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INFORMAL TRADE, GENDER AND THE BORDER EXPERIENCE

From Political Borders to Social Boundaries

OLGA SASUNKEVICH

INFORMAL TRADE, GENDER AND THE BORDER EXPERIENCE

Detailing the history of a well-known phenomenon of post-socialism – cross-border petty trade and smuggling – as the history of a practice in daily life from a gendered perspective, this book considers how changes in these practices in a particular border region, between Belarus and Lithuania, have been accompanied, and to some extent provoked, by changes in the border regime. It looks at how the selective openness of the Belarus–Lithuania border worked during different periods over the last 20 years and how it influenced the involvement of different social groups in shuttle trade practices.

Foremost, this book considers how political borders implement and/or intensify social boundaries and suggests that the selective openness of political borders, a prerequisite for the existence of female shuttle trade activities, is primarily built upon people's social characteristics. However, it claims that what can be seen as the grounds for growing inequality at a global level, at a local one may have an important resourceful meaning for various social groups including those usually perceived as disadvantaged, such as widowed female retirees or unemployed single women with children.

Source: Petras Malukas/AFP/Scanpix

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Border Regions Series

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In recent years, borders have taken on an immense significance. Throughout the world they have shifted, been constructed and dismantled, and become physical barriers between socio-political ideologies. They may separate societies with very different cultures, histories, national identities or economic power, or divide people of the same ethnic or cultural identity.

As manifestations of some of the world's key political, economic, societal and cultural issues, borders and border regions have received much academic attention over the past decade. This valuable series publishes high quality research monographs and edited comparative volumes that deal with all aspects of border regions, both empirically and theoretically. It will appeal to scholars interested in border regions and geopolitical issues across the whole range of social sciences.

To my parents

Contents

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List of Figures

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List of Tables

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Notes on Transliteration and Language Usage

Cyrillic proper and geographic names, titles and interview extracts are transliterated in accordance with the scholarly transliteration system, except for the words with already established forms of transliteration (for example, *kolkhoz* instead of *kolxoz*).

Belarusian geographic names are mainly transliterated from their officially used Belarusian versions (*Minsk* (not *Mensk*), *Hrodna* instead of *Harodnja*). The transliteration is based on Russian versions in those cases where names appear in quotes from Russian-language interviews or texts. Therefore, for example, *Ašmjany* is the dominant form of the town's title but Russian *Ošmjany* also occurs.

The designation of administrative units is transliterated in accordance with the historical period and the dominant power. For instance, *gubernija* of the Russian Empire is transliterated from Russian but *voblasc'* and *raën* as the units of contemporary Belarus – from Belarusian.

The pseudonyms of the respondents are transliterated from Russian since people usually used their Russian names to introduce themselves. The proper names of famous political or cultural figures are used in accordance with established English forms (for instance, *Alexander Lukashenka* but not *Aljaksandr Lukašènka*, *Mikhail Gorbachev* instead of *Mixail Gorbačev*). Other Cyrillic names are transliterated depending on the language in which they appear originally. The interview quotes are transliterated in accordance with the language the respondents spoke. The mixture of Russian and Belarusian languages in the same interview is preserved.

The usage of *Belarus*, *Belarusian* dominates in the text except for the cases where the Soviet period and the *Belorussian* Soviet Socialist Republic are discussed. *Vilnius* is used in regard to the Lithuanian period of the city's history; in other cases Belarusian version (*Vil'nja* (rare – Polish *Wilno*)) of the city's name is preferred.

All the quotes from Belarusian, Russian, Polish and German are translated by the author.

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Acknowledgments

The preparation of the manuscript was generously supported by the "Baltic Borderlands – Shifting Boundaries of Mind and Culture in the Borderlands of the Baltic Sea Region" programme at the University of Greifswald.

I have studied and written about the history of the Belarus–Lithuania border region within several borderlands inside and outside of the European Union. A large part of the research was done in the Belarusian border town of Ašmjany located 20 km away from the current border between two former Soviet republics – Belarus and Lithuania – which today is one of the external borders of the European Union and of the Schengen area. The theoretical development of the study started, however, at least two years before I came to Ašmjany as a researcher for the first time. My first attempt to think about this region as well as about cross-border petty trade practices was made during my frequent travels between Minsk and Vilnius when I was at the European Humanities University. My studies at EHU, the Belarusian university whose complicated existence in exile in Vilnius is a borderland experience in itself, were a turning point for my academic career as well as for my research interests. When I was crossing the Belarus–Lithuania border on a bus with Ašmjany women, I was constantly comparing my experience of cross-border mobility to theirs. To grasp the difference in these experiences the whole theoretical idea about political borders and social boundaries was later developed. A great input into my theoretical thinking about borders and boundaries as well as into the methodology of the research was made during my time at Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald in Germany. The University of Greifswald as well as the region where it is located turned out to be another borderland I found myself on in the course of my professional development. Being under Swedish control between the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the region of Western Pomerania (*Vorpommern*) is today's German–Polish borderland where the political border between the two EU members is almost invisible. Western Pomerania is also a part of German–Swedish–Polish Euroregion *Pomerania* which includes the Swedish province Scania (*Skåne*). It is here in *Skåne*, at Lund University located in the former territories of the Kingdom of Denmark and in today's Swedish–Danish border region these acknowledgments as well as the first draft of the book were written.

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Boundaries of Mind and Culture in the Borderlands of the Baltic Sea Region and for travel grants which allowed me to collect all the necessary empirical data in Belarus and Lithuania. The fourth year of my work was generously supported by the Swedish Institute (*Svenska institutet*) which provided me with the Visby Program Scholarship for staying at Lund University and completing the first draft of the book.

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The theoretical and literature suggestions of my colleagues from Lund University, in particular Agnes Malmgren and Eleonora Narvselius, were

especially helpful. I also thank Abel Polese and Jeremy Morris, the editors of the book about informalities in the post-socialist region, for recommending that I apply de Certeau's ideas to the understanding of petty trade practices as well as for introducing me to the body of literature on informal economies after socialism; Tatiana Zhurzhenko for her comments about the Polish Card as well as for her general interest in my work; Olga Blackledge for her ideas on how to recruit respondents; Tilman Plath for his comments on the structure of the book, and Andrei Yeliseyeu for his assistance with Schengen statistics. Alina Sunjuk, the vice-editor of the *Ašmjanski vesnik* newspaper, helped me significantly with publishing the announcements of an essay competition, obtaining some local statistics and finding a valuable respondent. I thank the former director of the Ašmjany local museum Žanna Ivanova for her assistance in organizing a focus-group discussion in the museum. I am also indebted to the current director, Anastasiya Novickaya, for her assistance in obtaining a picture for this book from the museum archive. But, foremost, this work would have never been done without my respondents who shared with me their invaluable memories of daily life experience before and after the appearance of the Belarus–Lithuania border.

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List of Abbreviations

BYR	Belarusian rouble
EUR	Euro
LR	Lithuanian Republic, *Lietuvos Respublika*
LTL	Lithuanian litas
RB	Republic of Belarus, *Rèspublika Belarus'*
RP	Republic of Poland, *Rzeczpospolita Polska*
RSFSR	Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, *Rossijskaja Socialističeskaja Federativnaja Sovetskaja Respublika*
USD	US dollar

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Introduction

Aim, Research Case and Agenda

The aim of this book is to reconstruct the histories of two interrelated phenomena – of a political border between two former Soviet republics – Belarus and Lithuania, and of cross-border informal petty trade ('shuttle trade') in this border region. These histories mainly fall within the post-Soviet period. Therefore, in a broader perspective the book is driven by the aspiration to consider how more general historical changes which influenced this region were perceived by ordinary people and the impact they had on daily routine and local practices in the border region. The timeframe of the research – 1990–2011 – is determined by such important historical events as the emergence of independent national states from former Soviet republics, the collapse of the USSR, the enlargement of the EU to Eastern Europe as well as the expansion of the Schengen zone to the EU's eastern borders. The history of the Belarus–Lithuania border began in 1990, when Lithuania was the first among the Soviet republics to proclaim its independence from the Soviet Union, and has lasted up until today. However, in order to have some historical distance, the timeframe is limited to 2011.

There are two main points of departure which have shaped my interest in the Belarus–Lithuania border region. On the one hand, the contemporary history of this geographical territory undermines widespread historical optimism about the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc in general as the main factor for the disappearance of impermeable political borders in Eastern Europe. These borders were considered to be an attribute of the previous political system driven by a strong will to keep its citizens inside the Iron Curtain perimeter. As this research demonstrates, neither was the Iron Curtain completely impermeable nor did the Cold War division entirely disappear after the collapse of the Soviet system. The transformation of the previous political order hardly eliminated the East–West dichotomy in political, social and economic thinking about this region. Moreover, it led to the emergence of literal borders in historically borderless spaces, such as the Vil'nja region (*bel.* Vilenščyna, *pol.* Wileńszczyzna), the location of the contemporary political border between Belarus and Lithuania. On the other hand, research into local practices of cross-border mobility in the Belarus–Lithuania borderland seeks to reconsider the dominant pessimistic perception of these new borders in the context of European Union and Schengen area enlargement. Just like the old Iron Curtain, the new one which, in the view of some scholars, appeared in Eastern Europe with the Schengen Agreement is not a completely insurmountable barrier for people who are presumably left

out of the EU ideals of the freedom of people's cross-border mobility. The peculiarities of the Belarus–Lithuania borderland history keep the Schengen border *selectively open* (Paasi, 2011) for inhabitants of this region, in particular for the dwellers of the small Belarusian town of Ašmjany where most of this research was conducted.

Having been a part of former *Kresy Wschodnie*, the Belarus–Lithuania border region has received salient attention from Polish scholars who have focused their interest on the problems of national identity and interethnic relations in *Wileńszczyzna* (Perzanowski, 2005; Kušmierz, 1991; Kabzińska-Stawarz, 1994). As the political and administrative periphery of the former *Rzeczpospolita*, this region was known for its complicated and diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious composition (Handke, 1997). In this sense, the geographical space of the former *Wileńszczyzna* had been regarded as a cultural borderland long before the actual political border between Belarus and Lithuania emerged here in the early 1990s.[1] Although such an approach to this region is criticized for its non-reflexivity and descriptiveness, the cultural specificity of the Belarus–Lithuania borderland remains an inspiring case for the studies of relations between tradition and changes as well as of the cultural dynamics in the process of communication and constant negotiations on the meaning of such categories as cultural identity and belonging (Perzanowski, 2005).

The cultural complexity of the Belarus–Lithuania borderland is an important but, nevertheless, only an incidental aspect of this book. The ethnic and religious identities of border inhabitants have a significant meaning only in regard to the principal research agenda which is the point of departure for the study of shuttle trade on the Belarus–Lithuania border. This agenda is concentrated foremost around: 1) daily life history in this region before and after the appearance of the border; 2) the adjustment of people's practices to a new social reality brought into existence by the emergence of the border as well as by post-Soviet transformation in general; and 3) the interrelations between changes in the border regime and in cross-border petty trade activities throughout the 20-year period of the border's history. Thus methodologically the book follows the practice turn in border studies (Andersen and Sandberg, 2012) and studies of economies after socialism (Smith and Stenning, 2006; Morris and Polese, 2014), which presupposes that border and cross-border economic activities are considered to be an inseparable part of daily life practices. In this sense, shuttle trade as an everyday experience of the border is what the border can be conceptualized and constituted through. To grasp the social meaning of the political border one has to follow scrupulously how borders perform in daily life (Andersen and Sandberg, 2012) and which everyday practices actualize the existence of the border for people.

Cross-border informal economic practices are considered to be an important attribute of the border reality. The existence of informal and illegal economic

1 On relations between categories of *kresy* and borderland see Kwaśniewski 1997: 63–83.

activities across borders varies historically and geographically, from opium smuggling and human trafficking on colonial frontiers in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth–early twentieth century (Tagliacozzo, 2007) to petty trade in used clothes on the border between the US and Mexico at the beginning of the 2000s (Gauthier, 2007). Although these practices had not been so widespread in the Belarus–Lithuania border region until the early 1990s, the smuggling route *Wilno-Raków-Minsk*, described by Sergiusz Piasecki (1994[1937]) in his autobiographical novel about smuggling across the Polish–Soviet border during the interwar period, presumably passed through Ašmjany, the town which today is known as the centre of cross-border informalities on the Belarus–Lithuania borderland. The town's reputation as well as its location along the A3 motorway between Minsk and Vilnius were among the primary reasons which made me pick this location for the study of shuttle trade practices in the region. The choice of locality also underlines that the word order in the phrase *Belarus–Lithuania border* is important. The perception of this border throughout its history is first and foremost constructed from the standpoint of the Belarusian dwellers of the border region. There is insufficient data to conclude which state's citizens are more involved in cross-border activities. While Lithuanian politicians accuse Belarusians, Belarusian customs officials constantly report Lithuanian smugglers. However, the reality of the border regime is that Lithuanian citizens who can cross the border in both directions most likely have Belarusian roots and Belarusian relatives. Therefore, the 'methodological nationalism' as the research boundedness to the locality which is currently criticized in studies of cross-border mobility (Kalir, 2013) is determined here by the specificities of shuttle traders' cross-border movement and by the border regime requirements as an important basis upon which this movement is organized. Besides the geographical, the research has also a distinguishable gender focus. It is built upon memories and narratives of female shuttle traders who are usually involved with the least visible and the most underrepresented types of cross-border trading activities. However, female participation in shuttle trade has its own history which refers to the specificities of shuttle trade development in the post-socialist region.

