: The case of selected countries of Central and Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>**

### **Bezpieczeństwo kulturowe mniejszości rosyjskiej w warunkach wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej. Casus wybranych państw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

With the end of the Cold War, the process of broadening and deepening the term “security” began, drawing attention to its non-military aspects. Among other things, the concept of cultural security and, more recently, the cultural security of national and ethnic minorities have emerged in scientific discourse. This article aims to analyse the cultural security of the Russian minority under conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian War in selected Central and Eastern European countries (Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland). It is noted that war is a significant determinant of the cultural security of minorities, regardless of the degree of involvement of the minority’s country of residence and spiritual homeland in the conflict. Hence, countries not directly involved in the war were selected for detailed analysis.

#### **KEYWORDS:**

*cultural security, Russian minority, Russo-Ukrainian War, Central and Eastern Europe*

<sup>\*</sup> Tomasz Szyszlak – Dr, University of Wrocław, Poland, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0281-3377>, e-mail: [tomasz.szyszlak@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:tomasz.szyszlak@uwr.edu.pl).

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**STRESZCZENIE:**

Wraz z zakończeniem zimnej wojny rozpoczął się proces poszerzania i pogłębiania terminu „bezpieczeństwo”, w ramach którego coraz większe znaczenie zaczęły zyskiwać jego pozamilitarne aspekty. W dyskursie naukowym pojawiła się m.in. kategoria bezpieczeństwa kulturowego, a w ostatnim czasie również bezpieczeństwa kulturowego mniejszości narodowych i etnicznych. Celem artykułu jest analiza bezpieczeństwa kulturowego mniejszości rosyjskiej w warunkach wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej w wybranych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (Białoruś, Litwa, Polska). Zauważono, że wojna jest istotnym czynnikiem wpływającym na bezpieczeństwo kulturowe mniejszości, bez względu na stopień zaangażowania państwa ich zamieszkania oraz ojczysty duchowej w konflikt. Z tego względu do szczegółowej analizy wybrano państwa, które nie są zaangażowane w wojnę bezpośrednią.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:**

*bezpieczeństwo kulturowe, mniejszość rosyjska, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia*

**Introduction**

After the fall of the Soviet Union, 25 million ethnic Russians found themselves outside the borders of the Russian Federation. Overnight, they transitioned from being representatives of a favoured and de facto ruling nation to members of a national minority. The past three and a half decades have been an ongoing struggle for the Russian minority against marginalisation in the political, socio-economic, and, above all, cultural dimensions. I understand this struggle as encompassing issues related to the freedom to practice religion, use the native language, migration and assimilation processes, the functioning of cultural institutions, and respect for monuments and places of memory. The situation became particularly critical in countries antagonised to varying degrees by the Russian Federation (the Baltic States and Georgia). Not least, the events related to the Russo-Ukrainian war, which has been ongoing since 2014, especially its current phase – full-scale war – have left their most significant mark.

In this work, I hypothesise that the Russo-Ukrainian War is a significant determinant of the cultural security of the Russian minority in all countries of the Central and Eastern European region, regardless of the degree of involvement in the conflict. I explore the relationship between war and the cultural security of national and ethnic minorities, the challenges faced by the Russian minority on the eve of the Russo-Ukrainian War, and the

dimensions in which this war poses a challenge to the cultural security of the Russian minority. I employ the following qualitative research methods: content analysis, observation, and case study. In the first chapter, I introduce the concept of the cultural security of national and ethnic minorities and reflect on four hypothetical situations in which the country of residence and the spiritual homeland of the minority may find themselves. In the second part, I provide a brief overview of the potential of the Russian minority in Central and Eastern Europe, examining it from both historical and demographic perspectives. In the next part of this work, I focus on the challenges to the cultural security of the Russian minority on the eve of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which are crucial from my perspective, with a primary focus on Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland. Finally, in the last chapter of the work, I analyse the cultural security of the Russian minority in three selected countries of the region after 24 February 2022.

## **1. Cultural security of national and ethnic minorities under war conditions**

The end of the Cold War catalysed the development of new security threats or the intensification of previously trivialised ones. As a result, the connections between cultural factors and security were increasingly noticeable. At the same time, attention was paid to minority social groups (ethnic and religious) as both objects and referential subjects. The concepts of “cultural security”, or “cultural safety”, and “cultural engagement” were introduced into the scientific discourse and interpreted both on a micro-scale (concerning social groups and individuals) and on a macro-scale (crucial for the survival of the entire nation and maintaining social cohesion). Over time, the term “cultural security of national and ethnic minorities” also emerged.

It appears essential to define the term “national and ethnic minorities” to fully comprehend its implications. According to the Encyclopaedia of National Security, these are “categories or groups of people permanently residing in a defined territory (usually a state) with a varying degree of organisation, having a sense of community resulting from the characteristics treated as membership distinguishing features (e.g., language, religion,

customs, culture), which constitute their conscious distinction from the majority and their non-dominant position in society”<sup>2</sup>.

