

Contemporary Self-identification as a “Tutejszy” in Southeastern Lithuania

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Abstract

The article raises the issue of identification as a “tutejszy” among people who live in southeastern Lithuania today. The question of how and why “tutejsi” (plural for “tutejszy”) draw identity boundaries between themselves and other people is very important due to the overall social and political changes in this region over the last century. To answer this question, qualitative field research was conducted using observation, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with the region’s inhabitants.

The data analysis revealed two categories that play a role in the drawing of identity boundaries: the first relates to ethnicity and the second one relates to the value ascribed to being a “tutejszy”. Based on these two axes, the authors developed four models of “tutejszy” identification in southeastern Lithuania.

Key words

“Tutejszy”, southeastern Lithuania, Vilnius, Polish ethnic identity

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Introduction

Talking with people in southeastern Lithuania, it is impossible not to notice the label “tutejszy”, which people living in this region use to describe themselves or some others living in this region. Literally translated, “tutejszy” means being “local”. Of course, inhabitants of various parts of the world, especially border areas, often avoid identifying with specific ethnic groups and self-define as “local” (Wilson – Donnan 2012). This is most often an expression of the greater relationship of these people with the place they inhabit, identifying “with their own small homeland [rather] than with the state and its current authorities” (Fedorovič – Davlevič 2022).

Today, in southeastern Lithuania, the term “tutejszy” is still used alongside its synonyms “miejscowy” and “lokalny”. Although all these words mean “local” it is important to note a subtle but important difference – the terms “miejscowy” and “lokalny” are not so strongly marked. The word “tutejszy” [original Polish spelling, “tutejszy” singular, “tutejsi” plural], is the most strongly marked and still most frequently used. It passed from the Polish language into the Lithuanian language and in its Lithuanian form (the singular: “tutejšas”, less often in the form “tuteišis”, and the plural: “tuteišiai”), is commonly used in the dominant Lithuanian discourse and understood – most often in a derogatory manner – as a term for the member of the Polish minority living in southeastern Lithuania. But is this term also understood in the same way by the “tutejsi” themselves? The word “tutejszy” has been used by the inhabitants of the border areas of today’s Lithuania, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine to self-identify as a definition of one’s territorial identity since at least the 19th century (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016; Przeniosło 2018). It seems that now in Lithuania, with the completely changed socio-political situation, this term has evolved and acquired new meanings. This article is an attempt to answer the following question: How do people who identify as a “tutejszy” in southeastern Lithuania today, draw identity boundaries between themselves and other people?

Historical context of the region

In the Lithuanian context, the term “tutejszy” is closely related to the history of southeastern Lithuania and the experiences of the people who have lived there. In the 19th century this territory belonged to the Russian Empire. As Rimantas Miknys emphasizes, the term “tutejszy” was used in the 19th century to call people who lived in this territory (including modern-day southeastern Lithuania), who had no national-level consciousness and did not identify with any nation. “They simply considered themselves

‘locals’ (‘tutejszy’ in Polish).” (Miknys, 2000: 27–28)¹ As Helena Romer-Ochenkowska wrote:

“Before the war, ‘Tutejszy’ was the only description that a man from the Vilnius region [Wileńszczyzna in Polish] applied to himself. ‘Who are you,’ they asked, ‘Pole?’ ‘No, I’m a simple person, tutejszy!’ ‘You mean Belarusian??’ ‘No, I’m [...] Catholic, tutejszy.’ This is the answer generally heard. This word contains a strict and strong admission of belonging to the land, landscape and surroundings. ‘Tutejszy’. Born, lived and died here.” (Romer-Ochenkowska 1931: 190)

After World War 1 the Polish and Lithuanian states were re-established. A conflict arose between them as to which state this region (present-day southeastern Lithuania) should belong to and each had arguments in its favour. The representatives of Lithuania claimed that these territories used to be part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, so they must now belong to the restored Lithuanian state. Polish representatives, on the other hand, argued that the majority of the inhabitants of these territories had at least a rudimentary attachment to Polish identity, an affinity with Polish culture, and should be allowed to decide (in a referendum) which state they want to belong to (Eberhardt 1997: 67).

However, an agreement was not reached and a war broke out between Poland and Lithuania (Lesčius 2003: 169), with Poland winning. This region belonged to it throughout the interwar period, it was under-developed economically (Kirwiel 2011: 24), and many of its inhabitants did not have strongly manifested ethnic identities with many identifying (much like in the 19th century) as “tutejsi” (Kirwiel 2011: 33). Gradually, Polonization processes took place.

The Soviet Army conquered the region in the 1939 war with Poland (Truska 2007: 43), however, a political agreement was reached with Lithuania in the same year and the territories were handed over to Lithuania (Truska 2007: 47). However, the next year, the occupation of Lithuania itself by the USSR took place. During World War 2, Lithuanian, Polish, and Soviet partisans fought each other in these territories, local residents were terrorized in the fighting (Anušauskas 2007a: 251). After the War, the Soviets deported some local inhabitants (Anušauskas 2007b: 299).

This region and its people’s identity were strongly affected by the migration processes that took place after World War 2 and later during the Soviet era. During two waves of repatriation, about 300,000 people left Soviet Lithuania for Soviet Poland. Most of them were Poles from the Vilnius region. Those who left were replaced by immigrants from the neighbouring

1 All translations from Polish and Lithuanian into English are the authors’.

Belarusian SSR (Stravinskienė 2011: 84). After the War, following a poor harvest, Ukrainians came to “eastern Lithuania” looking for a better life (Stravinskienė 2013: 129). All these immigrants brought their customs, languages and identities with them that over time became part of south-eastern Lithuania’s reality.