Historical, Economic and Social Peculiarities of Shuttle Trade in Post-Socialism

> One day there will be a monument to the shuttler. This will be a figure cut in dark stone depicting a mature woman in her 40s–50s, not a tall one, thickset, solidly built, with short hair and huge round-bellied checked bags in both of her hands. There will be hungry children and not a very sober husband holding her skirt from behind. In front of her a stern border guard will be standing. It will be written on the pedestal, 'She has struggled … '.
>
> Veronika Čerkasova. Èta strana naprotiv (2006)

In the current study shuttle trade (čelnočnaja torgovlja) is considered to be a synonym of cross-border petty trade and is defined as 'a form of arbitrage […], understood as the exploitation of differences in prices and exchange rates over time and space via circulation activities' (Williams and Balaź, 2002, p. 323). International petty trading usually consists of a large number of traders 'with limited capital, who exploit price difference via trans-border trading, mostly over relatively short distances' (Williams and Balaź, 2002, p. 323). Cross-border petty trade as a noticeable phenomenon of post-socialist transformations is known under a number of other definitions such as 'trade tourism', 'suitcase trade', 'addicted travelling' or 'professional migration' (Iglicka and Sword, 1999, p. 9). However, the concept of shuttle trade is used in this book because it not only describes a particular economic practice but also refers to certain historical, economic and social contexts in which this activity emerged and has been operated.

First of all, shuttle trade appeals to a particular historical context. The concept was part of a public and media discourse after socialism, especially in post-Soviet space. Still today people from the former Soviet republics such as Russia, Belarus and Ukraine easily recognize this concept and a certain social and economic reality that it designates. As an economic phenomenon, shuttle trade appears at the junction between the planned economy of the Soviet socialism and new economic relations which flourished in the region after 1989. The historical emergence of shuttle trade can be traced to the 1970–1980s when the first open-air markets were opened in Hungary and Poland (Czakó and Sik, 1999; Sik and Wallace 1999). The development of private initiatives, in particular trade, which were partially tolerated by the Hungarian and Polish states was the people's response to the economic insufficiency of late socialism in satisfying people's demand for cheap and quality goods for daily use. The Soviet economy of deficit created substantial ground for informal economic activities which exploded on a mass scale during *perestroika* in the late 1980s. In the early 1990s shuttle trade became a peculiar phenomenon of transition which was represented in several studies of these practices in different countries of the former socialist bloc (this literature will be considered below).

The flourishing of shuttle trade after the collapse of the socialist economic system has often been explained by the economic necessity people faced during post-socialist transitions. Therefore, the second aspect of shuttle trade as a concept concerns a general idea about this activity as the strategy of survival for disadvantaged people. The image of the monument to the shuttle trader described in the epigraph is an attempt to visualize this metaphorical meaning. A woman who has to take care of her hungry children and a dysfunctional drunken husband is to a large extent a common association made with shuttle trade. Although throughout the book this general idea is challenged, its correlation to the reality cannot be completely denied either.

The third feature of the shuttle trade concept concerns the social status of this activity. Being considered as the survival strategy for the disadvantaged, shuttle trade is often regarded as a low-status contemptible economic practice. Such

an attitude has its roots in the moral norms of Soviet society where privately-organized trade was treated as not only an illegal but also an immoral practice. Therefore, from the beginning of its development shuttle trade had been regarded as a dubious economic activity which people in the least favourable circumstances started to engage in. The image of an *intelligentsia* representative who was forced to trade at a bazaar in order to feed her children was very common for the understanding of shuttle trade in the early 1990s. The low status of shuttle trade was also considered as one of the reasons why women resorted to it more readily than men. As Russian sociologist Tat'jana Andreeva (2003) claims, men were less ready to accept a decrease in their social status than women. Moreover, in general, survival strategies turned out to be 'indeed largely part of the woman's sphere' after socialism (White, 2004). Consequently, shuttle trade has a distinctive gender aspect to it and is identified as a primarily female activity. This common understanding does not always find empirical support in scholarly literature. However, as a rule, women are indeed involved in the least profitable and prestigious types of shuttle trade activities.[2]

The last reason why the concept of shuttle trade is of principal importance here is because the metaphor of shuttling has an evident reference to back-and-forth mobility and to the border regime that either makes mobility an available experience or becomes a substantial restriction on the way to this experience. The issue of mobility is constantly stressed in the book. On the one hand, it is considered to be an important resource for women, a way to their social mobility and economic sustainability. Moreover, women's subjective experience of transnational and geographical mobility can be seen in accordance with feminist subjectivity theory as a way to transgress boundaries and acquire new possibilities (Morokvasic, 2004). On the other hand, here caution in regard to the 'celebration of mobility' (Morokvasic, 2004, p. 20) should be kept because the boundary between the empowering and exploitative aspects of geographical mobility in the case of shuttle trade may remain very ambiguous.

The four aspects of shuttle trade – 1) as an activity where socialist and post-socialist practices are intertwined; 2) as a necessity-driven economic practice; 3) as a primarily female strategy of livelihood; and 4) as an enterprise requiring a high level of geographical (mainly cross-border) mobility – have been considered in thorough scholarly literature on the subject in one way or another. The studies of cross-border petty trading after the collapse of the socialist economic system

2 For example, Iglicka's (1999) survey of petty trade between the former USSR and Poland in 1995 demonstrates that women represented 63 per cent of shuttle traders in the sample. In Williams and Balaź's (2002) survey on the Slovak–Ukrainian border in 1999, on the contrary, men dominated and represented 59 per cent of 150 respondents. However, women in that sample were better educated but at the same time were more likely than men to travel by bus, which, according to the scholars, designates their involvement into 'the most basic – and usually the least profitable – form of activity' (Williams and Balaź, 2002, p. 333).

can be divided into two periods. The literature of the first includes studies based on empirical data collected during the early years of this activity, approximately until the mid-1990s. These studies aspire to understand the economic and social meanings cross-border petty trade had for people, to what extent it was inherited from the previous economic system and the possibilities its development could have had for the region.[3] Two important aspects of these studies deserve particular attention. First of all, the early research of shuttle trade practices considers the relaxation of border restrictions in Eastern Europe after 1989 as one of the most important factors which influenced the flourishing of cross-border trade practices after socialism (Humphrey, 2002; Morokvasic, 2003; Sik and Wallace, 1999). Secondly, economic necessity is seen as the primary driving force for people to rely on petty trade activities for their survival (Konstantinov et al., 1998; Iglicka, 1999; Sword, 1999; Andreeva, 2003).

However, at least two studies from the same period offer a different view from the common understanding of the role which borders play in petty trade practices and of people's motivation to operate this business. For example, German economists Stefan Bantle and Henrik Egbert (1996) in their economic analysis of cross-border small-scale trading argue that not only the disappearance of borders but also their emergence may create opportunities for traders. As they suggest, borders have the potential to split 'a former relatively homogeneous markets into several ones' (Bantle and Egbert, 1996, p. 16). However, as it becomes clear from their analysis, the authors mainly refer to national economic and political disparities which exist between two independent states which share a common border, notwithstanding whether the border itself is strictly regulated or plays the role of a symbolic marker of the states' sovereignty and remains basically porous (Bantle and Egbert, 1996, p. 17). The second study by sociologist Mirjana Morokvasic (2003, 2004) based on the empirical material of the early 1990s challenges the idea of necessity and survival as a leading motive for engagement in trading and considers the spatial mobility of shuttle traders as an economic advantage that not everyone possesses. In Morokvasic's view, '[people's] capacity to stay mobile for a long time […] is an immense advantage in comparison to those who do not or cannot move' (Morokvasic, 2003, p. 108). Consequently, as the author suggests, shuttle trade is 'rarely a survival strategy, rather it is seen as complementing the income at home' (Morokvasic, 2003, p. 110). Since Morokvasic's theoretical suggestions are based on the empirical research of Polish traders' experience, the border factor does not play such an important role in her study. On the contrary, the scholar argues that the circulation of petty traders 'is facilitated […] by the relaxed visa requirements for the citizens of the states who are now candidates for joining the EU' (Morokvasic, 2003, p. 107).

3 On petty trade at Polish markets in the early 1990s see Iglicka, 1999; Sword,1999; at markets of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia – Wallace et al.,1999; across the Polish-German border – Irek, 1998; in Bulgaria – Konstantinov et al., 1998: 729–745; at Lithuanian markets – Hohnen, 1998.

In contrast to the literature of the first period, the studies of the second one are primarily focused on petty trade activities in the border regions throughout the 2000s.[4] Besides petty trading, this literature also includes the studies of petty smuggling of alcohol and cigarettes on the EU external borders. This period begins with an article by economic geographers Allan M. Williams and Vladimir Balaź (2002) about petty trading on the Ukrainian–Slovak border. Williams and Balaź (2002) raise the problem of considering petty trade in terms of survival arguing that the explanation of the persistence of this activity in the post-socialist region primarily as an economic necessity under transition cannot be sufficient. A similar line of reasoning is presented by anthropologist Anna Stammler-Gossman (2012) in her study of shuttle trade on the Finnish–Russian border. As she maintains, cross-border shuttle trade in northern Russia 'is a dynamic sector that is driven more by trading for "advantage" rather than by trading for necessity' (Stammler-Gossman, 2012, p. 234). It is important to admit that the two studies are focused on the external borders of the European Union, although in the case of Williams and Balaź's article, the empirical data had been gathered before Slovakia entered the EU in 2004.

The situation on the western border of Russia with Poland after Poland became a EU member is scrupulously analyzed in German scholars' studies. The book by social geographer Mathias Wagner (2011) about the social and economic meaning of cross-border smuggling for the local community of the Polish border town Sępopol considers the phenomenon comprehensively. The issue of the border plays an important role in Wagner's inquiry. He not only analyzes the ways smugglers successfully cross the border and the relationship between smugglers and customs officials, but also admits the filtering function which the border plays in the local society. As he argues, without the border control everyone could buy cheaper commodities in neighbouring Russia. Therefore, according to Wagner, not the border itself but the border and customs control, which keeps those who do not know how to deal with it out of smuggling, makes this activity a profitable practice for those people who find the way to handle the restrictions determined by the border's existence. Wagner as well as German sociologist Bettina Bruns (2010), whose study is conducted in Bartoszyce, another Polish town in the same border region, also underlines the heterogeneity of smuggling on the Polish–Russian border. In their studies Bruns and Wagner distinguish several types of smugglers for whom the meaning of cross-border informal practices varies from

4 On petty trade and smuggling in the Ukrainian–Polish border region see Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2012; Polese, 2012; on the Ukrainian–Slovak border – Williams and Balaź, 2002; on the Ukrainian–Romanian border – Cassidy, 2011; on the Russian–Finnish border – Stammler-Gossman, 2012; on the Russian–Polish border – Bruns, 2010; Wagner, 2011; on the Belarusian–Polish border – Grygar, 2010. On comparative and/or aggregated studies from different border regions of Eastern Europe see Wagner and Lukowski, 2010; Bruns, Miggelbring and Müller, 2011; Bruns and Miggelbrink, 2012.

being a primary source of income to serving as a way of socializing and as an adventurous experience. [5]

The social heterogeneity of 'ants' – petty smugglers on the Ukrainian–Polish border – is also stressed by anthropologist Marta Byrska-Szklarczyk (2012). As she argues, the social background of petty smugglers varies significantly. The community of 'ants' includes 'the inhabitants of the countryside and of the city, women and men, the young and the old, unemployed for whom the border is the only source of money as well as employed (both legally and illegally) who only earn extra money to supplement their low income' (Byrska-Szklarczyk 2012, p. 104). Moreover, besides the accent on the heterogeneity of smugglers, Byrska-Szklarczyk's study has other aspects relevant to the context of the current research. First, in her article the border is not only the context or condition of petty trade practices but a self-sufficient research subject. The anthropologist considers the range of metaphors which petty smugglers use in order to explain their border experience and daily border practices. As she argues, the border between Ukraine and Poland is not just a line of territorial demarcation for smugglers but 'a prison', 'a war front', 'a meeting point', 'a factory' (Byrska-Szklarczyk 2012, p. 98). Secondly, unlike Brun's and Wagner's, Byrska-Szklarczyk's empirical data was collected after Poland had accepted the Schengen *acquis*. She demonstrates how this change influenced not only the functioning of smuggling but also the conceptualization of the border by smugglers who perceived Schengen enlargement as the death of the border. Nevertheless, Byrska-Szklarczyk does not elaborate on the nuances in visa requirements which might leave space for the *selective openness* of the border in spite of the seeming persistence of the new border regime.