As Elżbieta Szyszlak notes, “as in the case of the cultural security of the state, the essence of the cultural security of ethnic minorities consists of such categories as culture, cultural heritage, and identity. However, what is different is that they operate under the conditions of confrontation with the heritage and identity of the majority, and often under the conditions of a threat they pose”<sup>3</sup>. Defence against assimilation with the majority is of key importance for the sense of cultural security of national and ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, it is not intentional to close oneself off to relations with the rest of society or to ghettoise the minority. However, integration is desirable when the minority participates in the life of the majority and co-creates its culture without abandoning its own, while maintaining its own identity. Integration understood in this way in democratic states occurs with the help of the state; in other cases, the state may remain neutral or even hinder this process<sup>4</sup>.

Several exogenous and endogenous factors influence the cultural security of national and ethnic minorities. In the first category, we can distinguish conditions identical to those of the state’s cultural security, i.e., globalisation, wars and conflicts, economic crises, climate change, related ecological threats, and natural disasters, as well as migration movements often conditioned by the above factors. In addition, the relationship between the country of residence and the spiritual homeland of the minority, as well as the proximity of the home country or the international community’s interest in the situation of the minority, is a critical aspect from the perspective of the cultural security of national and ethnic minorities. No less important is the broadly defined policy of the state of residence towards the minority and its relations with the ethnic majority and society as a whole.

Endogenous factors include the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of minorities, the prevalence and advancement of the assimilation process among their members, demographic processes, national activities, including

<sup>2</sup> A. Chabasińska, *Mniejszości narodowe i etniczne*, [in:] J. Itrich-Drabarek, S. Mitkow, P. Bryczek-Wróbel (eds.), *Encyklopedia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego*, Warsaw 2023, pp. 342–343.

<sup>3</sup> E. Szyszlak, *The problem of cultural security of minority group*, [in:] E. Szyszlak, R. Wiśniewski, R. Zenderowski (eds.), *Cultural Security. Theory – Selected Aspects – Case Studies*, Lausanne 2023, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 110–111.

the activity of social, religious, and political organisations, and the presence of a national elite.

In the context of the topic of this paper, more attention should be paid to war as a determinant of the cultural security of national and ethnic minorities. It is necessary to distinguish four hypothetical situations which the state of residence and the minority's spiritual homeland are likely to face. First, the two states are at war with each other. Such a situation is unfavourable for the minority, as both parties to the conflict are bound to exploit the minority for their own ends. For the members of the minority as citizens of their state of residence, the choice between loyalty to their spiritual homeland and loyalty to the state with which the war is being fought may become a matter of renouncing one's own identity and assimilation. The state of residence may reduce or completely withdraw its support for minorities, and the reasons for such a decision may range from the need to divert the resources thus saved to other purposes, including the military, to considering minorities as traitors, a so-called "fifth column". A not-so-distant example illustrating this type of situation is the case of the Japanese minority in the United States of America after the attack on Pearl Harbour. Fearing diversion and due to their low degree of assimilation, Americans of Japanese descent were interned in camps in the interior of the country.

Second, the state of residence and its home state are at odds with another state or states in a war. In such a situation, threats to the cultural security of national and ethnic minorities are primarily related to the possibility of the minority finding itself under occupation by the opposing side, won by the opposing side. The situation may become particularly unfavourable for the minority when the minority's spiritual homeland has turned out to be a state that is deeply involved in the conflict, either militarily, politically, or economically. Then, the cultural heritage of the minority may be destroyed, and discriminatory measures or even ethnic cleansing in the broad sense may be applied to the minority itself. The situation of the German minority in Hungary or Romania during and after the Second World War can illustrate these considerations clearly.

Third, the minority's country of residence is at war, while the home country is not involved. In such a situation, the spiritual homeland becomes a natural direction for the migration movements of war refugees. On the other hand, fleeing from war is an expression of a particular attitude towards civic duties related to the defence of the demographic homeland, not only

in the military sense. The home country's support of such attitudes among citizens of the country of residence may ultimately harm bilateral relations. We encountered a similar situation in the case of the escape of Russians from Azerbaijan and Armenia in the face of the war between these former Soviet republics.

Fourth, the minority's spiritual homeland state is at war, but the state of residence is not involved. Due to the presence of a group of people of the same ethnicity, the state of residence may become a target for migration flows from the country of origin. The increase in the number of non-majority people can pose a considerable challenge to the host state, especially when it is a state with little demographic potential. Furthermore, an influx of refugees from a minority's spiritual homeland may involve a shattering of the minority's identity, after all, living in isolation from the core part of its ethnic nation. A recent example of this is the situation of Ukrainians in Poland.