During the Soviet period, the USSR aimed to create a Soviet citizen, a “builder of communism”. Soviet ideology was actively introduced in the region, while the ethnic and religious identities of local people were suppressed (Jakubčionis 2007: 363) and the Russian language and Soviet culture spread among the people in the region.

In 1990, after the restoration of Lithuanian independence and the creation of a democratic system, the current stage of the development of the Lithuanian state and society began, southeastern Lithuania and its inhabitants are no exception in this respect as southeastern Lithuania forms an integral part of Lithuania, and its inhabitants are Lithuanian citizens.

Literature review

It is worth noting that other researchers have also explored the term “tutejszy” in southeastern Lithuania, the monograph *Ethnicity and Identities in southeastern Lithuania: Expressions and Contexts* (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė et.al. 2016) being one of the most important pieces of work in this respect. Its authors draw attention to the importance of historical processes, Lithuania’s identity politics, and the historical memory politics of local municipal authorities in the process of constructing local identities in this region.

In this context, the article *Local (tutejszy), Pole, Catholic: Ethno-Religious Identity of Residents of southeastern Lithuania* written by Katarzyna Korzeniewska (2013) which discusses the “tutejszy’s” identity is also worth mentioning. Korzeniewska argues that a “tutejszy” identifies with a place where the local dialect and languages spoken by local people are prevalent, with a geographical location defined by parish boundaries and various geographical objects (2013: 154–155). When exploring the geographic aspect, she adds that “the geographic ‘place’ that the ‘tutejszy’ considers their own is defined” based on (1) language, (2) the administrative division of the Church (parishes) and (3) the landscape/geography (Korzeniewska 2013: 154–155).

It is important to emphasize that researchers often associate the “tutejszy” identity with instability, a person’s unwillingness (or inability) to assign themselves to a specific ethnic group or feeling “betwixt and between”. Krystyna Rutkowska (2008) in her article *Language and identity on the Polish-Lithuanian border* states that “the identity of a person living on the

borderland can be described as unstable, uncertain, ‘tutejszy by choice’, ambivalent, bivalent, multicultural” (Rutkowska 2008: 61).

It should be noted that the term itself can evoke emotions, for example, the Polish ethnologist, Lech Mróz quite categorically states that in studies published in Lithuania “the data about ‘tutejsi’ are falsified by [Lithuanian] nationalists” (Mróz 1993: 56). This implies that identifying some Poles as “tutejsi” is an attempt to reduce the official number of Poles living in Lithuania.

From this perspective, the “tutejszy” identity is an alternative for those who are unable or unwilling to define their ethnicity. As Engelking emphasizes: “some people define themselves through negation – not Polish, not Russian, not Belarusian, not Lithuanian, or directly – as a ‘tutejszy”” (Engelking 2000: 19).

It is very important to mention that some scholars tend to “ascribe” one or another (mostly Polish and Lithuanian) ethnic identity to a “tutejszy,” with some portraying them as belonging to Polish (or Lithuanian) ethnicity but not being aware of it. For example, in her book *National identity in the borderland. The sense of national identity in the narratives of students, parents and teachers of Polish schools in Lithuania*, the Polish scholar Dorota Jaworska states that there are three kinds of Poles in southeastern Lithuania: (1) The Great Poles (“Wielcy Polacy” in Polish) who clearly understand their ethnic identity, (2) Smaller Poles (“Mniejsi Polacy” in Polish), who admit to being of Polish ethnicity but are not “interested in it” and lastly (3) Weakest Poles (“Najslabsi Polacy” in Polish) are the ones who do not understand their ethnic identity and do not make an effort to understand it and she attributes Polish ethnicity to them (Jaworska 2012: 105).

Clearly, she underestimates the complexity of identification in border areas with such a complicated historical past. Moreover, the author compares the “standard” of Polishness in Poland to Polishness in Lithuania that was for 50 years shaped practically without any contact with Poland and was influenced by, among others, processes of Russification and Lithuanization.

As we can see, researchers have so far perceived identification as “local”, simplifying it greatly and not delving too deeply into its individual significance. There is an obvious tendency to think that “tutejszy” is not able to understand his/her ethnic identity, therefore, many scholars tend to “help” such a person by telling him/her who he/she is. Furthermore, scholars look for a single, fixed identification of a “tutejszy,” labelling him/her Polish, or Lithuanian. Even those scholars who acknowledge the existence of the “tutejszy” identity, very often fail to see the multiplicity of “tutejszy” identifications in different regions or even in one area. To put it simply, the “tutejszy” identity can mean different things to different people and our article aims to shed some light on this.

Methodology

This article is based on empirical data collected by two researchers independently of each other in southeastern Lithuania. Vidmantas Vyšniauskas conducted his field work in the Šalčininkai and Vilnius districts during the summer months (June, July, August) from 2016 to 2020. Anna Pilarczyk-Palaitis conducted her research in Vilnius and Vilnius districts from 2020 to 2022. Because data analysis showed that identifying as a “tutejszy” in southeastern Lithuania is sometimes slightly different in those two areas, whenever important the authors refer separately to Vilnius and the northern parts of southeastern Lithuania and to the southern part of southeastern Lithuania. The field work involved observation, participant observation and a series of in-depth interviews in the Vilnius district (Vilnius, Miašiagala, Didžioji Riešė, Medininkai and Šilėnai) and the Šalčininkai district (Eišiškės, Dieveniškės, Šalčininkai, Dailidės, Kalesninkai and Jašiūnai).

Observation and participant observation were carried out in public events, where no special permits were needed to conduct research and these included concerts, public festivals, religious festivals, masses, openings of art exhibitions and public meetings. No personal information was collected during these public events. Observation, especially participant observation, allows the authors to explore everyday practices and to better evaluate interview data.