In line with the aforementioned studies, the current research aspires to enrich the body of the literature on the petty trade practices in post-socialist countries bringing to light some aspects of this practice which have not received proper attention so far. First of all, this is a historical study of petty trade practices in a formerly borderless region. Therefore, on the one hand, it unites the problems and research questions from both periods of petty trade studies considered above but on the other hand, the research demonstrates to which extent the situation on the Belarus–Lithuania borderland differs from that in other post-socialist countries. The most important aspect which adds peculiarity to this study is determined by the fact that, unlike in many other regions of the former Soviet bloc, in this area the shuttle trade started flourishing simultaneously with the establishment of the political border between the two former Soviet republics and went hand-in-hand with the gradual toughening of border regulations. Consequently, the study combines synchronic and diachronic perspectives on petty trade and smuggling. On the one hand, it considers the peculiarities of this practice during different periods of the border's history and compares its development on the Belarus–Lithuania

5 See Brun's analysis of the case of "adventurous earners of supplementary income" ("abenteuerlustiger Nebenverdiener") (Bruns, 2010, p. 246–53).

border with the identical processes in other regions in particular timeframes. On the other hand, unlike other similar studies, the current one takes a longitudinal approach. It observes the changes, which shuttle trade practices in this region had undergone over more than 20 years of the border's history. The research demonstrates which elements of cross-border petty trading are determined by a particular historical moment and which of them are found during every historical period and, consequently, have a permanent character.

Secondly, to explain the persistence of cross-border petty trading in the post-socialist region the current study regards shuttle trade not only as an economic activity but also as a socially embedded practice. This book follows the ideas of those scholars who claim that economic necessity cannot be a sufficient explanation of the persistence which is observed in regard to the informal economy in the post-socialist region (see Williams and Balaź above) and that the range of informal economic activities after socialism should be considered in the context of daily life practices (Smith and Stenning, 2006). To approach shuttle trade from this perspective reference is made to Michel de Certeau's (1988) distinction between strategies and tactics. According to de Certeau (1988, p. xix), a strategy describes different types of rationality including an economic one and 'represents the calculus of force-relationships when a subject of will and power can be isolated from the "environment"'. As opposed to a strategy, a tactic is a spontaneous practice 'which is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing"' (de Certeau, 1988, p. xix). Following this logic, this book suggests that to explain the readiness with which people start shuttle trading, when they have an opportunity to do so, one has to approach this practice not only as an economically rational strategy but also as a spontaneous, opportunity-based daily tactic. The argument is that people resort to shuttle trade not only because they *have to* but also because they *can*. In this sense, it shares Brun's et al. (2010) reasoning, according to which the range of cross-border petty trade practices can be represented as a continuum between strategies and tactics depending on the particular types of this practice.

Thirdly, considering shuttle trade as a daily tactic, or 'clever tricks' which, according to de Certeau (1998, p. xix), represent 'victories of "the weak" over "the strong"' (whether the strength be that of powerful people, the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), this study elaborates upon the meaning which shuttle trade may have for identity, experience and agency of women involved in it. Although some other studies also refer to women's engagement in cross-border petty trade practices (Irek, 1998; Morokvasic, 2003; Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2012), this research is placed within the framework of gender studies and investigates the structural specificities of petty trade in the context of the gender segregation of the formal and informal labour markets (Chapter 6). However, this work challenges the perception of shuttle trade as merely a strategy for the disadvantaged and consider which resources women possess in order to start shuttle trading and how trade experience can stimulate women's self-confidence and satisfaction. The argument is that the solidarity with other shuttlers which women experience at

the moment of implementing their practice is one of the sources of the personal strength they obtain through shuttle trading.

Finally, shuttle trade and political borders across which it operates are treated in the book as two equally important and interrelated research subjects. Following the idea about the resource potential of borders for trading practices (see Wagner above), it is posited that borders, or border regimes, have an important filtering function, which differentiates people who can cross them freely from those whose mobility is restricted by them. In other words, the *selective openness* of political borders which endows them with the role of social boundaries is understood here as the *raison d'être* of shuttle trade practices.

Political Borders and Social Boundaries: Theoretical Approach

Studying the history of female cross-border petty trade on the Belarus–Lithuania border, this research follows Ansii Paasi's (2005, p. 668) suggestion about 'contextual theorizing' of certain processes and phenomena taking place on different borders all over the world. The Finnish geographer proposes an approach which combines the pure empiricism of traditional political geography with the theoretical potential of other social disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, or cultural studies.[6] This approach, on the one hand, allows scholars to reasonably theorize on particular essential characteristics of political borders. On the other hand, it calls for careful consideration of how historical, social and cultural specificities of border regions challenge generalizing assumptions about the nature of political borders and border regimes.

One of the major questions that this book seeks to answer is how political borders perform the function of social boundaries. Addressing this question in the course of the study of shuttle trade practices, this book aspires to understand:

1. How political borders implement their filtering function, the role this function plays for shuttle trade practices and how social characteristics have determined people's uneven access to cross-border activities during different periods of shuttle trade history on the Belarus–Lithuania borderland;
2. Whether access to cross-border mobility has a meaning for people's economic and social status and if yes, then how the interdependence

6 The same reasoning can be also found in David Newman's recent article (Newman, 2011). In the concluding comments Newman admits that borders as research objects are too diverse to be studied through a single model. However, he argues that there are a number of common topics dedicated to 'an analysis of the dynamics and functionality of the bordering process' (Newman 2011: 44). Consequently, as Newman maintains, at least a common language for border scholars from different disciplines is required (ibid.). Newman's point is also supported by border anthropologists Wilson and Donnan (Wilson and Donnan, 2012, p. 14).

between spatial and social mobility is represented at the local scale of the border region;
3. How our experience of political borders depends on our social status and to what extent our social belonging matters at the moment of border crossing.

To begin with, the terminological difference between the terms *border* and *boundary* should be clarified. The term *border* is understood here as '[a] linear dividing line[…], fixed in a particular space, meant to mark the division between political and/or administrative units' (Parker, 2006, p. 79). *Border* mainly refers to political delimitation of the territory and to 'the political, social and cultural aspects of territoriality' (Zhurzhenko, 2010, p. 26). Thus, the border is defined here foremost as a geographical, spatial entity, which not only delimits state territories but also designates political, social and cultural specificities of this delimitation.

The term *boundary* which is often used as a synonym of *border* also refers to the division but between 'different peoples and cultures' (Baud and Van Schendel, 1997, p. 213). The term *boundary* can be applicable to political borders but at the same time, it can also designate any other division existing in culture and society. One of the most comprehensive works on the development of the concept of social and cultural boundaries in social sciences belongs to sociologists Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár (2008). In their article, they make an extensive overview of how the term *boundary* is interpreted in different social disciplines and the further development it requires. Although political borders do not form the central focus of the Lamont-Molnár's article, they, nevertheless, appeal to the issue of territorial and national, i.e. political borders, speaking about national identity, spatial boundaries, nation building and deterritorialization (Lamont and Molnár, 2008, pp. 183–6). Following the argument of border anthropologists Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson (1998), Lamont and Molnár consider political borders as a place where the experience of the state is intensified substantially and 'citizenship is strongly enforced' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p.183). Thus, mainly referring to studies which consider border regions as a space where 'the relational construction of national similarities and differences is particularly apparent' (p. 183), Lamont and Molnár tend to depict the experience of territorial borders as an intensification of symbolic boundaries which, in the words of Donnan and Wilson (1999, p. 22), 'differentiate "us" from "them"'.

The function of differentiation, which territorial (political) borders implement in social practice, forms the theoretical core of the current research. However, while border anthropologists (Donnan and Wilson, 1998, 1999) are interested in the interrelations between political borders and *symbolic* boundaries, in this work it is the analytical connection between political borders and *social* boundaries which is examined. Lamont and Molnár (2002, p. 168) define the latter as 'objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities'. My argument about how political borders function as social boundaries is built upon three assumptions.

First, this book departs from the idea that border regimes are aimed foremost at controlling the porosity of political borders. According to Brunet-Jailly (2007, p. 2), 'the nature of borders is to be porous, which is the problem for the makers of security policy'. Since, as Brunet-Jailly further argues, border porosity is initially determined by human interaction and activities across the border, it is fair to suggest that people's cross-border mobility is one of the major concerns for security policies upon which border regimes are based. In turn, these security policies are directed at proper differentiation between those who can cross the border and those for whom this possibility is restricted. This differentiation is founded on inclusionary and exclusionary measures simultaneously (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). As Mau et al. (2012, p. 2) maintain, 'border controls are increasingly designed to differentiate between two groups of people: on the one hand, the "wanted" who are allowed access and whose mobility is facilitated, and on the other hand, the "unwanted", who are rendered immobile'. On a practical level, this inequality in rights to cross the border, i.e. to stay mobile, is foremost implemented through visa policies (Mau et al., 2012). Analyzing visa waiver agreements of various member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Mau et al. (2012) underline that many of them are highly selective in defining those who can enjoy mobility privileges. This selectivity is foremost based on the class criterion when people from particular social groups such as business elites or celebrities usually experience fewer problems with their cross-border mobility than less advantaged groups such as the unemployed or those 'stripped of stable resources'.[7] However, other social categories, in particular age, ethnicity, citizenship, and origin can also play a significant role in the facilitation of cross-border mobility or, on the contrary, for its restriction. Which social characteristics have made the Belarus–Lithuania border selectively open for certain categories of borderland inhabitants and how this selectivity has influenced the development of trading activities are considered here.

The second assumption concerns the question of how cross-border mobility based on the principles of differentiation and selectivity impacts one's social mobility and social positioning. Although the clear link between geographical and social mobility is not always supported by empirical evidence (Kaufmann and Montulet, 2008) and physical movement can also be a disadvantageous experience (Massey, 1994), the literature admits the resource and empowerment potential of the possibility of moving freely (Kaufmann and Montulet, 2008; Hanson, 2010; Mandel, 2004).[8] Considering the interrelation between cross-border and social mobility, Étienne Balibar's (2002, p. 81–2) argument is useful, that today borders 'not merely … give individuals from different social classes different experience of the law, the civil administration, the police and elementary rights, such as the freedom of circulation and freedom of enterprise, but actively *differentiate* between

7 On implementation of this principle in the Schengen *acquis* see Clochard and Dupeyron, 2007, p. 23.

8 See Chapter 5 on this discussion.

individuals in terms of social class'. Balibar's vision is close to Mau et al.'s (2012, p. 3) reasoning that unequal opportunities to cross borders enforce the growth of 'transnational inequalities' which are 'not simply a product of unequal distribution of resources that enables only the better-off part of the world population to enjoy opportunities for mobility, but also a result of the unequal distribution and the differentiation of rights to mobility'. In other words, the unequal access to cross-border mobility can be seen in the terms of uneven distribution of basic resources among which the right to cross borders freely becomes more and more significant. As Saskia Sassen (2007) argues, mobility becomes the core attribute of a new transnational professional class and is 'not only of service to a firm but also of maximizing social capital' (Sassen, 2007, p. 175).

At the local level of a border region the meaning of access to cross-border mobility may vary from economic and physical survival to the resourceful potential for advancement in the social hierarchy. Analyzing the life-trajectories of women involved in shuttle trade activities on the Belarus–Lithuania border, the argument is made that, on the one hand, access to cross-border mobility as one of the basic resources for a trade activity can be a significant factor for the advancement of woman's social position. On the other hand, shuttle trade is not a socially homogeneous activity and unites women of different social backgrounds and experience. To put it differently, geographical (cross-border) mobility is an important but not yet sufficient factor for the explanation of social differences between people (in particular, women) in border regions.

The social heterogeneity of shuttle traders as of the professional group characterized by the high intensity of cross-border mobility brings to the surface the final theoretical assumption that demonstrates the analytical link between political borders and social boundaries. According to Canadian political scholar William Walters (Walters, 2006, p. 188), 'borders are becoming more and more important […] as spaces and instruments for the policing of a variety of actors, objects and processes whose common denominator is their "mobility"'. In other words, people who have the right to cross-border mobility do not experience the border crossing similarly. As geographer Peter Adey (2004, p. 502) points out, such spaces as border crossings or airports are 'the most obvious points for […] social differentiation', since there the distinction between desirable and undesirable modes of mobility becomes most visible. Technologies of surveillance at the border points (such as profiling, biometry) are aimed at the differentiation of travellers into high-risk and low-risk groups (Adey, 2004; Walters, 2006). Therefore, even though highly-skilled professional workers from global (or national) corporations and shuttle traders from remote border regions both receive social and economic advantages from their cross-border mobility, their experience of how they cross the border and how they are perceived by border officials and other groups of people remains substantially different.

The inequality among various 'mobile' groups is intensified through the vision of what 'wanted' and 'unwanted' mobility means in a particular context. Chapter 6 elaborates on how the social boundary between shuttle traders and other passengers

is constructed at the moment of border crossing. On the one hand, it considers how border officials divide people into those whose mobility is non-dangerous and acceptable (tourists or students, for instance) and those who are under suspicion. Unlike other passengers, middle-aged Ašmjany women often become the subject of intent for customs and border control. On the other hand, passengers also tend to separate themselves from traders as if claiming that their right to mobility and the aim of their visits to Lithuania differs substantially from that of traders. While for shuttle traders (or other high-risk groups) border crossing is the crucial moment for their business, for passengers, whose mobility is not threatening, it is rather a possibility of reclaiming their social position or, in the words of Balibar (2002, p. 83), 'a point of symbolic acknowledgment of [their] social status … '.