## **2. The Russian minority in Central and Eastern European countries**

Central and Eastern Europe is a region defined in a variety of ways<sup>5</sup>. However, it encompasses the area of the Old Continent east of the German and Italian linguistic areas and west of the Russian linguistic area. Due to the vast and heterogeneous nature of the region, the Russian minorities living in these countries also differ significantly in terms of their origins, demographic potential, and development of national life. According to the latest censuses, in most post-Soviet countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Russian minority is the most numerous national minority, with the only exception being Lithuania, where the Polish minority holds the title of the most significant national minority (in 2021 – 0.18 million, 6.5% of the population). The situation is also peculiar in Transnistria, a breakaway region of Moldova, where Russians constitute the largest ethnic group, slightly ahead of Moldovans (in 2015 – 0.16 million, 33% of the population) and Ukrainians (in 2015 – 0.13 million, 26.7% of the population).

<sup>5</sup> Z.J. Winnicki, *Europa Środkowa czy Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia? Europejskie kręgi cywilizacyjne*, "Wschodnioznawstwo" 2017, pp. 11–20.

Table 1. Demographic potential of Russian minorities in the former Soviet republics of Central and Eastern Europe

Country	1989		Census I		Census II		Census III	
	million	%	million	%	million	%	million	%
Belarus	1.34	13.2	1.14	11.4	0.79	8.3	0.71	7.5
Estonia	0.47	30.3	0.35	25.6	0.33	25.5	0.32	23.7
Latvia	0.91	34.0	0.70	29.6	0.56	26.9	0.46	24.5
Lithuania	0.34	9.4	0.22	6.3	0.18	5.8	0.14	5.0
Moldova (a)	0.56	13.0	0.37	9.4	0.12	4.1	0.08	3.2
Transnistria	-	-	-	-	0.16	34.0	-	-
Ukraine (b)	11.36	22.1	8.33	17.3	-	-	-	-

Legend: Key: Census I – the first census after the fall of the USSR: 1999 (Belarus), 2000 (Estonia, Latvia), 2001 (Lithuania, Ukraine), 2004 (Moldova); Census II – the second census after the fall of the USSR: 2009 (Belarus), 2011 (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), 2014 (Moldova), 2015 (Transnistria); Census III – the third census after the fall of the USSR: 2019 (Belarus), 2021 (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), 2024 (Moldova); (a) – 2004 census, combined censuses of the government-controlled area and Transnistria, 2014 and 2024 censuses were conducted only in government-controlled area; (b) – the 2001 census was the only one in Ukraine after the fall of the USSR

Source: own study based on: P. Eberhardt, *Geografia ludności Rosji*, Warsaw 2002, p. 94; Gyventojų ir būstų surašymai, <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/gyventoju-ir-bustu-surasymai> [13.06.2025]; Национальный состав населения Республики Беларусь. Статистический бюллетень [Natsional'nyy sostav naseleniya Respubliki Belarus. Statisticheskiy byulleten'], Minsk 2020, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/dfs/dfs842f32b1b8a711043f8f54856f5c8.pdf> [13.06.2025]; Население и демографические процессы [Naseleniye i demograficheskiye protsessy], [https://statistika.gov.md/ru/statistic\\_domain\\_details/12](https://statistika.gov.md/ru/statistic_domain_details/12) [13.06.2025]; Statistika andmebaas. Rahva ja eluruumide loendus, <https://andmed.stat.ee/et/stat/rahvaloendus> [13.06.2025]; Statistika datubāze. Etniskais sastāvs, [https://data.stat.gov.lv/pubweb/lv/OSP\\_PUB/START\\_POP\\_IR\\_IR/](https://data.stat.gov.lv/pubweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IR_IR/) [13.06.2025]; Всеукраїнський перепис населення. Національний склад населення, громадянство [Vse-ukrains'kyj perepys naselennya. Natsional'nyy sklad naselennya, hromadyanstvo], [http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/nationality\\_population/](http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/nationality_population/) [13.06.2025].

As Magdalena Karolak-Michalska and Andrzej Wierzbicki note, the process of adaptation by the Russian minority to the new realities of life in the former Soviet republics of Eastern Europe makes it possible to distinguish several dominant strategies among attitudes towards the emergent political reality: 1) patriotic towards the state of residence – expressed in love for the state and strong ties with the titular nations, as well as in readiness to stay on their territory and build the newly formed state; 2) patriotic towards the Russian Federation – manifested in love and attachment to the historical homeland and the Russian nation, as well as returning to the mother country and working for its development; 3) nationalistic – evident in the sense of belonging to the Russian nation, disrespectful attitude towards the titular nations, remaining on the territories of the former republics of the Soviet Union and fighting to increase the privileges and rights of the Russian minority, striving to develop the language, culture, historical heritage, and to secure access to the state power structures and its resources there; 4) xenophobic – manifested in aversion and aggression towards the new political reality and advocating a return to the structures of the USSR; 5) indirect – expressed in both love for the home country and the state of residence, attachment to the Russian nation and a strong bond with the titular

nations, with a simultaneous desire to return to the Russian Federation and to remain in the country of residence<sup>6</sup>.