During the field work, a series of interviews were also conducted and the topics covered included: family, local community customs, traditions, professional and religious practices, education, social activities as well as ethnic and national self-identifications. It was during these conversations that people’s interpretations of being a “tutejszy” and the meanings ascribed to this identification became apparent, clarifying different people’s understandings.

The authors approach is emic, they aim to answer the research question from the perspective of the region’s inhabitants who define themselves as “tutejsi”. It should be emphasized here that the subject of our study is self-identification as a “tutejszy” and although we use the terms “self-identification” and “identification” interchangeably, they both refer to how people identify themselves, and others in their surroundings, as a “tutejszy,” how they set boundaries, how they understand their identification as a “tutejszy” and what features and values they attribute to it.

In total, 22 people participated in the research – 15 women and 7 men. The youngest was 26 years old, and the oldest 88. The research participants were born and grew up in southeastern Lithuania and they defined their ethnicity very differently, as Poles, Lithuanians, Russians, Belarusians, some

identified with two groups at the same time (e.g. Poles and Lithuanians), or they did not identify with any ethnic group and defined themselves as “tutejsi” only.

The participants were told about the purpose and the course of the research, it was stressed that the information they provide will be anonymized. The vast majority of the interviewees were happy and eager to participate in the research, they saw their participation as an opportunity to refute some stereotypes and spread knowledge about the region in which they live.

The Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian languages were used during the field work. Vidmantas Vyšniauskas is a native Lithuanian speaker, he is sufficiently competent in Polish and Russian to communicate with participants. Anna Pilarczyk-Palaitis is a native Polish speaker, she also speaks Lithuanian and the “simple” language used in southeastern Lithuania fluently.

The data were collected independently and then re-read in the light of a common research question. The data analysis identified two categories: ethnicity – some study participants believe that “tutejsi” could include people belonging to various ethnic groups, others believe that it only applies to representatives of the Polish minority in Lithuania and the value ascribed to being a “tutejszy”. For some it has a positive value and is beneficial to them, while others believe that being a “tutejszy” has a negative value and is burdensome for them. Based on this, the authors developed four models of “tutejszy” identification in southeastern Lithuania. These models are schematic to some extent, they have been identified on the basis of dominant features and hence they do not exhaust the range of possible identifications in this region.

The theoretical framework

Inevitably, the question concerning “tutejszy”, is a question about identification. Who is a “tutejszy”? Who is not a “tutejszy”? What does it mean to be a “tutejszy”? How are the differences between a “tutejszy” and other people perceived and maintained? The authors believe that the best theoretical approach for this study is to understand identity as a boundary as proposed by Fredrik Barth in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* from 1969. Barth explored the creation and maintenance of boundaries between groups, seeking to understand why a person identifies as a member of one group and feels culturally different from another group. He argues that the most important object of analysis should not be the cultural content of a particular group, but the ethnic boundary drawn between the groups (1969: 15). The essence of the ethnic boundary is a person’s identification with culture and people who they consider their own, thereby distancing

themselves from others who are considered to belong to other cultures (1969: 9–10).

Barth claimed that the ethnic boundary is not drawn by “objective” differences but only by those differences that people themselves consider important (Barth 1969: 14). According to Barth, when assigning oneself to one group or culture and distinguishing oneself from others, one does not rely on any fixed and unchanging features. Although this theoretical approach has a lot of advantages, Rogers Brubaker points out some of its weaknesses. Brubaker criticises the notion that a cultural boundary divides groups and cultures that are internally homogenous, pointing out that Barth’s oversimplification that one homogenous group is separated by a cultural boundary from another homogenous group (Brubaker 2004: 37). According to Brubaker, the best way to handle this issue is to understand boundaries not as a fact, but as a process – as something, that is happening when people encounter each other (Brubaker 2004: 12).

In this context Marcus Banks also makes an important point, in contrast to Barth, he argues that we should not be referring to the existence of a group, but instead, to an idea of a group (Banks 2005: 12). This is a reminder that identification is always situational, and changes depending on context. In this vein, the “tutejszy” identification must be considered a constantly changing process (and understanding), which takes place every time people from different groups interact with each other.

Antonina Kłoskowska argues along similar lines: “The place of national identification in the total identity of an individual not only varies individually but depends on the person’s situation and the situation of their entire national community.” (Kłoskowska 2012: 111) She makes an interesting distinction between the national identification (i.e. self-declared belonging to a national group), and “valence”, which she defines as cultural assimilation: “[...] a sense of connection with an ethnic or national culture recognized as one’s own, constituting the cultural heritage of one’s own group, and not only the sphere of competence acquired due to education, professional expertise or attachment to broader transnational communities [...]” (Kłoskowska 2012: 162).

It is thus valence that enables a true sense of belonging in the community. She points out that, especially in the borderlands, there is a possibility for so-called polyvalence, i.e. an individual recognizing more than one culture as their own. This seems to be a particularly valuable observation in the context of researching the identification of the inhabitants of southeastern Lithuania.

These theoretical insights will be used to discuss and analyse how people, who identify as “tutejsi” draw identity boundaries between themselves and other people. This will allow us to understand different identifications and

differing ways in which identity boundaries are drawn. Although people use the same identification label – “tutejszy” – they may ascribe very different meanings to it (and to their identification) and the chosen theoretical approach will allow us to understand what those meanings are and why they are so different.

The Findings: Differentiated understandings of one’s identification as a “tutejszy”

The data analysis revealed four basic types of self-identification among the “tutejsi”, these relate to:

(I) Ethnic identification.