Thus, the case of cross-border mobility of women involved in shuttle trade activities across the Belarus–Lithuania border demonstrates how the theory of the social functioning of political borders works at the local scale of a certain border region and to what extent generalizing ideas from border theory are undermined or supported by the Belarus–Lithuania borderland contextual specificities. After all, even though shuttling mobility can be perceived as a disadvantageous experience in comparison with the mobility of other social groups such as transnational elites, for instance, it is important to acknowledge that in the local context of a small town on the periphery this mobility has an important resourceful meaning and is understood as a privilege rather than as a misfortune.

Sources and Methodology

The principal source of the research is 18 oral history interviews conducted throughout 2010–2012 (14 primary ones and four additional) with 14 women, between 25 and 80 years old, involved in shuttle trade activities during different periods of the border's history (see Appendix I). The topics and arguments began to be repetitive from the third interview, therefore, the sample covers the most significant research issues and the development of shuttle trade during every period of the border history. The last three interviews did not bring any new information in relation to border and shuttle trade experience but enriched the story with details from individual histories. Each interview lasted 60–80 minutes on average with some exceptions such as the longest one which was conducted for more than 140 minutes and the shortest one which lasted only 35 minutes. All interviews were taped and later transcribed in accordance with the method of detailed transcribing (Elliot, 2009). Most interviews were either in Russian or in *trasjanka* (the mixture of Russian and Belarusian with the inclusions of local dialecticisms). The interviews were anonymized. Most interviews were paid.

The interview analysis is built upon the tradition in oral history studies which considers people's narratives as memories of the past produced in the present. As historian Lynn Abrams argues (2010, p. 78), 'memory is […] a process of remembering: the calling up of images, experiences and emotions from our past

life, ordering them, placing them within a narrative or story and then telling them in a way that is shaped at least in part by our social and cultural context'. In this sense, an oral history interview is treated in accordance with the tradition of narrative analysis where personal narratives are regarded as the stories which 'are usually constructed around a core of facts of life events, yet allow a wide periphery for the freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of this "remembered facts"' (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998, p. 8). Therefore, as Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998, p. 9) emphasize, analyzing a narrated story, 'the researcher can access not only the individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller's culture and social world'. To keep a balance between the reality and its representation in the narrative Abrams (2010, p. 78) suggests to approach oral history sources with four questions – what happened (the fact), how people felt about it (the attitude), how they recall it (emotions and contemporary reflections) and what public memory they draw upon (the interrelation between a personal narrative and other sources). Analysis of the interviews followed the suggested scheme in order to: 1) reconstruct particular episodes from border and shuttle trade history (this part of information was further validated through other, mainly written, sources[9]); and 2) to grasp the human dimension of these episodes, i.e. to understand people's experience and perception of the border and cross-border mobility. Therefore, any kind of factual omissions in personal narratives is treated not as an indicator of a lack of reliability but as an important source of information which is related to people's rationale in building their narrative in a way they do it. In this sense, it follows the idea of historian Alessandro Portelli (1991, p. 2), who argues that '"wrong" tales […] are so very valuable [because] [t]hey allow us to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them'. Some such omissions and their meaning in the context of respondent's life-experience are considered here. Moreover, analyzing memories as the retrospection which is produced from the current position the respondent's situation in the present tended to be figured out considering which particular life-circumstances make people recall their past and relate it to their present in a way they do it in their interviews. Therefore, the interview material is used not only for historical (re)construction but also for the analysis of the contemporary situation in the border region.

To triangulate and verify oral history interviews a range of other sources are used: published, non-published and participant observation. First of all, the border experience is represented here not only through people's memories but also through the author's participant observation of daily life in the town and of border crossings covering the period 2010–2011. During this time a total of five months were spent in Ašmjany and approximately 10 back-and-forth cross-border trips between the town and the city of Vilnius were made. The fieldnotes also contain observation at Vilnius markets (*Kalvarijų turgus*, *Halės turgus*) as the main trade destination for Ašmjany dwellers as well as everyday conversations

9 On similar approach to validation of oral history interviews see Niendorf, 1997.

with other people in the town. Several detailed discussions with those traders or Ašmjany dwellers who did not want to set up the interview officially but who were willing to provide their reminiscences are also included. The informal interviews with high-ranking customs officials from the local customs office are a part of the fieldnotes as well.

The non-published research material extends beyond the community of shuttle traders and covers the experience of women who are not engaged into this activity. To include the voices of those women an essay contest was initiated entitled *The meaning of the border for me and my family* which took place in autumn 2011 (see Appendix II).[10] The contest was organized with assistance from the Ašmjany local museum and local newspaper *Ašmjanski vesnik* where the announcement of the contest was published several times. Notwithstanding the money prize which was promised for the three best essays, the formal results of the competition were negligible. Only three essays were received. However, the competition allowed contact to be established with the museum and the newspaper and to organize a follow-up focus-group discussion (a moderated debate on a particular theme) with the contest participants and museum employees in February 2012. Nine women including the three winners took part in this event, their age varied from 27 to 76. The discussion was focused on the participants' border experience. The questions raised concerned people's memory of the life in the town before the appearance of the border (this was also the leading theme of one of the essays), the reminiscences of the border development in the region and attitudes towards shuttle traders. Unlike the latter, most of the participants in the focus-group discussion could not cross the border regularly. However, they shared many aspects of local memories, in particular nostalgia in relation to the borderless period with the shuttle traders.

The published sources include:

1. The materials from local and national media including national media (Belarusian *Sovetskaja Belorussija* also known as *SB. Belarus' segodnja*, the Lithuanian *Lietuvos Rytas* (in Russian), and Ašmjany's local newspapers *Ašmjanski vesnik* and *Iŭeŭski kraj*, published in the town Iŭe located 60 km away from Ašmjany).[11]
2. Belarusian, Lithuanian and the EU official documents in regard to border regulations.
3. The statistics of cross-border smuggling and border violation, the number of visas issued to Belarusian citizens as well as the statistical and population census data about Ašmjany inhabitants and the region in general.

10 The contest was not targeted exclusively at women, however, the fact that only women responded with their essays and that the organizational support was provided by women is telling in itself (on gender relations in Ašmjany see Chapter 7).

11 I am grateful to Prof. Tomas Lundén from the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies at Södertörn University who shared the material from *Iŭeŭski kraj* with me.

4. Sources from the Soviet period such as the statistics on the migration flows between the BSSR and LithSSR and data on the number of people resettled from the Ašmjany region to Poland in 1944–1946.
5. Published protocols and media articles related to the political scandal around the Belarus–Lithuania border in 1997.
6. The open letters of Belarusian historians on the Vil'nja question published in Belarusian newspapers *Zvjazda* and *Narodnaja gazeta* in 1992.

Some published works about the region from the period of 1990–2011 are also partially useful as sources. In particular, the study at *Gariūnai* market in Vilnius made by Danish anthropologist Pernille Hohnen (1998) in 1993–1995. Hohnen's study touches upon several aspects which were mentioned by the respondents in regard to this period and to shuttle trade development at that time. The first is connected to the Polish history of the Vil'nja region and its influence on the development of shuttle trade practices in Vilnius. The second aspect concerns the activity of Belarusian traders at Vilnius markets at that time which was represented as a mass phenomenon by the respondents. Hohnen's ethnographic observations prove that Vilnius dwellers were indeed aware of the possibility of buying food products from Belarusians who sold them at *Halės* market. Some anthropological observations by Ida Harboe Knudsen (2012) whose theoretical and empirical ideas are frequently cited are also used as a source. Above all, Harboe Knudsen's remarks on relations between traders of formal and informal dairy markets as well as on cigarette trade by Belarusian smugglers in Lithuanian Marijampolė are especially valuable for the explanation and validation of information provided in the interviews with the Ašmjany dwellers. Finally, the ethnographic work by Łukasz Cegliński (2006) in Lithuanian Eišiškės in 2001–2002 allows a comparison between the synchronic experience of the border dwellers during that period with diachronic memories about the same time among the Ašmjany inhabitants.

The Structure of the Book

The book consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 provides a detailed description of the place of the study as well as of the heterogeneity of shuttle trade practices in Ašmjany. The periodization of the border and shuttle trade history is also regarded in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 considers some aspects of the Soviet history of the Belarus–Lithuania border region. It focuses on those features of the Soviet history which are relevant for understanding the development of cross-border practices after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Chapters 3–5 three main periods of the Belarus–Lithuania border history and the development of shuttle trade during each of them are analyzed. Starting with the early 1990s (Chapter 3), the period of a porous border and mass shuttle trade, I proceed to the middle 1990s–2007 (Chapter 4) when the border was mainly institutionalized and the main types of trade in the

region including professional trade appeared, and conclude with the period after Schengen, 2007–2011, (Chapter 5) when the border became most persistent but, nevertheless, barely stopped the existence of cross-border petty trade practices.

Chapter 6 returns the reader to the current development of the Ašmjany region and regards gender relations in the town as well as the daily life of women in Belarusian provinces. In addition to giving a more general picture of gender segregation and gender norms in Belarusian society, this chapter explains why petty trade practices in Ašmjany are dominated by women and which favourable and unfavourable circumstances drive them to be involved in this activity.

Chapter 1
Shuttle Trade in Ašmjany: Contextualizing Oral History Research

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the place where this research into the border's history and the history of shuttle trade took place. Since the study is primarily based on oral history sources, which mainly represent projections of the present onto the past, it is important to start in the same way: to draw a picture of the present context of the place where memories and stories about the border and shuttle trade were produced. The particular development of Ašmjany affected not only historical and contemporary patterns of shuttle trade but also the study of its history. This chapter considers what the borderland position of Ašmjany means, what shuttle trade in the town looks like and the periods of history when cross-border trade in this region took place.

Ašmjany: a Town on the Borderland?

Ašmjany is a small Belarusian town of 15,000 inhabitants located 20 km away from the contemporary border between the Republic of Belarus and the Lithuanian Republic, 50 km away from Vilnius, 120 km from Minsk and 220 km from Hrodna, the administrative centre of voblast'[1] to which Ašmjany belongs (Figure 1.1). Throughout its history Ašmjany was shaped by ethnic, religious, and linguistic boundaries which connected and at the same time divided people in the town. However, today the ethnic and linguistic multiplicity of Ašmjany is rather a matter of the past. The town has few evident signs of a symbolical borderland where different cultures and ways of life intersect creating specific 'borderland' identities which according to some scholars are based on cultural hybridization and blurred national and ethnic boundaries (Martinez, 1994; Törnquist-Plewa, 1998). At the same time, the material presence of the new political border is highly perceptible in the daily life of the town.

1 Voblasc' is an administrative division one-step below the national level. Belarus consists of six voblasc's which are further subdivided into *raëns*. Ašmjany is the centre of Ašmjanski *raën* (*raënny cèntr*).

Figure 1.1 Map of the Belarus–Lithuania Borderland

Figure 1.2 The building of Ašmjany synagogue
Author: Olga Sasunkevich

Figure 1.3 Ašmjany town centre
Author: Olga Sasunkevich

The borderland history of Ašmjany becomes evident immediately after one reaches the town centre. The main square of Ašmjany – the Square of 17 September[2] – is located between a Roman Catholic and an Orthodox church. A little further, near the local ethnographic museum, an old abandoned synagogue is situated. Behind the Orthodox Church and the town's bus station is a monument to Vladimir Lenin.[3] All of these are signs of different historical epochs, the variety of political and cultural influences on Ašmjany, which have marked the whole history of the town from the beginning of its existence.

According to historical ethnographers, in the tenth–thirteenth centuries the language and cultural boundary between Balts and Slavs had lain 'approximately between rivers Narač and Ašmjanka' (Karaneŭski, 2003, p. 49), i.e. precisely in the region where later Ašmjany emerged. The first record of the town in historical sources is dated to the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1341) when Ašmjany

2 In the history of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic 17 September was commemorated as the unification of the BSSR in 1939 after the liberation of its western part from Poland by the Red Army. However, officially the Red Army entered Ašmjany on 18 September 1939.

3 During the last trip to the town at the end of 2012 the monument had been recently demolished in the course of the reconstruction of town's centre.

was a settlement belonging to the Duchy of Vil'nja (*Vilenskae knjastva*). First, the town belonged to Grand Duke Hedymin (*lith.* Gediminas, *pol.* Giedymin), and after his death in 1341 it was inherited by his sons Jaŭnut and Al'herd (*lith.* Algirdas, *pol.* Olgierd). Since 1382 Ašmjany was the part of Duke Jahajla's (*lith.* Jogaila, *pol.* Jagiełło) property. That was also the time when Catholicism started spreading in the mostly Orthodox territories to which Ašmjany belonged.[4] In 1413 the Duchy of Vil'nja was transformed into the voivodoship of Vil'nja (*Vilenskae vaevodstva*). After the Lublin Union of 1569 Ašmjany as the town of the Vil'nja voivodoship became a part of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. After the third partition of the Commonwealth in 1795 Ašmjany as well as the whole Vil'nja region was incorporated into the Russian Empire. Since then Ašmjany became a part of Vilenskaja gubernija.