Meanwhile, in the case of the other countries in the region, we are primarily dealing with small diasporic groups concentrated in large cities, mainly capital cities, formed primarily as a result of migration following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Poland and Romania, these are also Old Believers who have been living within the borders of these countries for several centuries. Due to the lack of Soviet resentment among these people as a result of their location in lands that were not part of the USSR, the above-mentioned typology of strategy proposed by Karolak-Michalska and Wierzbicki cannot be fully applied. Russian minorities living in countries with a significant cultural distance must adopt an adaptive strategy that emphasises the rejection of extreme attitudes, highlighting the importance of moderation in cultural adaptation.

### 3. Challenges to the cultural security of the Russian minority on the eve of the Russo-Ukrainian War

This subsection focuses on five issues relevant to the cultural security of Russian minorities, namely religion, language, migration, cultural institutions, and monuments and places of remembrance.

In terms of religion, for those belonging to the Russian minority, **membership in the Orthodox Church** is of significant importance, as it is considered the traditional confession of Russians. To a lesser extent, but more pronounced in the diaspora, the Old Believers' Churches are also significant. The largest of these is the Russian Orthodox Church (hereafter: ROC), which operates in all post-Soviet states (except Georgia), recognising the area as its canonical territory (except Armenia and Georgia). Only Azerbaijan and Lithuania have not created any autonomous or semi-autonomous structures. In each of the ROC structures, except for Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, ethnic Russians are the dominant group. It is worth noting that it faces intense competition in some post-Soviet states: in Ukraine, where the Orthodox

<sup>6</sup> A. Wierzbicki, M. Karolak-Michalska, *Mniejszość rosyjska w etnopolityce państw Europy Wschodniej i Azji Centralnej*, Warsaw 2016, pp. 98–99.



Church of Ukraine<sup>7</sup> was established in 2018, furthermore, in Armenia – the Georgian Orthodox Church, in Estonia – the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate<sup>8</sup>, and in Moldova – the Romanian Orthodox Church<sup>9</sup>.

Another issue relevant to the cultural security of Russian minorities is **the problem of using the Russian language** in public life in the countries of residence. After the fall of the USSR, many countries in the region began the process of emancipating their national languages and limiting the use of Russian. It lost its status as an official language in all countries (in Belarus, it regained this status in 1995); in some, it acquired a different status (in Moldova, it retained the status of a language of inter-ethnic communication until 2020), while the Baltic States eliminated it from public life<sup>10</sup>.

With the collapse of the USSR, Russians living in non-Russian union republics lost their privileged position overnight. Consequently, the **process of migration**, particularly a mass exodus of Russian minority representatives to Russia, commenced. Among their direct causes, the political and economic instability of the countries of residence, the occurrence of armed conflicts and hotspots on their territory, as well as the significant decline in living standards, played a crucial role. Between 1989 and 1996, approximately 3 million people from other member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States resettled in the Russian Federation, primarily from Kazakhstan (614,000) and the Baltic States (another 200,000)<sup>11</sup>. The following years showed that this trend slowed down; however, at the same time,

<sup>7</sup> The Orthodox Church of Ukraine was established at the Unification Council on 15 December 2018, and on 6 January 2019, it received a tomos, or decree granting it autocephaly, from Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. For more see T. Szyszlak, *The conflict over the autocephaly of Ukrainian Orthodoxy as an element of the hybrid war*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2020, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 49–71.

<sup>8</sup> For more see M. Ławreszczuk, *Prawosławie wobec tendencji nacjonalistycznych i etnofiletystycznych. Studium teologiczno-kanoniczne*, Warsaw 2009, pp. 281–285.

<sup>9</sup> For more see T. Szyszlak, *Prawosławie a tożsamość Mołdawian. Historia i współczesność sporu pomiędzy Patriarchatem Moskiewskim a Patriarchatem Rumuńskim*, [in:] A. Szabaciuk, D. Wybranowski, R. Zenderowski (eds.), *Religia w konfliktach etnicznych we współczesnym świecie*, vol. 1: *Zagadnienia teoretyczne. Europa i obszar poradziecki*, Lublin 2016, pp. 227–239.

<sup>10</sup> A. Kozyrńska, *Status języka rosyjskiego na obszarze poradzieckim. Stan prawny – zagrożenia – perspektywy – wyzwania*, "Politeja" 2023, no. 2(83), p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> W. Marciniak, *Rozkład Związku Radzieckiego – konsekwencje migracyjne*, [in:] J.E. Zamojski (ed.), *Upadek imperiów i rozwój migracji*, Warsaw 2003, pp. 100–102.

Moscow began to encourage ethnic Russians from outside Russia to resettle in their historical homeland, especially in regions with evident demographic deficits, such as Siberia and the Far East<sup>12</sup>.