- Residents of villages and small towns from the areas south-east of Vilnius (see Annex 1), who consider themselves “tutejsi” defined a “tutejszy” as a person who can identify with Polish, Belarusian, Russian or Lithuanian ethnicities. The defining factor was being *born and living “here”* (within the territory inhabited by the research participants). So a “tutejszy” in this sense is a person “from here”, regardless of his/her ethnic identification.
- Research participants who consider themselves “tutejsi” living in Vilnius and the surrounding towns north of Vilnius (see Annex 1) consider *only ethnic Poles born and living in Lithuania to be “tutejsi”*. This identification is most often drawn in contrast to Poles from Poland. The participants, however, emphasized that a “tutejszy” – as a Pole in Lithuania – may also recognize elements of other cultures, for example, Russian or Lithuanian as “their own”.

(II) Value ascribed to being a “tutejszy”. During conversations with participants, regardless of their education, age or place of residence, markedly different attitudes towards being a “tutejszy” emerged.

- Some interviewees considered the “tutejszy” identification to be positive, bringing them benefits and often being a source of pride.
- Others considered it to be negative, an identification that is the source of life’s failures and even shame.

Based on these, four models of self-identification as a “tutejszy” were identified as illustrated below:

II. Attitude towards the identification of “tutejszy”	I. Ethnic affiliation	
	“Tutejszy” – a person who lives “here” (ethnic affiliation doesn’t matter)	“Tutejszy” – a Pole from Lithuania, (as opposed to being a Pole from Poland)
“Tutejszy” identification as humiliation	Type 1 Resident of southeastern Lithuania – inept and not knowing “who he/she is”	Type 2 Pole from Lithuania – an inept, Russified inhabitant of a backward province
“Tutejszy” identification as pride	Type 3 Resident of southeastern Lithuania – able to speak several languages, tolerant, resourceful	Type 4 Pole from Lithuania – knowing several languages, educated, “true” Catholic

What follows, is a more detailed description of the four models of the “tutejszy identification”.

1. “‘Tutejszy’ means [...] you don’t know who you are at all”

During the field work in rural areas and small towns south-east of Vilnius, some people regarded this term as derogatory, the negative connotations of the “tutejszy” identification are very often related to its stereotypical, negative meaning in the Lithuanian language. It is often understood as imposed “from above” and although it is negative, it cannot be escaped. In the stereotypical meaning of this Lithuanian word, “tuteišas” is an incomplete Pole, untrue hybrid, a person who doesn’t know who he is. This is illustrated in the explanation by a woman from Eišiškės:

If someone says that you are a “tutejszy”, it means that you are uneducated, you don’t know your history, you don’t know who you are at all. You are stupid and you don’t know history. (woman, 39, Eišiškės)

The above quote emphasizes the meaning attributed by the woman who identifies herself as a “tutejszy” that is clearly associated with shame and humiliation. This humiliation manifests itself in the fact that (1) a person

who calls themselves a “tutejszy” is uneducated, (2) they do not know history (most likely the history of their country, state, perhaps nation) and as a result of this lack of education and knowledge (3) a person does not understand who they are, i.e. does not understand their identity.

It has already been explained that during the 20th century these areas and the broader southeastern Lithuania had a particularly complicated history in the course of which they were ruled by several different states: the Russian Empire, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Lithuania. Later they became part of the occupied Soviet Lithuania. These political changes were often violent and local people are convinced (and often rightly so) that a person’s ethnic identity was significantly influenced by being or not being persecuted during these events. It is to be expected that many people who survived such historical upheavals, wanted to avoid involvement in conflicts (that often arose along ethnic lines) and possible problems.

Our data suggest that one way of escaping violence and persecution was to avoid identifying along ethnic lines and opt for the “tutejszy” identification, as an interviewee explained:

The best thing to do is to say you’re a “tutejszy” who lives here, that works for everyone. Whoever asks, I’m a “tutejszy”, and what this means can be interpreted by anyone as they wish. Poles ask – I’m a “tutejszy”, Lithuanians ask – I’m a “tutejszy”. (woman, 48, Dieveniškės)

Another interviewee claimed:

Especially after the 1863 rebellion people’s property was confiscated in Žemaitija. People were deported to Siberia and colonist Russians settled in deported people’s houses. People tried to escape the repressions by saying we are locals, not Lithuanians. They did not want to identify with Lithuanians or Poles, because the uprising was organized by Poles and Lithuanians. Therefore, people did not want to say who they were, so as not to get deported. (man, 83, Eišiškės)

The term “tutejszy” was particularly suitable for distancing oneself from different ethnic identities and the tensions and conflicts arising (or likely to arise) based on it. In people’s understanding, such self-naming could also help when the territories they lived in were transferred from one state to another. In the face of these changes and changing policies of the state, identifying as a “tutejszy” may have helped people avoid repression and violence. This term, which in the recent past had a certain protective

meaning, has now acquired a negative meaning – it refers to a person who does not understand their ethnicity. A person who does not understand who they are.

Some of the interviewees attributed additional negative characteristics to the “tutejszy” identification. According to one of them: *“this is our province (...) We are rather backward here, lagging behind civilizational processes”* (woman, 70, Dieveniškės). Another woman said: *“we live in such a poor province, people lack initiative and ambition here”* (woman, 35, Dieveniškės). For these women, who considered themselves “tutejsi”, being “tutejsi” is associated with a certain backwardness (even described as a civilization backwardness), a lack of ambition and initiative, which are associated with the bad economic conditions in southeastern Lithuania.

Thus, the identity boundary is drawn between the backward “tutejsi” who live in this region without a clearly defined ethnicity and people who live in other areas of Lithuania and have a more clearly defined ethnic identity.