Until the start of the twentieth century Ašmjany as well as most of contemporary Belarus remained in the Russian Empire. However, the historical events of the first three decades of the last century were rather contradictory for the town. Figuratively speaking, that was the time when one from Ašmjany could go to sleep in one country and wake up next morning in another one. After the October Revolution and the end of the First World War Ašmjany together with other territories around Vil'nja became a sphere of interest for different states.[5] In 1919–20 the town was alternately taken by Polish and Red Army troops, and then together with the entire Vil'nja region it was recognized as the part of Lithuania according to the Peace Treaty between Russia and Lithuania signed on 12 July 1920 (RSFSR and LR. *Mirnyj dogovor* (1920), 1959).[6] However, Poland did not recognize the Soviet–Lithuanian Treaty. Later that year Ašmjany as well as other towns of the region became a part of so-called *Central Lithuania* (*bel.* Sjarèdnjaja Litva, *pol.* Litwa Środkowa).[7] That was achieved as the result of a secret operation led by Polish General Lucjan Żeligowski whose aim was to return Vil'nja to Poland (Snyder, 2003). In February 1922 Central Lithuania ceased to exist, and Ašmjany along with the entire Vil'nja region became a part of Poland (Karaneŭski, 2003).

In September 1939 during a military campaign against Poland the Vil'nja region was occupied by the Red Army. The Soviet Union promised Vil'nja to

4 In the Middle Ages the region where contemporary Ašmjany is located was populated by Slavs. Until the end of the fourteenth century the Slavic population of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was mainly Orthodox (Baronas, 2002, p. 31). Besides, as Mindaugas Paknys mentions, before the conversion of Lithuania into Catholicism, the eastern territories of Vilnius had a widely developed parish network which mostly consisted of Russian Orthodox churches (Paknys, 2002, p. 51).

5 Ašmjany is regarded here as a part of lands around Vilnius which were claimed by different national and political groups in the frame of the so-called *Wilno Question* after World War I. On *Wilno Question* see Žepkaitė, 1993; Łossowski, 1993; Snyder, 2003.

6 On the historical events preceding the Treaty see Łossowski, 1993, p. 281; Snyder, 2003, p. 63.

7 Central Lithuania included Vil'nja and surrounding territories. More on Central Lithuania see Łossowski, 1993; Snyder, 2003; Trusov, 2009; Laurinavičus, 2010.

Lithuania but under the condition that the latter would allow the former to locate the Red Army on its territory (Laurinavičus, 2010). Moreover, according to the Agreement on Mutual Help between Lithuania and the Soviet Union, the Soviet–Lithuanian border of 1920 was shifted much closer to Vil'nja (Laurinavičus, 2010). Consequently, some regions populated by Lithuanians should have become a part of the Soviet Union. This perspective caused dissatisfaction among the Lithuanian population. To satisfy their claims, the Soviet authorities divided the former Vil'nja region between the Lithuanian and Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republics (the LithSSR and BSSR) after Lithuania had been annexed by the USSR in 1940 (Laurinavičus, 2010). As a result, Ašmjany as well as some other towns of the formerly united region became a part of the BSSR, while Vil'nja, Druskeniki (*lith.* Druskininkai), Svjančjany (*lith.* Švenčionys) were given to the LithSSR. During the German occupation, Ašmjany was again attached to the Lithuanian administrative unit created by Nazi Germans (Širjaev, 1991). However, after World War II the town was returned to the BSSR for the last time. Since that time the borderland position of Ašmjany acquired its literal embodiment in the administrative boundary between the two Soviet Socialist republics. In Soviet times this administrative boundary between the Belorussian and Lithuanian republics was almost invisible. But this situation as well as the status of the border changed significantly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The political contestations, which Ašmjany was a part of until World War II, significantly influenced the demographic and cultural development of the town. Throughout its history the town along with the Vil'nja region was known for its multi-confessional and multi-lingual structure. Until World War II Ašmjany, as with many other Belarusian towns and cities, had primarily been a Jewish settlement. According to the Russian Empire Census of 1897 (Institut demografii Nacional'nogo issledovatel'skogo universiteta *Vysšaja škola èkonomiki*, 2015), Jews represented more than a half of the town's population (53 per cent). Another dominant group was of Slavic origin; although the ethnicity of the Slavic population in the Vil'nja region at the end of the nineteenth–the beginning of the twentieth century is a disputable issue.[8] Nevertheless, besides Jewish (mostly

8 The census of 1897 did not contain data on the ethnic origin, and most conclusions about the ethnicity of people in the Vil'nja region were made on the basis of people's native languages and confessional belonging. This caused numerous doubts in regard to the results of the census especially among Polish historians who claimed that the number of Poles in the region was underestimated and that Catholics from this region should have been regarded as being of Polish ethnicity (Tereškovič, 2004, p. 20). Although, according to historian Andreas Kappeler, the Polish population in the Russian Empire was indeed understated in the census; in general, scholars agree on the reliability of the census data (Kappeler, 2001, p. 284, 286). Therefore, according to the census as well as to some other estimation from that period, the majority of the population in the Ašmjany region spoke Belarusian (Doubek, 1938) which they designated as *prosta mova*. Thus it is impossible to talk about a certain national or ethnic identity of those people, but their linguistic and religious identities are an issue which scholars mostly agree upon.

Yiddish), people in Ašmjany spoke at least three Slavic languages (Belarusian, or rather *local*, Russian and Polish). The multi-confessionalism of the town was mainly represented by Judaism, Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy.

In the course of harsh historical changes of the twentieth century, however, Ašmjany lost most of its charm of being a cultural and religious borderland. Although the representatives of the town's *intelligentsia* still tend to depict it as multi-ethnic (mainly Polish and Jewish) and multi-cultural, the reality looks different. According to the last census of 2009, most people (88.3 per cent) consider themselves Belarusians, the Polish minority represents only 5.7 per cent of the town's population (RB. National Statistical Committee, 2011). The representation of the Jewish population, which was destroyed during World War II in the Ašmjany ghetto, is insignificant: there are only eight Jewish people in the town of 15,000 inhabitants (RB. National Statistical Committee, 2011). The Lithuanian minority represents only 0.2 per cent of the population (ibid.). Most people in Ašmjany (67 per cent) consider Belarusian to be their native language (ibid.). Around 30 per cent of inhabitants consider themselves to be Russian speaking (ibid.). However, when it comes to the practice of language usage in daily life, the situation looks the opposite. Only 31.7 per cent of the town's population claims to speak Belarusian at home, while Russian, according to the same data, is used by 66.3 per cent of Ašmjany inhabitants (ibid.). Moreover, observations from the research conducted for this book demonstrate that most people in the town speak *trasjanka*, a mixture of Russian and Belarusian, with the inclusion of local dialecticisms and Polish words.[9] *Trasjanka* in Ašmjany spreads across different social groups and generations. Both an educated teacher in her 40s born in Ašmjany and a non-educated retired female worker in her 70s born in a neighbouring village spoke *trasjanka* in their interviews. The influence of the Polish language is also visible in the town. Several respondents spoke Polish or at least knew it on a basic level mainly through Catholic Church services. At the same time, the cultural impact of neighbouring Lithuania is negligible and barely anyone in the town speaks or understands the Lithuanian language.

The cultural homogenization of Ašmjany is to a certain extent a typical consequence of both Soviet cultural policy and Soviet-style urbanization in Belarus. Contemporary Ašmjany still looks very much like a standard Soviet small town with modest traces of previous historical epochs.[10] Before World War II the population of Ašmjany was approximately 8,000 people (Karaneŭski, 2003). During the War there was a significant loss of town inhabitants, which

9 More on the language situation and *trasjanka* in contemporary Belarus see Hentschel, 2008; Kittel et al., 2010; Hentschel and Kittel, 2011; Mečkovskaja, 2007.

10 The urban planning of modern Ašmjany corresponds with the general idea of a typical Soviet city, described by Sturejko (2012), for instance. On the Sovietization of towns and cities in the western part of Belarus (based on the example of Hrodna) see Ackermann, 2011.

brought the population down to 3,460 in 1945 (Karaneŭski, 2003). However, during the two post-war decades Ašmjany experienced substantial growth, and by 1970 the population of the town exceeded that of the pre-war period and reached almost 10,000 (Karaneŭski, 2003). The population growth was accompanied by the development of urban infrastructure and industry in Ašmjany. In spite of the town's pre-Soviet history, it, nevertheless, remained substantially rural until World War II. The basic features of the urban settlement such as amenities, electrification and urban appearance were mostly developed after the war. Nevertheless, the boundary between the rural and the urban is still blurred in the town (as in most Belarusian provincial towns and sometimes even cities), and traces of rural life are quite vivid. Ašmjany, including the centre, is dominated by one-, or more rarely two-level brick or wooden houses of village appearance. Urban architecture is mostly represented by a few pre-war buildings located in the city centre, some Soviet-style administrative buildings situated primarily along the central street *Saveckaja*, a couple of modern glass buildings and three condominium areas which mainly consist of Soviet or post-Soviet blocks of flats. Amenities such as mains water and central heating are still not available for everyone, and many private houses are heated by stoves. [11] In this sense Ašmjany can be defined as a 'semi-urban settlement' – the term which sociologist Anne White (2004, p. 20) uses in relation to small towns in Russia and which means that despite their urban status, such towns may 'have a village appearance and, to some extent, like villages, suffer from a lack of amenities'.

Furthermore, the rurality of Ašmjany extends beyond the town's appearance and the lack of facilities and touches upon the social and daily aspects of life in the town. When I came to Ašmjany for the first research trip in the early September of 2010, I instantly understood that the harvest was at the top of the agenda. Everyone spoke about the harvest; some appointments with local people were scheduled in accordance with their plans on reaping the yield; one potential respondent justified her refusal to meet for an interview saying that she did not have enough time for this because she needed to dig up potatoes in a village. During interviews, some of the informants mentioned their plots (*ogorod*) saying that they either returned from their *ogorod* shortly before the interview or that they were going to visit it afterwards. Linguistically it was formulated as *pojti na ogorod* ('to go to the plot') which meant that these plots were located nearby, sometimes just around the corner even in the case

11 As one respondent *Anna* recalled, when she came to Ašmjany from a city in 1989 she was very surprised to find out that many people in the town still used wells as a source of drinking water. Therefore, in her narrative Anna considered moving to Ašmjany not only as migration from one Soviet republic (Kyrgyz) to another (Belorussian) but also as a shift from an urban to rural way of life: '*We came here and I saw that people really used wells. It was strange for me that at the end of the twentieth century people still used wells. I was a child of asphalt. But now it is normal for me, you see, I easily handle the wood-burning stove*' (Anna, Interview 10, February 2012).

Figure 1.4 Ašmjany town centre in the middle of the twentieth century (1953)

Source: Courtesy of Ašmjany local museum

when respondents lived in block buildings. In other words, it became clear that the cultivation of land in Ašmjany had a regular character and constituted an important part of people's everyday life. It is worth mentioning, however, that the cultivation of plots is far from being a unique feature of Ašmjany. In her study of Russian small towns White (2004) describes the same tendency arguing that for the inhabitants of small towns gardening and growing vegetables is more than only a peasant tradition in newly developed urban settlements but rather a means of economic survival. She notes that her poorer respondents were very dependent on their vegetable plots. Although this issue was not a particular topic of the study, it nevertheless unintentionally appeared both in the interviews and during the fieldwork. Therefore, people were not asked the purpose as to why they grew vegetables and whether they had economic reasoning. However, from interviews and observations the impression was gained that even if people did it to save some money which otherwise they would have needed to spend on basic vegetables; the tradition and social norms also mattered to a great extent. As one of the respondents (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010) mentioned,

> Well, almost all people in Ašmjany have plots. Farming (*xozjajstvo*) is far less important today, well, those who have private [houses], chickens, all these …

> But earlier it was very, you have a house and you don't have a pig? But now there is less of this. But plots are cultivated by everyone. And me as well.[12]

Hence urbanization in Ašmjany is still a continuing process in the infrastructural, social and cultural sense. The construction of new apartment buildings in Ašmjany is developing and many people in the town are using state-subsidized low-rate loans (1–3 per cent) for inhabitants of small towns to improve their housing conditions and move to apartments. New habitation preferences also impact social life in the town where people become more atomized and separated from traditional networks of family and neighbours. However, despite these changes, informal networks as vestiges of both traditional and Soviet societies remain highly important for different aspects of life in Ašmjany. Since these networks constitute an important part of a shuttle trade strategy, this aspect will be developed later. In general, it is worth mentioning that people are mainly positive about the ongoing changes in the town and the fact that Ašmjany 'does not look like a village' has a significant importance for locals. Some of them even see the reason for these positive transformations in Lithuanian (or 'Western', 'European') cultural influence which determines a 'specific mentality' of Ašmjany people. However, the changes people mainly referred to concerned primarily the modernization of the town's appearance and should rather be considered as the result of the existing state policy aimed at the development of small towns in Belarus.[13]