Significant importance should also be attributed to the institutions of cultural life of Russian minorities. It has become the practice of the Russian authorities to establish coordination councils of Russian compatriots' associations (координационный совет организаций российских соотечественников) at the Russian Federation's embassies. Such measures are in line with the Federal Act "On the State Policy of the Russian Federation concerning compatriots abroad" of 1999<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, in 2020, for the first time, on the initiative of compatriots, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, an important amendment was made to Article 69 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation by adding paragraph 3, which reads as follows: "The Russian Federation shall support compatriots living abroad in the exercise of their rights, ensuring the protection of their interests and the preservation of the all-Russian cultural identity"<sup>14</sup>.

In Poland, a remarkable milestone was reached in 2007 with the establishment of a council. This council brought together representatives of eight organisations. The seat of the council is located at the Russian Centre for Culture and Science – Russian House, in Warsaw<sup>15</sup>. It is worth adding that the Union of Organisations of Russian Minorities in Poland was also established in 2016<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> T. Szyszlak, *The impact of immigration from post-Soviet states on the national security system of the Russian Federation*, "The Voice of Security Awareness" 2017, vol. I, issue II, pp. 6–8.

<sup>13</sup> Федеральный закон от 24 мая 1999 г. N 99-ФЗ „О государственной политике Российской Федерации в отношении соотечественников за рубежом” (с изменениями и дополнениями) [Federal'nyy zakon ot 24 maya 1999 g. N 99-FZ „O gosudarstvennoy politike Rossiyskoy Federatsii v otnoshenii sootchestvennikov za rubezhom” (s izmeneniyami i dopolneniyami)], <https://base.garant.ru/12115694/> [13.06.2025].

<sup>14</sup> Constitution of the Russian Federation. Passed by nation-wide voting of December 12, 1993, with the amendments approved by nation-wide voting on July 1, 2020, <https://constitution.garant.ru/english/> [13.06.2025].

<sup>15</sup> Всемирный конгресс российских соотечественников, проживающих за рубежом. Польша [Vsemirnyy kongress rossiyskikh sootchestvennikov, prozhivayushchikh za rubezhom. Pol'sha], <https://vkrs.com/koordinatsionnye-sovety/map/pl/> [13.06.2025].

<sup>16</sup> Союзу российских общин Польши быть! [Soyuzu rossiyskikh obshchin Pol'shi byt'!], 16 February 2016, <https://www.ronik.org.pl/rodacy/archiwum/137/> [13.06.2025].

The Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots (координационный совет российских соотечественников) has a broader composition. It includes 15 organisations, for example, the Union of Cossacks in Poland, whose seat is in the village of Pólko in the commune of Niemce near Lublin. The aim of the association, established in 2010, is to continue and promote the traditions of units composed of Cossacks originating from the Russian Empire, who fought alongside the Polish Army during the Polish-Bolshevik War, including the Battle of Warsaw. The Union cultivates Cossack culture and traditions, maintains contacts, and cooperates with organisations promoting cavalry traditions, with a particular emphasis on the Polish cavalry. It also takes part in the preparations for and celebrations of holidays and anniversaries, with a particular emphasis on the Battle of Warsaw<sup>17</sup>.

Following on from the above, it is not only ethnic Russians who are considered to be Russian compatriots but also representatives of other peoples of the Russian Federation, including Cossacks<sup>18</sup>. This unity is clearly demonstrated in the composition of the Coordination Council of the Organisation of Russian Compatriots at the Russian Federation Embassy in Minsk. In addition to Cossack associations, we find there Bashkirs, Chuvashis, Dagestanians, and Tatars<sup>19</sup>.

Finally, the number and nature of cultural monuments and memorial sites, as well as the attitude towards them on the part of the state of residence and the majority society, are evidence of the level of cultural security of Russian

<sup>17</sup> Союз Казаков в Польше – Związek Kozaków w Polsce. „Твой брат не всегда прав, но он всегда твой брат!” [Soyuz Kazakov v Pol’she – Związek Kozaków w Polsce. “Tvooy brat ne vseгда prav, no on vseгда tvoj brat!”], <https://kazaczestwo.wixsite.com/website> [13.06.2025].

<sup>18</sup> I realise that calling the Cossacks a nation is perhaps controversial and that they could probably be referred to by a term derived from Russian ethnology – a subethnos, meaning a group with particular, undeniable features of ethnic distinctiveness that is part of the basic ethnos – the Russians. For more controversies related to the understanding of the term Cossacks in the contemporary Russian Federation see T. Szyszlak, *Korporacja subetnosem inspirowana. Kozacy rejestrowi w systemie bezpieczeństwa narodowego Federacji Rosyjskiej*, “Wschodnioznawstwo” 2022, pp. 317–338.