The negative perception of this term is not only communicated by some local people, it can also evoke negative emotions. When beginning his field work, Vyšniauskas, who had little experience, asked a local woman in her 40s in Kalesninkai if there were any “tutejsi” in the town with whom he could talk. The woman returned, with three of her colleagues, who were clearly irritated by the question and one of the women in her 40s said in a raised voiced that *“there are no ‘tutejsi’ here [...], you need to go somewhere else”*. Clearly, some local residents have a conflicted relationship with the “tutejszy” identity and make an effort to distance themselves from this identification.

2. “It’s different in Poland, there’s more order there”

The fundamental difference in assigning meaning to the term “tutejszy” among the inhabitants of Vilnius and the northern part of the Vilnius region, is the fact that all interlocutors defined a “tutejszy” as a “local Pole” – an ethnic Pole, but born and permanently living in Lithuania.² Most often, this recognition is based on the contrast with Poles from Poland. This is well illustrated in a fragment of an interview:

2 It should be noted here that the term “Wilniuk” is used as well, however, it also denotes a member of the global diaspora of Poles from Lithuania (not only from Vilnius). An example of the use of this a term is in the name of the event – Światowy Zjazd Wilniuków [The World Congress of Wilniuki], see for example: <http://www.wilnoteka.lt/artykul/juz-dzis-rusza-ii-swiatowy-zjazd-wilniukow-o-czem-warto-pamietac>

In my environment, a “tutejszy” is a Pole from the Vilnius region [Pol. Wileńszczyzna]. A “Pole” is from Poland, and a “tutejszy” is a Pole from here, from Lithuania. (woman, 30, Vilnius)

Very often, when comparing a “Pole from Poland” with a “tutejszy”, interviewees attribute negative traits to the latter (and therefore themselves):

A “tutejszy” is rather uneducated and does not know how to speak Polish properly. A “tutejszy” doesn’t know any contemporary culture in Poland and doesn’t want to learn about it. We stopped at Mickiewicz learned at school. People would rather watch Russian television and believe in Putin. (man, 55, Vilnius)

It is important when a person talks about the “tutejszy” identity and says “we”. It shows that despite negative descriptions of the “tutejszy” identity the person ascribes this identity to himself and the people in his surroundings.

Another interlocutor said:

[...] such Poles stayed in Lithuania [...] – uneducated, without a profession. [...] People without ambition, people who haven’t seen the world. (woman, 60, Vilnius)

Attention should be paid here to the actual low level of education of the Polish minority in Lithuania, who are one of the least educated ethnic groups in Lithuania – in terms of the percentage of people with higher education, Poles are in the penultimate place, with only the Roma being a more poorly educated group than them.³ This should be attributed primarily to the post-War resettlements, during which the vast majority of Polish intellectual elites left Lithuania, including most of the academic lecturers and teachers (Srebrakowski 2001: 103). The consequence of poor education was the pursuit of lower-paid occupations and a low position in the social stratification (Bobryk 2005: 42–53). As our ethnographic research shows, the general opinion is that poor education and the low social position of the Polish minority in Lithuania are not associated with resettlements, and many representatives of the Polish minority in Lithuania (due to lack of education and knowledge about the historical processes) believe that a lower level of education and low professional positions are somehow

3 Data from the State Data Agency of Lithuania: Statistics Lithuania based on the 2021 census. Accessed: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/informaciniai-pranesimai?articleId=9843270>

attributed to being a “tutejszy”. This is illustrated by the statement from one research participant:

I'm a “tutejszy”, like others here. All of us are rather uneducated, that's how we are. Well, this is our land, well, look – in Poland it's different, there's more order, everyone is doing something. [...] Selling something here, repairing something there, everyone is so resourceful. And here, people are like that – they can't do anything, they don't want to do anything. (man, 50, Maišiagala)

The second issue that should be noted, is the Polish “Kresy” discourse⁴ that is directed from Poland, which positions the Polish minority in Lithuania as inhabitants of the Polish “Kresy” – literally the Polish *borderlands*. After the post-War change of Polish state borders and the loss of eastern territories, a modern “Kresy” discourse emerged as a kind of “cult of lost lands”. The modern “Kresy” discourse has for the last fifty years occupied an increasingly larger and more important place in Poland's official national discourse, completely dominating today's identity policy of the Polish State towards Poles in Lithuania. In this discourse, Poles in Lithuania are, on the one hand, sacralized – as guardians of the Polishness of these areas – but also peripheralized – as inhabitants of the borderlands – by definition peripheral and backward in terms of civilization and economics (Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2023).

This is illustrated by the following quote:

Poles from Poland are different from us here, or rather we here are different from them. There used to be a time when we were really more different, when we were in the Soviet Union, and there were big economic differences. But it stayed with the people – and even now, when they came here, they came from the richer Poland, larger, wealthier, one could say from the West. (man, 50, Vilnius)

This self-image of a “tutejszy” standing in contrast with a Pole from Poland often counters the feeling of being an inferior Pole. This is visible, for example, in a fragment of the interview:

4 The term “Kresy” describes the east of today's Poland, which before the partitions belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and today belongs to at least three independent states: Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus. Today, the “Kresy” is still a strongly mythologized and sacralised space, perceived in the so-called “Kresy” discourse as ethnically Polish territories (Pilarczyk-Palaitis, 2023).