Although the cultural influence of Lithuania on the urban image of Ašmjany is a disputable issue, the material presence of the neighbouring state is remarkable enough. Plastic bags from Lithuanian supermarkets, clothes, footwear, some foodstuffs at the market – all this can be observed in the everyday life of the town. In their interviews and daily conversations the locals constantly stressed the importance of Lithuanian goods for local consumption. To a certain extent, it is explained by the fact that, although grocery stores in the town were modernized and developed in the last 20 years after the USSR collapse, they remain highly outdated with a very limited assortment. During the time spent in the town as a researcher, sometimes very basic things such as coffee or cheese needed to be

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12 *Sčitaj, u vsex ljudej v Ošmjanax ogorody. Tam xozjajstvo uže kak-to stali men'še vesti vot u kogo častnye [doma], kuročki, eto vse. A ran'še tak očen' eto, kak-to ty imeeš' dom i ty ne imeeš' tam kabančika ne rastiš', ni to, to, to, to teper' net takogo, pomen'še. Nu a ogorody vse sadjat. Da, ja tozhe.*

13 This policy is, however, very controversial. In the case of Ašmjany it is pretty much aimed at the transformation of the town's appearance without substantial changes and renovation of the basic infrastructure such as mains water or central heating systems. As a result, although the town looks rather renovated, people still experience many inconveniences such as the lack of hot (and sometimes even cold) water in the daytime or poor quality mains water. Moreover, the reconstruction of the centres of small towns is also criticized by some scholars and experts who argue that usually such reconstructions negatively affect the cultural and architectural heritage of Belarusian small towns. Notwithstanding this criticism, people in small settlements usually appreciate these changes. More on the discussion about renovation of small towns in Belarus see Sturejko, 2014.

brought from Minsk or Vilnius because these particular items were either of a poor quality or too expensive in Ašmjany shops. The situation with clothing and footwear stores is even worse; therefore, the demand for these goods is mainly satisfied by local entrepreneurs who own private shops or rent market places or by petty traders who distribute these commodities through informal networks.

Another aspect of Ašmjany daily life, where the proximity of the border and of neighbouring Lithuania is vividly represented, is the system of public and private transportation. Although, according to the town dwellers, the transport connection between the town and Vilnius was cut off significantly after the border appearance; there are still at least five buses per day which operate between Ašmjany and Vilnius.[14] At the same time, being rather expensive (and comparable with the costs in the city of Minsk with a population of more than two million), the town system of public transport is very inconvenient and poor. When I once started complaining about the local transport to a librarian wondering why people in Ašmjany did not use bicycles, she told me that it was because every family in the town had one, two or even three cars (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, 20 September 2010). This might sound very common to a Western observer, for instance; but for Belarus such a situation is rather unusual. According to statistics, in Belarus the average number of automobiles is one per three–four persons (depending on a particular region) which means that in general an average family of three–four people owns one car (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2012a). Although the statistics do not contain information on particular Belarusian towns (except for Minsk), the Hrodna region to which Ašmjany belongs has the highest level of car ownership. Moreover, Ašmjany is well known in Belarus for its extensive auto trade which has flourished in the town over the last 10–15 years. Needless to say that most of these cars are imported from neighbouring Lithuania.[15]

Cross-border auto trade was also considered by most of the people spoken with as one of the main sources, and symbol, of the town's prosperity. Some people even said that Ašmjany was regarded as the richest place in Belarus. Such claims are certainly hard to prove, and even if the necessary statistics were available, it would barely take into account various informal forms of earning money that exist in the town.[16] However, a striking fact was that people connected the prosperity of Ašmjany to its position on the borderland. As one of the informants (Anna, Interview 10, February 2012) put it,

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14 However, during the period of research there was only one direct (local) bus between Ašmjany and Vilnius. Others were transit buses from Minsk which passed Ašmjany since the town was located along the Minsk–Vilnius motorway.

15 Until recently the leading role in auto trade was played by an auto market in the Lithuanian small town of Marijampolė. According to historian Karl Schlögel, at some point this market has been the largest auto bazaar in Eastern Europe (Schlögel, 2005).

16 Car traders and customs officers were most frequently mentioned among the richest professional groups in the town. Although both of the activities themselves are legal, people always referred to their shadowed aspects which were connected with bribes (in the case of customs officers) and tax evasion (in the case of car traders).

> I like this region, Ašmjanski, because people are very adventurous here and people want to make money. They are always in search for the better, not for the worse. They always find something somewhere, some earnings on the side. And this is perhaps because the border is nearby. It is connected … .[17]

In other words, the Belarus–Lithuania border has a very pragmatic meaning for Ašmjany. Although it is experienced as a cultural and social barrier especially by those for whom the cross-border movement is unavailable for different reasons, its economic significance is also considerable for the region. Further consideration is given to how the economic benefits of the border are used in the town and the niche shuttle traders occupy in cross-border activities.

Ašmjanskija Cëtki: Cross-Border Petty Trade in Ašmjany

> The *Ašmjanskaja cëtka*[18] never sleeps. After a shuttle trip to Vil'nja in her home town of Ašmjany she takes her husband out of the closet, feeds him, dusts him off, changes his socks and hangs him back, under a cellophane cover. Then she goes to work, sits down at a table under the portrait[19] and counts quarterly bonuses for her co-workers – and then she is back to the front line.
>
> ... before the border control in the line of duty *Ašmjanskija cëtki* paint their lips or, on the contrary, eliminate all signs of feminity (everyone has her own method). [They are] flirting with Lithuanian border guards and custom officers who, sweating, are counting endless stamps in their passports.[20]
>
> Paval Kascjukevič. Ajčyna Kantrabanda (2011). [21]

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17 *Mne očen' nravitsja ètot raen, Ošmjanskij, potomu čto ljudi očen' predpriimčivye i ljudi xotjat zarabotat'. I orientirujutsja na lučšee, a ne na xudšee. Oni vsegda gde-to čto-to naxodili, kakie-to levye zarabotki, i èto bylo nu vot, navernoe, to, čto granica vozle nas. Svjazano s ètim.*

18 Literally: Ašmjany women. The word *cëtka* has a disdainful connotation. It is usually used in regards to middle-aged women or women who are considered vulgar or rowdy. This metaphor refers to a general perception and idea about shuttle traders on the Belarus–Lithuania border.

19 The author refers here to the typical image of the work place in state-financed organizations where the portrait of the Belarusian president is an obligatory attribute.

20 Since the multiple-entry Schengen visa (type C) allows a person to stay in Schengen states for a certain period of time (usually 60 or 90 days per 6 months), every time one crosses the border he or she gets a special stamp where the date of entering a Schengen country is specified. Usually, when there are too many stamps in a passport, border guards count the length of stay in the Schengen area in order to figure out if the entire length of stay has not been exceeded.

21 *Ašmjanskija cëtki nikoli ne spjac'. Paslja čaŭnočnaha rèjsa ŭ Vil'nju, ŭžo ŭ rodnaj Ašmjane, jany vycjahvajuc' muža z šafy, kormjac' jaho, zdz'muxvajuc' pyl, mjanjajuc' škarpètki i vešajuc' nazad, pad cèlafanavy čaxol. Potym iduc' na pracu, sjadajuc' za stol*

Cross-border Economic Activities in Ašmjany

According to the level of average wages, the Ašmjany region is among the poorest in Belarus. In 2011 the average wage in the Ašmjany *raën* was approximately 1.6 million Belarusian rubbles (BYR) (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2012a) which was 9 per cent below the average in the Hrodna region and 16 per cent below the national level (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2015). The statistics, however, do not take into consideration various forms of informal economic activities most of which are connected to the specificities of the border region. There are several well-known and visible forms of them on the Belarus–Lithuania borderland which include heterogeneous practices and agents. Most of these activities are clearly differentiated along the gender axis. In this sense, cross-border economy in the region is as gender segregated as the informal and formal labour markets in general. The reasons for this segregation are considered in detail in Chapter 6. Briefly speaking, the gender division of informal cross-border practices is built upon the idea of male and female roles in the family where men are seen as breadwinners and, therefore, are expected to be involved with those types of work or business which can bring a more substantial income. Moreover, the participants of the informal economy often capitalize on those resources and knowledge which they possess from their general experience. Consequently, male involvement with the auto trade business and female engagement into trade in clothes and foodstuffs can, to a large extent, be seen as the continuation of the idea of male and female activities in regular life where cars and technique in general are still seen as rather a male than a female sphere. Access to technologies, in particular driving experience, also influences the scale of cross-border business. A person is capable of carrying more goods across the border by a private car than using public transportation. Although the number of female drivers is constantly growing in Belarus, the predominance of women among smugglers and petty traders who use public transportation is perceivable at a glance. An overview of different kinds of cross-border economic activities in Ašmjany and their gender segregation is presented in the table below.

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pad partrètam, naličvajuc' kvartal'nuju prahrèsiŭku ŭsjamu kalektyvu i – nazad, na liniju frontu.

... perad kantrolem Ašmjanskija cëtki pa doŭhu služby padfarboŭvajuc' vusny abo naadvarot – zmjatajuc' z tvaru ŭse sljady žanocskasci (u kožnaj svaja metoda). [Jany] flirtujuc' z litoŭskimi mytnikami i pamežnikami, što, zmakrèŭšy, ličac' bjaskoncyja štampiki ŭ ix paspartax.

Table 1.1 Cross-border economic activities in Ašmjany

	Male activities	Female activities
Type of activity	• Auto trade • Gasoline trade • Smuggling of cigarettes	• Trade in clothes, foodstuffs and household chemicals • Smuggling of cigarettes
Means of transport used	Private vehicles	Public transportation
Scale	Large or middle scale	Middle or small scale

The first type which has been mentioned already is *auto trade*. It is built upon the import of mainly used cars from Western Europe and the United States to Lithuania and then further to Belarus and Russia. Auto trade was considered for a long time as one of the main sources of income for Ašmjany men. However, the last research trips for this project fell in the period when the Belarusian government significantly raised import duties on used cars in the course of economic integration with Russia and Kazakhstan in the framework of the Customs Union. This was a matter of slight anxiety among some locals; however, even those of them who had close relatives involved in the auto trade were not ready to estimate the consequences of these changes for the well-being of their families and the region in general. The most common opinion was that demand for expensive foreign cars would persist in any case, especially among customers from Russia.

Another segment of cross-border economy which the Belarus–Lithuania border is known for is *gasoline trade*. Gasoline is twice as expensive in Lithuania than in Belarus; therefore, either Lithuanians with Belarusian visas who usually have relatives in the border region make regular trips to Belarus for gasoline or Belarusians who have Schengen visas carry it to Lithuanian buyers. The growth of this activity led to the flourishing of petrol station businesses on the Belarusian side of the border. Six petrol stations function today on the 20 km-long segment of the motorway between Ašmjany and the cross-border point of *Kamenny Loh* but even this quantity does not always prevent queues to fill up a car. In summer 2011 when Belarus was in the middle of a financial crisis which caused a shortage of foreign currency in the country and the existence of two currency rates – official and informal – the government was even forced to issue a special resolution which was supposed to limit the export of gasoline (and some other goods) across the border. This decision was determined by the situation when the difference in the price of gasoline between Belarus and its EU neighbours caused by currency rate fluctuations was so huge and demand for Belarusian gasoline on the borderlands was so high that petrol stations were not able to satisfy it and a fuel shortage appeared. Although this resolution was cancelled at the beginning of 2012, gasoline traders do remain the subject of constant concern for border officials and locals since they are considered to be the main reason for incredibly long queues at the border.

The third type of predominantly male cross-border economic activities is *large- or middle-scale smuggling* of cigarettes and alcohol. This activity is a major concern for customs officials and border guards on both of the sides of the border. Regular reports appear about successful operations aimed at discovering the illegal transportation of cigarettes and alcohol in the media and on web pages of both the State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus and State Border Guard Service at the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania. In 2011 Lithuanian customs officers claimed to have discovered 154.9 litres of smuggled alcohol (LR. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2015) and more than one million boxes of smuggled cigarettes (LR. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2015b) on the border with Belarus. Apparently, the statistics are based only on the cases of failure and do not represent how much alcohol and tobacco was actually brought into Lithuania and then further to Western Europe. Large-scale smuggling is primarily operated by organized crime networks. For example, in 2010 the Lithuanian Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius (Lukaitite, 2010) claimed that the existence of smuggling was mostly determined by large criminal groups and not by individuals who either tried to transport cigarettes across the river or cross the border in their Volkswagens. The latter represents middle-scale smuggling in the region.