<sup>19</sup> Список белорусских общественных объединений российских соотечественников, проживающих в Республике Беларусь, руководители которых входят в КСОРС при Посольстве России в Республике Беларусь (по состоянию на 12.12.2024 г.) [Spisok belorusskikh obshchestvennykh ob’yedineniy rossiyskikh sootchestvennikov, prozhivayushchikh v Respublike Belarus’, rukovoditeli kotorykh vkhodyat v KSORS pri Posol’stve Rossii v Respublike Belarus’ (po sostoyaniyu na 12.12.2024 g.)], <https://belarus.mid.ru/ru/consular-services/consular-functions/organization-of-compatriots-in-belarus/> [13.06.2025].

minorities. In Belarus, great importance is attached to places associated with the families of the prominent Russian writers Alexander Pushkin and Fyodor Dostoevsky. In the town of Vyetka in the Gomel Oblast, there is the only museum of Old Believers within the borders of the post-Soviet states. The town was founded in the second half of the 17th century, i.e., during the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, by exiles from central Russia<sup>20</sup>.

#### **4. Cultural security of the Russian minority after 24 February 2022: The case of selected Central and Eastern European countries**

In the case of Lithuania, the weakening of the Russian Orthodox Church's potential was a result of the establishment of the Exarchate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2023. This Exarchate, comprising 10 secessionist parishes, including one Belarusian and one Ukrainian, both based in Vilnius, was created by the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In this new religious structure, the Russian language and identity were completely eliminated, paving the way for a confession with influences from Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine.

The genesis of the creation of the exarchate is connected with the dismissal of five clergypersons (including Fr. Gintaras Sungaila) from the dioceses of Vilnius and Lithuania of the ROC in June 2022. In protest, these clergy members filed an appeal to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (Archontonis). In September 2022, an official Lithuanian delegation, led by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mantas Adomėnas, met at the Patriarchate's seat in Istanbul, resulting in the decision of the Phanar authorities in February 2023 to restore the priestly ordinations of all five clergy persons and their incardination into the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It was recognised that the decision of the Moscow Patriarchate to deprive them of their clergy status was not based on canonical reasons but rather was a response to the criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which the priests had formulated<sup>21</sup>. A month later, Patriarch Bartholomew I visited Lithuania, where he

<sup>20</sup> *Беларусь шматнацыянальная* [Bielaruś šmatnacyjanal'naja], Minsk 2011, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Communiqué on the Petition of Appeal by Clergymen from Lithuania*, 17 February 2023, <https://ec-patr.org/ανακοινωθέν-περί-της-ἐκκληΐτου-προσφ> [13.06.2025].

met with Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė and President Gitanas Nausėda. Prime Minister Šimonytė stated that such a plan would help not only Orthodox Lithuanians but also Ukrainians who had sought refuge in the country after the Russian aggression, as well as Belarusians who had found refuge from repression in their homeland<sup>22</sup>.

As Fr. Gintaras Sungaila noted, the faithful of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Lithuania celebrate with Catholics on 25 December in order to distance themselves from Russia, where Orthodox Christmas is celebrated according to the Julian calendar at the beginning of January, starting from 2023 onwards. The clergyperson pointed out that the same decision had previously been taken by Ukraine, where the majority of the faithful are Orthodox, and that in a Catholic country such as Lithuania, a step like that would “harmonise” the dates of Orthodox holidays with national holidays, as well as “make life easier for mixed families, who until now had to celebrate Christmas twice”<sup>23</sup>.

The creation of the Exarchate signifies a reduction in the potential of the ROC, the emergence of a second Orthodox obedience on the Lithuanian religious scene and, consequently, a deterioration in the level of cultural security for the Russian minority in Lithuania. The events related to the departure of some parishes from the structures of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine<sup>24</sup>, as well as initiatives to delegatize local ROC entities in Ukraine and Estonia, should be understood in a similar manner<sup>25</sup>.

In the public spaces of many Central and Eastern European countries, there are monuments to Red Army soldiers who fell in battle against the Germans during World War II. Starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the process of their eradication as symbols of Russian domination began. In the case of Poland, this process accelerated significantly in 2016, when

<sup>22</sup> N. Szczygłowski, *The Patriarchate of Constantinople is finalizing the creation of its own structures for the Orthodox Church in Lithuania*, “New Eastern Europe”, 7 February 2024.

<sup>23</sup> *Православные в Литве отпразднуют Рождество 25 декабря, чтобы „не как в России”* [Pravoslavnyye v Litve prazdnuyut Rozhdestvo 25 dekabrya, chtoby “ne kak v Rossii”], 20 December 2023, <https://www.dp.ru/a/2023/12/20/pravoslavnie-v-litve-otprazdnuyut> [13.06.2025].

<sup>24</sup> See T. Szyszlak, *Wpływ sekurytyzacji Ukraińskiego Kościoła Prawosławnego w jedności z Patriarchatem Moskiewskim na zmiany w ustawodawstwie wyznaniowym Ukrainy po 2013 r.*, “Studia z Prawa Wyznaniowego” 2021, vol. 24, pp. 441–443.