For Poles from Poland, [...] you can hear that we are real Poles, that they can learn Polishness from us [...]. But when I went to Poznań, I suddenly became “Russian” to them, and when I said I was a Pole from Lithuania – they called me Lithuanian [...] I always felt there as if I were someone inferior, a peasant, a “poor cousin from the countryside” who wanted to have a good life in the city. (woman, 26, Vilnius)

Lithuanians see and say “tuteišiai” with contempt. [...] Poles from Poland view a “tutejszy” as an uneducated peasant, a “kresowiak”. This word has become derogatory because of these negative assessments, [...], so I rather call myself a “local” [Pol. Miejskowa] Pole, a Lithuanian Pole, although I am a “tutejsza”. (woman, 50, Didžioji Riešė)

These examples show us that very clear boundaries between groups were set and felt by the study participants. Despite the official (especially political) discourse in Poland asserting that, the Poles from Lithuania are “the real Poles”, by Polish citizens in Poland, they are most often perceived as “Russians”, “Lithuanians”, inhabitants of the East. In other words, everyone, but not a Pole. Poles from Lithuania, in response to such an image of themselves, make a clear distinction between Poles from Lithuania and Poles from Poland. There is also a clear boundary inside Lithuania drawn between Lithuanians and the “tutejsi” as non-Lithuanians.

3. “You’re sure to find a shared language everywhere”

Some participants understand being a “tutejszy” as a source of pride as they associated it with deep roots in their locality:

My family has lived in these lands since the 1500s, relatives I know have lived [here] since the 1700s. We made a family tree. I lived in the Vilnius district, my great-great-grandparents lived in Eišiškės, Šalčininkai district. (woman, 72, Šalčininkai)

Deep roots are associated with an emotional attachment to the area where one lives. The term “tutejszy” refers to a person who, “*was born, grew up and lives here on this land. Parents are here, everything is here*” (woman, 67, Dieveniškės). “*There is a very strong attachment to the land, so strong that it doesn’t even matter what state this land is in, you are attached to it.*” (woman, 39, Eišiškės) In these women’s statements, we can see the locals identifying with the place in which they live, i.e. the place where they feel as “tutejsi”.

One woman, very aptly, associated the term “tutejszy” with the land, with the place where she lives:

[The label] “tutejszy” comes from [the word] “here” [“Tutejszy’ od tego, że tutaj, tu.” in Polish]. *It has a lot to do with the dialect. And we emphasize very much that we are from here, that I was born here, that my roots are here. [...] That word defines my location here, all the specifics that define my presence here, my thinking, my worldview. The person who has lived in Eišiškės all his/her life and has never left the town, he/she will see and understand everything in the Eišiškės way.* (woman, 72, Eišiškės)

In this case, the term “tutejszy” is associated with the ability to see the world from the perspective of the “tutejsi”. As reflected in the previously quoted conversation, this means that the diversity of different ethnic groups, religions, and life experiences need to be considered, it values the local community, in this case, the town of Eišiškės. A connection not only with the people currently living in this place, but also with those who have lived in these lands for hundreds of years.

“Tutejszy” is also associated with the ability to communicate in at least three languages, which is in turn associated with the mixing of various ethnic groups in the areas covered by the study.

You can address a person in Polish, in Russian, in so-called “simple language” and the person will understand and answer you. If not in the same language then in a different one, but you can be sure that you’ll be able to communicate everywhere. (woman, 72, Šalčininkai)

Continuing with the positive qualities that are attributed to a “tutejszy”, it is important to quote another participant who lists a series of positive qualities that, according to him, are characteristic of a “tutejszy”:

Many nations are mixed here, and we as “tutejsi” took the best qualities from each of those nations, we speak many languages, we are tolerant, we are entrepreneurial and intelligent like Jews, we show solidarity like Gypsies. (man, 59, Dailidės)

This sense of connection with the land, the awareness of the “tutejsi” way of life and the intricacies of communication with each other (knowledge of the mentioned languages, tolerance), are contrasted with those who came to southeastern Lithuania as visitors or immigrants. They, according to the

local people, do not have the aforementioned qualities. Those who are not from here are called “the ones who have arrived”:

I remember these words from my childhood. This is the “tutejszy”, and this is who “zajechałszy” [The one who has arrived in simple language] – the one who came from further away. (woman, 70, Dieveniškės)

This is a good example of how an identity boundary is drawn in relation to other people, from other parts of Lithuania or other countries. People from other areas do not speak local languages and do not understand the local way of life – these are the most commonly mentioned characteristics that help to draw identity boundaries.

The pride of a “tutejszy” is also attributed to an association with “authentic traditions,” a claim that “tutejsi” in southeastern Lithuania have preserved the old, “true” traditions, while people living elsewhere (according to the “tutejsi”) have become modern and lost their old traditions. Or in the words of an interviewee:

Here, festivals are celebrated the same way as they were celebrated in ancient times, we do not give up on even the smallest details of traditions, while in other countries, whether it is Poland or somewhere around Kaunas, everything has already been modernized. Over there people celebrate festivals differently and pay little attention to old traditions. (man, 62, Medininkai)

The same view was largely shared by another respondent who not only emphasized the authenticity of traditions nurtured by “tutejsi”, but also the fact that this is recognized by scholars. She said:

Our people have preserved old traditions, especially songs and fairy tales. Now scholars come from Poland to record our songs. They like it here, they say, it’s so authentic here. (woman, 70, Dieveniškės)

Similar values were attributed to the preservation of language. The so-called “simple language” – a local dialect used by “tutejsi” is particularly old and archaic:

“Simple language” was used even in the times of Vytautas⁵, we have preserved that old language, we speak similarly to how people spoke

5 Vytautas, also known as Vytautas the Great, was the ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania at the end of 14th and the beginning of the 15th centuries.

hundreds of years ago, while other languages, Polish, Lithuanian, have changed according to spelling rules, and ours is still authentic.
(man, 71, Turgeliai)

The perception of the term “tutejszy” as discussed here is a source of pride, it refers to a person who has many positive qualities (knowing all the languages and with an understanding of local culture) and even feels a certain superiority over people who came to southeastern Lithuania from elsewhere and who lack these positive qualities.