However, smuggling also exists at another – low-scale – level with people (mainly women) carrying more than two boxes of cigarettes, a couple of bottles with cheap medicine and more than a litre of Belarusian vodka across the border. This kind of smuggling, being probably the most visible in the situation of the border crossing by bus or by train remains mainly unrepresented in statistics, border officials' reports and the media. Such smuggling constitutes only a part of what is defined here as female shuttle, or petty, trade across the border. Although shuttle trade remains discursively invisible and is considered the least harmful activity by customs officials,[22] it is one of the major symbols of the Belarus–Lithuania border for people who cross it regularly. When one goes from Minsk to Vilnius or, vice versa, from Vilnius to Minsk, one always meets the *Ašmjanskaja cëtka* who asks for a favour – to help her carry an illegal amount of goods across the border. However, being enormously visible at the moment of border control check, shuttle traders are dispersed in the space and time of the daily life in Ašmjany. Petty trade constitutes the local routine of a small border town, something that everyone in Ašmjany is well aware of but what may be difficult to grasp for an external observer.

Heterogeneity of Female Shuttle Trade: a Matter of Definition

Before I came to Ašmjany for the first study trip in 2010, I had observed the activities of petty traders on regular bus trips through the town on journeys between Minsk and Vilnius and on the *Minsk–Vilnius–Minsk* train which at that time still stopped at Ašmjany train station situated 15 km away from the town.

22 A non-taped conversation with a high-rank official of Ašmjany customs, Fieldnotes: 28 September 2010.

Therefore, some previous ideas on what shuttle trade in the town was like were formed before the start of this research project. To a great extent the preliminary notion about petty traders in the town is masterly described in the short story by Paval Kascjukevič – fragments of which are given in the epigraph. However, although traders were very visible on the border, one could hardly find their trail in Ašmjany. They were not represented at Ašmjany's two markets; neither did they trade on the streets or in any other public space. Nevertheless, when I asked local people about them, almost everyone told me that there were many of them in Ašmjany. As it appeared later, Ašmjany shuttle traders who sold their goods at the market or in private shops were a rare case. Most petty traders who brought goods from Lithuania to Belarus distributed them through informal networks to which I did not have access to begin with.

Moreover, the number of professional traders (people whose primary income comes from trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border) turned out to be less significant than expected. To some extent traders in Ašmjany are like 'werewolves' – many of them have quite respectable regular jobs (often at schools or other state organizations) but on certain days they turn into traders and go to Vilnius. Some of these women are involved in trade occasionally. They consider Vilnius as the place of descent and cheap shopping for themselves but when they go there their friends or colleagues who do not have visas may ask them to bring some particular goods from Lithuania. Women usually do this with a modest commission for their service. Furthermore, it also appeared that those women who belonged to the most noticeable group of 'traders' at the moment of border crossing did not actually live in Ašmjany and did not sell things themselves. They are native Belarusians who migrated to Lithuania during Soviet times and mostly work as delivery persons, i.e. they bring goods (mainly clothes) across the border but the goods are distributed by other traders.

Therefore, it appeared that many of the respondents or people talked with were not traders in a strict sense or at least their activity differed from what was presupposed to be shuttle trade as an activity connected with regular trips abroad for purchasing everyday goods and reselling them at a higher price at markets upon return (Jakovlev, Golikova and Kapralova, 2006). However, it was important not to limit the research to the theoretical categorization before starting the research. For this reason, the search of respondents relied on the ideas of locals about what cross-border trade was like in Ašmjany. When asking people whether they had acquaintances who were involved into this activity, neither a strict definition nor a detailed description of persons needed was given. Mostly the search was for someone who was bringing goods from Lithuania for sale or was connected to cross-border trade. Once such vague definition led to a curious incident where a woman was recommended as being involved with 'border trade'. However, when we met it turned out she was indeed a border trader but in a sense that she worked in a duty-free shop directly on the border. Nevertheless, that was the only occurrence of misinterpretation; usually people understood what exactly was meant by cross-border trade and bringing goods from Lithuania.

Following the logic of the local people and not limiting the research to particular definitions of shuttle trade, the heterogeneity of such a phenomenon as cross-border petty trade in the border region could be determined. It turned out that female shuttle trade in the normative sense did not occupy a significant place in the daily life of Ašmjany, although at least three of the respondents did belong to the group of people who could be called professional traders. However, less professional and rather occasional patterns of cross-border trade appeared to be even more important for the town. Actually, from observations most of the passengers of a daily *Vilnius–Ašmjany* bus were rather casual traders. The prevalence of this trade pattern allows the argument that for border regions petty trade might be less of a particular economic strategy but rather an integral part of daily life. In this sense, it was striking how 'traders' responded to interest in their trade as a subject of research. Many informants started interview meetings with the concern that they actually did not know what to say; neither did they understand what about their trade could be interesting to a researcher. Such a taken-for-granted character of Ašmjany shuttle trade needs further explanations and will be considered in Chapter 5.

Nevertheless, despite the difference between particular practices of cross-border trade observed in Ašmjany and shuttle trade in a more conventional sense this category was kept for the study to demonstrate, first, how the phenomenon changed during the years after the socialist bloc collapse; secondly, which forms shuttle trade took in the border region and to what extent the proximity of the border mattered; thirdly, how necessity which was considered as the main motive for starting shuttle trade in the early 1990s was replaced by other stimuli not all of which can be reduced to economic factors. Moreover, being used in a more metaphorical sense, the category of shuttle trade allows for heterogeneous practices of cross-border trade to be united under one label. Notwithstanding the structural dissimilarities among particular kinds of cross-border trade practices, the following features unite them: they are all based on arbitrage, require a regular cross-border mobility (including the formal aspect such as the possibility of having a multiple-entry visa), presuppose a certain degree of informality or illegality and are operated by individuals (instead of organized professional groups). Furthermore, in the situation of border crossing representatives of different groups are similarly treated as subjects of suspicion by the border and customs control simply due to the fact of being from Ašmjany. Therefore, even being involved in different kinds of trade, at the moment of border control shuttle traders from Ašmjany form a particular group of passengers which represents a composite character of *Ašmjanskaja cëtka* described by Kascjukevič.

However, a more attentive look at shuttle trade allows one to notice that the composite figure of the Ašmjany woman consists of at least four various groups of traders whose activities are organized in accordance with different principles. The first and probably the best-known category of traders are *petty smugglers* who smuggle cigarettes (more than two packs), alcohol (more than one litre) and medicine from Belarus to Lithuania. Smuggled goods are sold at Vilnius markets

or through social networks of friends or relatives who reside in the Lithuanian capital. Smuggling is a relatively profitable but a risky activity. A regular bus trip can bring up to 50 euro (EUR) of gross receipts. At the same time, the detention for smuggling may incur a penalty (approx. 200 EUR) or the suspension of the right to enter Lithuania.

Couriers, the second group of shuttle traders on the border between Belarus and Lithuania, combine smuggling with delivery practices. Couriers are mostly of Belarusian origin but live in Vilnius. On their way from Vilnius to Ašmjany, they carry clothes for Belarusian entrepreneurs who then sell them at Ašmjany or Minsk markets. The payment is made in accordance with the number of items that couriers have managed to bring across the border. On their way back, they also smuggle cigarettes and alcohol which they sell in Vilnius to their neighbours, co-workers or friends.

Another distinguishable group of traders are *professionals*, registered individual entrepreneurs who usually trade legally and pay taxes but avoid import duties on the goods (clothes, footwear, perfume) they bring from Lithuania to Belarus. Professionals tend to distinguish themselves from couriers and/or smugglers since their activity is better organized and regularized. However, at the moment of border crossing professionals still rely on other groups of Ašmjany women in order to cross the border without suspicion of the business activity from customs officials who follow special recommendations of the Belarusian State Customs Committee. According to these recommendations (mainly aimed at the inhabitants of border regions), a person who crosses the border regularly (once a week) cannot carry many similar goods (*Komsomol'skaja Pravda v Belarusi*, 2010). A suspicious number of similar items of clothes and footwear allows customs officials to confiscate them for the reason that the goods are carried for commercial purposes without proper documentation. To avoid confiscation, all women including professionals exchange goods among each other. This tactic helps them diversify the assortment of commodities they carry.

The fourth group of traders consists of *casuals*. According to observation, this group is the largest in Ašmjany and the most dispersed. Since casuals operate exclusively through informal networks, their activity is not visible at first glance. However, during the study the impression obtained was that the business of casuals constituted an important part of day-to-day consumption in the town. As one of them (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010) notes in her interview,

> Our people here have got used to it already, one barely goes to the market for shopping, because she knows, aha, I can ask that one, and that one will bring me [what I need] cheaper, or I can order something.[23]

23 *A u nas tut drugoj raz uže ljudi vot i privykli,tam na rynok malo kto pojdet pokupat', potomu čto znaet – aga, možno k tomu podojti, tot tebe privezet podeševle, ili čto-to zakazat' … .*

For casuals petty trade is usually not the primary but an additional source of income which is combined with a salary from regular employment or a pension. Moreover, for some casuals the trade itself is not the primary aim of their trips to Vilnius but an accompanying one. Foremost, casuals consider Vilnius as a source of consumption for their own needs (a local practice inherited from the Soviet times (see Chapter 2)); however, they readily combine such trips with occasional trade bringing particular goods which can be easily sold in Ašmjany. Structurally, the trade trips casuals make represent a mixture of activities of both smugglers and professionals. On their way to Vilnius casuals bring cigarettes and alcohol, although in the quantity which slightly (if at all) exceeds the limit allowed. Casuals prefer to avoid additional risks caused by smuggling but they use a small consignment of profitable goods to cover their travel costs. On the way from Vilnius to Ašmjany besides commodities for personal use, casuals also carry clothes, foodstuffs such as coffee, salmon, fruits and/or household chemicals. These goods are always in demand in the town and casuals can easily distribute them through informal networks.

Table 1.2 Types of female shuttle trade in Ašmjany

	Regularity of trade	Goods	Combination of formality/informality
Professionals	High, trade as primary employment	Clothes	Partially informal (pay taxes and sell goods legally but do not pay import duties)
Smugglers	High/Medium	Cigarettes, alcohol, medication	Informal
Couriers	High	Clothes on the way to Belarus (do not sell themselves); cigarettes on the way back to Vilnius	Informal
Casuals	Low	Clothes, foodstuffs	Informal

As it will be demonstrated in the following chapters, the abovementioned groups of traders have emerged in Ašmjany gradually, during different periods of the border development. Belonging to one or another group of traders has depended to a certain extent on the unequal possibilities of cross-border mobility among different groups of Ašmjany dwellers throughout the border history. If professionals, for instance, are characterized by a stable visa status which they have been able to use as a particular resource almost from the very beginning of the border's existence; casuals mainly consist of those social groups whose mobility is precarious and depends on political conjunctures which impact the border regime during the particular time period. Thus,

to a certain extent the variety of cross-border practices has been determined by the historical alterations in the border regime during the 20 years of the border's history. This interdependence between two modes of history – the history of the border regulations and the history of shuttle trade – has become the basis of periodization which the structure of the book is based upon. The last section of this chapter gives a brief outline of how these periods were distinguished and which specificities in the border development and shuttle trade existence they refer to.

From the Present to the Past of Ašmjany Shuttle Trade: Periodization

Since the history of Ašmjany shuttle trade has turned out to be closely related to the history of the Belarus–Lithuania border, its periodization as the discerning of particular events, which caused the rise and fall of different forms of shuttle trade in the last 20 years, is mainly determined by the history of border regime changes. However, the reconstruction of these events through media and document analysis followed but not preceded the analysis of people's memories about the border. In other words, the periods themselves appeared in people's narratives but particular timeframes for each period were either taken from the global and national history or reconstructed through the analysis of media and documents. By this approach a balance is maintained between what Italian historian Alessandro Portelli (1991, p. 63) defines as the aspiration of historians 'for a linear chronological sequence' and people's interest 'in pursuing and gathering together bundles of meaning, relationships and themes'.

According to the people's memories and narratives, two events in the history of the border were most important. The first one apparently referred to the appearance of the border. The second one was connected to the entry of Lithuania to the European Union. Both were considered as the events which divided the history of the region into 'before and after'. However, although both of the events to a large extent refer to such historical facts as the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the EU enlargement in 2004, a slightly different timeframe is used to mark these periods which will be further explained. In general, according to the human mode of border history, four historical periods were distinguished: before and after the border appeared and before and after Lithuania joined the EU.

The first period was remarkably defined in people's narratives as the period of the Soviet past when the border did not exist, people could go to Lithuania without any restrictions, they were used to doing so and they even considered Ašmjany as a suburb of Vilnius. Although shuttle trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border (as well as the border itself) did not exist at those times, other practices of informal trade took place, and first of all, the occasional trade in goods which were brought from Poland by those Ašmjany dwellers who had the right to travel outside of the Soviet Union. The history of the trade across the Soviet–Polish border, which was especially intensive in the late 1980s, shortly before the Soviet bloc collapsed, is traced back to the 1970s in Ašmjany.