<sup>25</sup> *Estonia: Prawosławnym parafiom zakazano podporządkowania się Rosji*, 11 April 2025, <https://dorzeczy.pl/religia/714042/parlament-zdecydowal-ws-prawoslawia-w-estonii-cho dzi-o-wplywy-rosji.html> [13.06.2025].

the Act on the Prohibition of the Propagation of Communism or Another Totalitarian System by the Names of Organisational Units, Auxiliary Units of Communes, Buildings, Objects and Devices of Public Utility and Monuments came into force<sup>26</sup>. According to estimates, 60 monuments commemorating this formation survived until 2022, often neglected, vandalised, and identified with Russianness. Thus, many of them were daubed with yellow and blue paint after 24 February 2022.

An example of a commemoration that has survived the entire transition period is the Red Army Soldier Monument in the Lower Silesian city of Wałbrzych. The Monument was created in 1976 and constituted part of the Wałbrzych Open-Air Sculpture Gallery. The pedestal featured a red star and the inscription “To Soviet Soldiers, Fallen in World War II”, restored with funds from the Russian Federation Embassy in Warsaw and unveiled by Chief of Mission Alexander Alekseev in 2013. Due to its peripheral location in the forest, away from the buildings, and next to the road leading to the Soviet soldiers’ necropolis, which the Russians renovated in 2017, the Monument was not the subject of much interest from state and local authorities, nor city residents themselves. The situation changed in the spring of 2022. The Monument was doused in red paint. The Wałbrzych authorities began the process of obtaining a positive opinion from the Institute of National Remembrance regarding the demolition, which was finally carried out in early September 2022. For his actions, the president of Wałbrzych, Roman Szelemej, is wanted by the Russian Federation under an arrest warrant<sup>27</sup>.

Another issue relevant to the Russian minority’s cultural security is the presence of the Russian language in the public space of the state of residence. I will use the non-obvious example of Belarus at this point. As is widely

<sup>26</sup> Ustawa z 1 kwietnia 2016 r. o zakazie propagowania komunizmu lub innego ustroju totalitarnego przez nazwy jednostek organizacyjnych, jednostek pomocniczych gminy, budowli, obiektów i urządzeń użyteczności publicznej oraz pomniki, Dz.U. 2018, poz. 1103.

<sup>27</sup> M. Walaszczyk, *W Wałbrzychu jest pomnik czerwonoarmisty, ale nie ma go Konstanty Skirmunt – szef przedwojennej dyplomacji pochowany na tamtejszym cmentarzu komunalnym*, 20 April 2022, <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/595195-usunac-pomnik-czerwonoarmisty-z-walbrzycha> [13.06.2025]; *Prezydent Wałbrzycha na celowniku Rosjan. Czym podpadł Roman Szelemej?*, 13 February 2024, <https://www.portalsamorzadowy.pl/polityka-i-spoleczenstwo/prezydent-walbrzycha-na-celowniku-rosjan-czym-podpadl-roman-szelemej,523720.html> [13.06.2025]; *Wałbrzych. Pomnik czerwonoarmisty usunięty! Rzeźba od momentu ataku Rosji na Ukrainę budziła kontrowersje*, 2 September 2022, <https://dziennik.walbrzych.pl/walbrzych-pomnik-czerwonoarmisty-usuniety-rzezba-od-momentu-ataku-rosji-na-ukraine-budzila-kontrowersje/#gsc.tab=0> [13.06.2025].

known, Alexander Lukashenko won the 1994 presidential election under the slogan of, among other things, emancipating the Russian language and equating it as the official language with Belarusian. This came to pass in 1995. With the reversal of the course of the Belarusianisation of public space over the past three decades, Russian has become the de facto dominant language. The cultural security of the Russian minority is under threat because the Russian minority has lost one of the foundations of its national identity at the expense of the majority society. According to the 2019 census, Russian is considered a native language by 38.1% of ethnic Belarusians (Belarusian is the native language of 61.2%). Notably, Russian is used as the language of everyday communication at home by 71% of ethnic Belarusians, while Belarusian is used by 28.5%<sup>28</sup>. Furthermore, an amendment to the Law on Languages in the Republic of Belarus came into force in 2023, which henceforth renders the possibility of learning in national minority languages impossible. Of course, this ban does not apply to the Russian minority, as Russian is the official language<sup>29</sup>.