4 “I am from Vilnius [...]. And I always say it proudly”

“Tutejszy”, as understood by the many inhabitants of Vilnius and the northern part of the Vilnius region who perceive themselves as “tutejsi”, is a “local Pole” who has many reasons to be proud of his/her identification. The strongly mythologized “Kresy” discourse, in which Vilnius and the surrounding region is an ideal rustic paradise (Bakuła 2006), has made just “being from here,” a reason to be proud:

I am from Vilnius [“Jestem Wilnianką” in Polish]. And I always say it proudly. I always meet kind people because who doesn’t love Vilnius? Mickiewicz, Syrokomla and Moniuszko, and many other most outstanding Poles lived here. (woman, 82, Vilnius)

The oldest participants, i.e. those born in the period before World War 2, during the War or just after World War 2, perceive their identity as a “tutejszy” person, [i.e. a Pole from Lithuania], in a positive way. These are people who have not only a vivid cultural memory, but also a communicative memory (Assmann 2008) about “Polish Vilnius”. They feel they are “*heirs to a great culture and history*” (woman, 82, Vilnius) and important guardians of these values. Such people are usually very proud of being Polish and continuing to live in Vilnius, even when it no longer belonged to Poland. As one of our oldest interviewees said:

We, “tutejsi” Poles, live here and thanks to us, Polishness lives here [in Lithuania]. We guard it, and we [are] still building this Polishness. Without us, there would have been no traces of Polishness here long ago. (woman, 88, Vilnius)

Multiculturalism is also mentioned as a reason to be proud of being a “tutejszy” Pole:

Poles from Poland have only Polish culture; they don't have many minorities. And here in Lithuania we have. Our Poles speak three languages from birth, and young people speak even four languages, because they also speak English. [...] And our local dishes are more interesting – from Karaim, Lithuanian, Jewish cuisine, not only Polish. (woman, 60, Maišiagala)

An example of a distinction between Poles from Poland and Poles from Lithuania is the archaic term “koroniarz” still used in Lithuania today. “Koroniarz” is a historical term used by the Lithuanian nobility since the Middle Ages for a Polish nobleman (“koroniarz” from the Polish word “Korona” meaning “The Crown” – a short label for The Crown of the Kingdom of Poland). This term was used to distinguish between a “koroniarz” as a Pole and Lithuanian, after the Polish-Lithuanian Union, and from the beginning it had many stereotypical connotations (see Buchowski 2011). Nowadays, this term is used only in Lithuania and only by representatives of the Polish minority in Lithuania to designate a Pole from Poland. In other words, today the term is used to distinguish between a “koroniarz” as a Pole from Poland and a “tutejszy” as a Pole from Lithuania. As our research shows, the use of the term “koroniarz” is most often derogatory today. One of the interviewees who works as a guide, put it like this:

“Koroniarze” come here mainly for sentimental trips, they often behave as if they came to Poland, they expect that everyone here will speak Polish, and if a Lithuanian does not understand, they are convinced that she/he in fact does, but maliciously pretends not to. [...] Most often, they are uneducated, have no idea about the history of Lithuania, but are constantly arguing. They are self-righteous, and they are very surprised when I tell them that our Poles – local ones – speak at least three languages from birth. They think that Poland is the centre of the world and the saviour of all nations. (woman, 45, Vilnius)

Another testament to the increasing pride in being a “tutejszy” among young Poles from Lithuania is the fact that for several years now they have participated in creating contents in the local dialect. An example of this is Bartosz Połoński’s novel entitled, *Robczyk*,⁶ which tells about the life of “local” Polish youth in Vilnius in the “tutejsi’s” language, and also a famous play based on this novel directed by Bożena Sosnowska performed in the Polish Theatre in Vilnius, as well as, for example, songs created in

6 The novel was published in 2023 by the publishing house “Części proste”.

the “tutejsi’s” language, like the music group Wiil’n’ska,⁷ or the singer Jańka z Wilna.⁸

Our data show how “tutejszy” can be understood as a prestigious identity that refers to a Polish person who has deep roots in this region, knows several languages (including the local dialect), and not only knows the history and culture of Poland, with which they feel a special connection, but also the history and culture of Lithuania, in which they live. As a result, such a person feels a certain degree of superiority when dealing with Poles from Poland who “have” only one culture.

We can assume that such a distinction between a “tutejszy” and a “ko-roniarz”, to the benefit of the “tutejszy”, is a strong expression of the civic identity emerging especially among young Poles in Lithuania.

Conclusions and discussion

Our data analysis of the identification of inhabitants of southeastern Lithuania who consider themselves “tutejsi” showed, first of all, how diverse and sometimes even contradictory these identifications are. Scholars who have so far studied the identification of the “tutejszy” in Lithuania (Frèjutè-Rakauskienè et.al. 2016; Korzeniewska 2013; Rutkovska 2008), have classified this identification mostly as a regional identification, without delving into the other meanings and values assigned to it. Applying Fredrik Barth’s (1969) theory of ethnic boundaries here, allowed us to see how differently the identification of a “tutejszy” may be understood and evaluated in Lithuania today by those who consider themselves “tutejsi”.

Our findings, first of all, contradict Lech Mróz’s (1993: 56) claim that the identity of a “tutejszy” is only an identity imposed “from above” and was “made up” by Lithuanians in order to lower the official number of ethnic Poles in Lithuania. As our research has shown, the “tutejszy” identity is still a very important identity that many people in Lithuania continue to identify with. However, today it is an identity that is evolving and has more than one form. The basic distinction that we uncovered is a territorial one.

We alluded to the situational character of the “tutejszy” identity, although we did not provide explicit empirical evidence for this. Although it is hardly noticeable in the interview quotes, we are convinced that the “tutejszy” identification is situational and changes depending on context. In our opinion, the situational nature of this identification can become especially apparent when people self-identifying as “tutejsi” leave the region or the country.

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7P-x_Jey3k

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sv8JBjMk7XM>

However, a more in-depth analysis of this phenomenon and the formulation of more precise conclusions require further, more extensive, research.

The findings related to the Vilnius region located south-east of Vilnius show that the term “tutejszy” refers to people, who might declare belonging to different ethnic groups and identify with different cultures, sometimes several at once, but who were born and live in southeastern Lithuania. In Vilnius and the northern parts of the Vilnius region, only ethnic Poles born and living in Lithuania are considered “tutejsi”, although they can also identify with many cultures and languages, not only Polish. Interestingly, these distinctions coincide with the linguistic diversity of the Vilnius region. The language that combines “tutejszy” and “simple language” is actually two different and separate languages. In the southeastern areas of the Vilnius region, it is a Polonized dialectal variety of the Belarusian language, and north of Vilnius and in Vilnius itself, it is the Vilnius dialectal variety of the Polish language – with many influences from Belarusian, Lithuanian and Russian (Ušinskienė 2001). However, this observation also requires further research and analysis.

Perhaps the different understandings of the “tutejszy” identification are also related to the historical identification of the inhabitants of those areas. In the rural border areas, the term “tutejszy” refers to a historical regional identification and has a strictly territorial character – it refers to belonging to a specific land – “the land of ancestors, regardless of whether it is under the management of the tsarist, Polish, German, Soviet or Lithuanian administration” (Dąbrowski 2011: 38). This may indicate that the attachment to a specific place of birth may often be still more important and valuable to “the locals” than a national or ethnic affiliation, particularly since this, in the case of local ethnic minorities, may be associated with conflicting loyalties. Therefore, using the category “tutejszy” as a first choice to define oneself in these areas may still be a (self-)protective behaviour inherited from the historical past.

Although our research shows that the sense of belonging to a specific place or region is very important in the “tutejszy” identity, declaring that one is a “tutejszy” does not indicate a lack of one’s own ethnic identification, or the inability to define it. Our research shows that in addition to identifying as a “tutejszy”, many also identify with a specific ethnic group – he/she may consider himself/herself a “tutejszy” Pole or a “tutejszy” Belarusian. That is, a person can consider himself/herself a local Pole, a local Belarusian etc. This finding contradicts Rutkowska’s (2008) statement, that “tutejsi” do not identify with an ethnic group.

In the case of Vilnius and the northern territories of the Vilnius region, which have a more suburban character, the “tutejszy” identification is linked

to the Polish identity. This may relate to the fact that already in the inter-war period, Vilnius was inhabited by Poles with a clearly formed national identity (Eberhardt 1997: 114–126), or perhaps here it is also related to the dominance of the meaning of the Lithuanian term “tuteišas”, which in official Lithuanian discourse means a Pole from Lithuania (Daukšas 2012).

A very interesting phenomenon is the drawing of an increasingly clear boundary between a “tutejszy”, a Pole from Lithuania, and a non-“tutejszy” (sometimes “koroniarz”), a Pole from Poland. This might be associated with processes of assimilation, but it also contradicts the perception of a Pole from the “Kresy” region as a backward inhabitant of the provinces, poorly educated and a poor recipient of humanitarian aid from Poland (see Pilarczyk-Palaitis 2023).

It should be noted that in both cases the “tutejszy” identification goes beyond an ethnic identity. The “tutejszy” identification accommodates the polyvalent characteristics of the inhabitants of this region (Kłoskowska 2012) and makes it possible to recognize several cultures as one’s own at the same time and to avoid conflicting loyalties and cultivate a sense of participation in the whole local community.

In this sense, being a “tutejszy” (“tutejszość” in Polish) is a kind of identification super category. When describing the process of creating and maintaining social order, Mary Douglas (2011) drew attention to the tool of categorization used by individuals and communities. It seems that the term “tutejszy” may exist in Lithuania today as a response to the need to identify with one of the categories, while at the same time there is no appropriate category that would be broad enough to accommodate the polyvalence of the “tutejszy” identification.

Another important distinction identified in our research is opposing evaluations of one’s own identity as a “tutejszy” – for some participants, regardless of the place, being a “tutejszy” is associated with prestige, benefits, pride, while for others it is a source of shame and a cause of failures in life. This evaluation is a very individual matter and is certainly related to the experiences and personality traits of a given individual. However, based on the findings presented here, a certain trend can be observed – more and more young people feel proud of being a “tutejszy”. This could certainly be another very interesting matter for future research.

To sum up, it should be emphasized, first of all, that the “tutejszy” identification in contemporary Lithuania is a complex and ambiguous phenomenon. By its very definition as an “identification,” it is also extremely situational and changeable. Our dominant models of “tutejszy” identification in contemporary Lithuania is one of the first in-depth analyses of this phenomenon and as such it cannot cover all aspects of and address the

full spectrum of issues related to this phenomenon. It is without doubt that research into the younger generation would allow us to capture the generational evolution of the “tutejszy” identification and would produce pertinent findings.

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Annex 1



Territories to the north of Vilnius where only Poles born and living in Lithuania are considered to be "tutejsi".



Territories to the southeast of Vilnius. Where "tutejszy" is understood as a person who can identify with Polish, Belarusian, Russian or Lithuanian ethnicities. The basic distinguishing factor being birth and living "here" (on the territory inhabited by the research participants).