Linguists maintain that a specific version of the Russian language has developed in Belarus, just as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States of America have developed distinct versions of English and Argentina or Mexico have developed separate variations of Spanish. In this context, let us quote Boris Norman, a professor at the Belarusian State University, for example: "It can be said that this region [Belarus – note by TS] has its own set of lexical associations, or rather the organisation of the lexical system (compared to the Russian language of the metropolis). [...] In principle, the regional version of Russian spoken by the Belarusian population

<sup>28</sup> Paradoxically, a larger percentage of ethnic Poles consider Belarusian to be the language of everyday communication at home, 46%, compared to 52.4% for Russian. See *Общая численность населения, численность населения по возрасту и полу, состоянию в браке, уровню образования, национальностям, языку, источникам средств к существованию по Республике Беларусь* [*Obshchaya chislennost' naseleniya, chislennost' naseleniya po vozrastu i polu, sostoyaniyu v brake, urovnyu obrazovaniya, natsional'nostyam, yazyku, istochnikam sredstv k sushchestvovaniyu po Respublike Belarus'*], Minsk 2020.

<sup>29</sup> *У Беларусі адмяняецца права навучацца на мовах нацыянальных меншасцяў* [*U Bielarusi admianiajessa prava navuchacca na movach nacyjnal'nych mienšasciaŭ*], 26 July 2023, <https://belsat.eu/news/26-07-2023-u-belarusi-admyanyaetstva-prava-na-navuchanne-na-movah-natsyyanalnyh-menshastsyyau> [13.06.2025].



is transformed (taking into account its state status) into a special national (official) variant”<sup>30</sup>.

It seemed that after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, attitudes towards the Russian language would change. President Lukashenko emphasised- the necessity of preserving Ukraine’s territorial integrity and pursued a policy towards the new authorities in Kyiv that clearly differed from the Russian one. In this situation, the Belarusian language began to be viewed as one of the factors that strengthened the distinctiveness of Belarus. A part of the elite began to strive to supplant Russian as the language of scientific communication and everyday life, thus aiming to strengthen the Belarusian language. No less speculation in this regard was unequivocally cut short by Lukashenko, who, on 22 April 2014, in his annual address to the Belarusian people delivered before the National Assembly, noted: “We believe – and I have said this many times – that the Russian language is the common property of three brotherly nations [...]. If we lose the Russian language, we lose our reason”. The depth of the issue is further highlighted by academic publications, which suggest that the Russian language in Belarus is discriminated against<sup>31</sup>.

The cultural life of the Russian minority has also diminished. Vilnius is a prime example of this. According to the results of the 2021 Lithuanian census, 9.6% of the city’s population is Russian (52,500), while there are more Poles – 15.2% (83,000)<sup>32</sup>. A characteristic dominant feature of the urban layout of the Lithuanian capital is the House of Polish Culture on Naugarduko Street, which is the centre of cultural life and the seat of many organisations of the Polish minority in Lithuania. The Russian minority has not created such an institution; not only that, in the face of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the cultural life of the Russian minority has been reduced. Nevertheless, several places in the capital are significant for local Russians. One of them is the Russian Drama Theatre of Lithuania, a cultural beacon for the Russian

<sup>30</sup> К. Папоротников, *У беларусов есть собственный русский язык? Вот чем он отличается от «основного» и что об этом говорят ученые* [K. Paporotnikov, *U belarusov yest’ sobstvennyy russkiy yazyk? Vot chem on otlichayetsya ot “osnovnogo” i chto ob etom govoryat uchenyye*], 2 April 2025, <https://news.zerkalo.io/cellar/95274.html> [13.06.2025].

<sup>31</sup> Н.М. Сергеев, *О русском языке в Белоруссии*, “Постсоветский материк” [N.M. Sergeyev, *O russkom yazyke v Belorussii*, “Postsovetskiy materik”] 2016, no. 2(10).

<sup>32</sup> *Gyventojai pagal tautybę savivaldybėse*, <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=0424adda-7b20-47a8-ac6c-f28c29486111#> [13.06.2025].



minority, which has been operating in the Pohulianka District of Vilnius since 1986. In the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine, a discussion began in May 2022 about the removing of the adjective “Russian” from the theatre’s name. In September 2022, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania renamed the theatre the Old Theatre of Vilnius. A year later, Audronis Imbrasas, a Lithuanian, became the head of the institution; nevertheless, the repertoire in Russian was only partially reduced, and this language remains the primary language of the performances<sup>33</sup>.

## Conclusion

This paper has successfully verified the hypothesis posed in the introductory section, revealing the significant impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on the cultural security of the Russian minority in all countries of the Central and Eastern European region. The three countries of Central and Eastern Europe were of particular interest: Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland, the closest neighbours of the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Despite not being directly involved in the conflict, each of these countries witnessed actions or phenomena that had a profound impact on the level of cultural security for the Russian minority. Aspects/dimensions in which war poses a challenge to cultural security were defined: religion, language, migration, cultural institutions, and monuments and places of remembrance.

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<sup>33</sup> *Вильнюсский старый театр. Пенептуар* [Vil'nyusskiy staryy teatr. Repertuar], <https://vsteatras.lt/ru/repertuaras> [13.06.2025].

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