Shuttle trade in Poland and in Polish goods outlasted the disintegration of the USSR and became an important source of income and even prosperity for professional traders in the early 1990s. At the same time, less advantaged women discovered Lithuania as a new trade destination. This brought into existence mass trade in Belarusian dairy and meat products in Vilnius, an activity with which many people in Ašmjany were involved. Food trade arose almost immediately after the first signs of the border appeared and existed on a mass scale until approximately the mid-1990s while making the border was still an ongoing process. Although both Belarus and Lithuania started implementing different forms of border control in 1990, the bilateral agreement between the two countries aimed at the border demarcation and delimitation was signed only five years later, in 1995. The visa regime between the two republics had been implemented one year earlier in 1994. Therefore, from 1990 when Lithuania proclaimed its independence from the Soviet Union and the first attempts to establish cross-border control were made until the mid-1990s when an official agreement between the two states was signed, the region basically remained what historians Baud and van Schendel (1997, p. 224) call *an infant* borderland. According to the authors, the infant borderland 'exists just after the borderline has been drawn' (Baud and van Schendel, 1997, p. 224) but social and economic connections still remain strong and clearly visible. Moreover, Baud and van Schendel (1997, p. 224) argue that at this stage the border is 'still a potentiality rather than social reality'. However, documentary regulations alone cannot be considered as sufficient grounds for understanding when the potentiality of the border comes to an end and the social reality arises. In the case of the early years of the Belarus–Lithuania border existence, for instance, the key documents were already in force in 1994–1995. Moreover, the state customs in both of the countries appeared even earlier, in 1991–1993. Notwithstanding these official changes, illegal mass cross-border movement as an everyday practice was still taking place until at least 1995, as it was mentioned by some of the respondents. Although people could often mix up particular dates especially if they were not connected to the important events of their private lives, the statistics of the Lithuania State Border Guard Service also proved this fact. If in 1995 the Service registered 5,017 people who attempted to cross the border illegally, in 1996 the number was more than five times lower (845 persons) (LR. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2015a).

Therefore, the period of an *infant* borderland overlapped with the period of a *mature* border regarding timeframes. To distinguish them the first one is referred to as to the period of a *porous* border which in different cases may have lasted up to the early 2000s. However, already in 1994, when important steps to the border regulation were made, particular attributes of the third period of the border history and, consequently, of shuttle trade were perceptible. This period was not homogeneous. It was characterized by several changes in the border regime between the two countries and by the incipient differentiation of shuttle trade practices. However, in general this period can be described as the time of the border institutionalization and significant changes in the state policy of Belarus and Lithuania towards the common border. To a large extent this policy was

determined by the different geo-political orientations which had been chosen by neighbouring countries. If Belarus came to be more clearly oriented towards its eastern neighbour Russia, Lithuania headed toward Europeanization, joining the European Union in 2004. The gravity of the countries towards different poles of the global political spectrum required more decisive actions in relations to the common border. In 1997–1999 a significant shift towards the policy and the discourse of a *non-porous* border happened. However, despite these changes, until the early 2000s the border had still remained a matter of bilateral relations between the two countries. These changes in the border regulation had two significant consequences for the practices of shuttle trade. On the one hand, as the result of the shift towards a persistent border, the border control between the two countries was indeed reinforced and shuttle trade as a mass activity lost its significance. This caused the gradual professionalization of shuttle trade across the Belarus-Lithuania border and the re-orientation of some traders towards Lithuanian markets as the main suppliers of imported commodities. On the other hand, since the regulation of the border between the two countries was still dominated by bilateral relations, the representatives of the two states made an agreement which facilitated cross-border movement for particular social groups. These groups (mainly organized by age) could also use their privileged position to implement shuttle trade. The form of this trade was reminiscent of the practices of mass shuttle trade of the early 1990s. However, its scale and primary motive significantly changed.

Although Lithuania joined the European Union on 1 May 2004, the documents which determined the cross-border movement of people between the two states were still of a bilateral character until 2007. Since 21 December 2007, when Lithuania adopted the Schengen rules, the border regulations have become the part of the EU legal framework. Therefore, actually 'the European' period in the history of the border and the history of shuttle trade started not in 2004 but in 2007 (or rather 2008 since the Schengen regulations came into force 10 days before the new year). The respondents who mentioned the importance of the changes which the EU brought into life, first of all meant new visa rules determined by the Schengen Agreement. Interestingly Schengen hardly limited the trade activities of those people who were regularly involved in it until 2007. Moreover, it allowed new social groups to start or resume their trade. This is thoroughly explained in Chapter 5. However, the history of the last period has not been entirely completed yet. Although this research is limited to 2011, the influence of Schengen on the cross-border mobility of the borderland people still remains an open question at least until the time when new changes to the border appear.[24] The latter remark to

24 The most realistic change which would start a new period of the border and shuttle trade development in the foreseeable future is the adoption of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the Government of the Republic of Lithuania about the mutual mobility of their citizens of border territories. The text of the Agreement (in Russian) can be found on http://www.guvd.gov.by/migration/mezhdunardog/# (last accessed 26 December 2014).

some extent concerns the periodization of this work in general. Although it might look like a consistent and linear narrative of the continuous development of shuttle trade under the influence of different border regimes, the reality of people's stories represented the situation more discrepantly. These discrepancies and overlaps will be considered in more detail in the following chapters.

Conclusions

This chapter draws a general picture of the place where the research was conducted. On the one hand, Ašmjany is considered to be the town on the borderland where cultures, religions and languages have tended to overlap throughout its controversial history. On the other hand, during Soviet times the town lost much of its ethnic and religious diversity. However, the influence of previous historical epochs is still tangible in Ašmjany. At the same time the literal position of the town on the border between Belarus and Lithuania is even more vivid. The signs of the neighbouring country as well as the different types of cross-border activities are graspable through the experience of daily life in Ašmjany.

There are several types of cross-border economic activities in the town which are differentiated along gender lines. While Ašmjany men are involved in middle- and large-scale types of businesses, women in the town find themselves in less risky but at the same time less profitable trade activities such as petty trade in clothes and foodstuffs and petty smuggling of cigarettes. Female shuttle trade in Ašmjany has appeared to be a more heterogeneous activity than one might expect. People not only smuggle cigarettes and alcohol across the border, they also bring clothes and foodstuffs from Lithuanian markets and distribute them among less fortunate counterparts who do not possess a Schengen visa. Some women operate such trade on a professional level, others consider it as a casual attribute of their shopping tours to neighbouring Vilnius. The casual character of shuttle trade and the importance of imported goods for daily consumption in the town are deeply embedded into the practices of the Soviet period as well as into the border position of the town.

The history of shuttle trade in Ašmjany started during Soviet times when people were bringing and selling goods from Poland. Lithuania as a trade destination was discovered only in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Belarus–Lithuania border in this region. Since that time the border regime has passed several substantial changes which have influenced people's mobility in the region and the development of shuttle trade practices. The changes in the border regulations form a basis for periodization which the book is built upon. The main periods of the border history, the status of the border during each of those periods and the forms of shuttle trading which existed during those periods are summarized in the table below. The detailed explanations of this table will be provided in chapters dedicated to particular periods.

Table 1.3 Periodization

	Status of the border	**Social groups and cross-border mobility**	**Shuttle trade practices**
Soviet period	An administrative boundary between two Soviet republics	No restrictions	None, Vilnius is the city for daily consumption (shuttle trade across Polish–Soviet border)
1990–1993: infant (porous) border	A porous border between two national states	Mass illegal cross-border movement	Shuttle trade in foodstuffs in Vilnius
1994–2007: mature border 1994–2002 2003–2007	A mature border	People who have relatives in Lithuania People above 65 years of age (until 2003)	Professional shuttle trade; couriers; smuggling Casual shuttle trade
2007–2011: persistent border	A persistent border between the Schengen zone and outer space	People who have relatives in Lithuania; People of Polish origin; Active members of the Catholic Church People with 'professional' Schengen visas	Professionals; couriers; smugglers Casual shuttle trade (but operated by other groups of people)

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Chapter 2
Shuttle Trade and Borders in Ašmjany Before the Disintegration of the USSR

The traces of the Soviet past in Ašmjany have been vivid not only in the town's appearance and the controversies of urban life, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, but also in local memories. Reminiscences of life 'before the border' occupied a significant place in many interviews and daily conversations with Ašmjany residents. Moreover, the way daily life in the town had been organized before the border appeared had an important impact on the development and operation of shuttle trade in the town after the USSR's collapse. First, I start with the analysis of interrelations between Ašmjany and Vilnius during Soviet times and the significant role which Vilnius played in the daily life of Ašmjany dwellers. Secondly, a picture of informal trade in Ašmjany at that time is drawn and its connections with the Polish past of the town demonstrated. Thirdly, I consider how memories about the Soviet past were represented by different people and which place in these reminiscences was taken by mobility and nostalgia.

Ašmjany as a Satellite of Vilnius: History of an Integrated Borderland

The development of shuttle trade in Ašmjany after the disintegration of the Soviet Union had its strong historical roots in Ašmjany's Soviet past when the border between two Soviet republics – the LithSSR and BSSR – did not exist and interactions between Belarusians and Lithuanians were extensive throughout the region. At that time the region represented a kind of an integrated borderland (Martínez, 1994) where barriers to human movement were entirely eliminated. The latter led to the development of both short- and long-term mobility across the administrative boundary between the two Soviet republics and to the high level of dependency on Vilnius among Ašmjany people in the course of their everyday life. Therefore, in their memories the interlocutors tended to depict Ašmjany as a satellite town of Vilnius or even as the city's suburb (Anna, Interview 10, 6 February 2012; Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, 14 September 2010) which had been perfectly connected to the 'centre' by cheap and regular public transportation (mainly buses and trains). The importance of Vilnius was intensified by the geographical location of Ašmjany on the periphery of the BSSR. Vilnius was two-and-a-half times closer to Ašmjany than Minsk, the capital of the Belorussian republic, and five times nearer than Hrodna, the administrative centre of the voblasc' to which Ašmjany belonged. Hence, due to its geographical proximity Vilnius had a more

significant meaning for Ašmjany people than Hrodna and Minsk taken together. People recalled that during Soviet times they did not know 'what Minsk was' and went there only on occasion:

> I say, I visited Minsk [for the first time] when I was at high school already. I remember the school organized a tour for us, probably only for the best pupils, and we went there on a truck, so I only saw Minsk from that truck. Minsk unlike Vilnius was rather strange for me (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012).[1]

As this extract demonstrates, Minsk was the destination of a special occasion, a place where people from Ašmjany went only with a specific purpose – either to visit particular attractions such as the circus, for instance, or to attend special events. At the same time, Vilnius was an integral part of daily life where one could go without any particular aim just to take a walk in the city centre. As another respondent (Anastasija, Interview 11, February 2012) recalled, she and her schoolmates were making regular trips to Vilnius after school just to eat ice-cream or to walk in a city park. Moreover, the interlocutors often claimed that they actually had not been able to find their way in Minsk as well as they did in Vilnius. However, the situation drastically changed in the post-Soviet years for those Ašmjany dwellers who had a long break in their visits to Vilnius after the border's appearance and the introduction of the visa regime. People had to redirect their attention to Minsk instead of Vilnius, and for some of them the cartography of Vilnius remained Soviet even 20 years after the Soviet Union's dissolution. For example, when one woman was asked to describe her regular trade trip to Vilnius, she mentioned that she usually went to *Dzeržinskij* market on *Dzeržinskij* Street. Since the existence of the toponym *Dzeržinskij*[2] in post-Soviet Vilnius seemed impossible, I asked her to specify where this market was located. She replied, 'Not far away from the department store [Univermag]'. After clarification about whether she meant Kalvarija market (*lith.* Kalvarijų turgus) and CUP,[3] she happily confirmed that was right.

Vilnius was also preferred to Minsk in the course of resettlement from the Ašmjany region. The intensive inter-republic migration on this borderland was part of a more general pattern of urbanization which was booming between the 1960s and early 1980s in both the Belorussian and Lithuanian Soviet republics. People who were born in villages adjacent to Ašmjany preferred to move to Vilnius because, as one of the respondents put it, 'they did not want to stay in the village

1 *Ja ž govorju, v Minske ja uže v takom vozraste byla, pomnju, so školy povezli nas, i to, navernoe, lučšix s klassa, v cirk, v gruzovoj mašine. Tak vot ja tol'ko Minsk videla tam s toj mašiny. A tak-to Minsk mne kak by čužoj, a vot Vilnjus … .*

2 This is a reference to Feliks Dzeržinskij (1877–1926), a native of the Vil'nja region, a prominent figure of October Revolution and a founder of Soviet State Security forces (*Cheka*).

3 Central Department Store (Centrinė universalinė parduotuve).

working in kolkhoz and liked the city more than the countryside' (Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012).[4] Hence, relocation from the Ašmjany region to Vilnius was perceived not so much as immigration from one Soviet republic to another, but merely as migration from the village to the city. Why people made their choice in favour of Vilnius instead of BSSR's urban settlements might be explained by the following reasons. First of all, the distance mattered. As previously mentioned, Vilnius was the closest city to Ašmjany. Moreover, in the case of some villages which were located on the very boundary between the two Soviet republics the distance from Vilnius was insignificant (20–30 km). The closeness to the place of origin was important for people who tended to keep strong connections with their parental families and siblings. That was quite widespread among the dwellers of rural areas where the ties of traditional family remained strong. A respondent (Žanna, Interview 13, March 2012) who had moved to Vilnius in 1983 recalled, for instance, that she used to visit her parents every weekend. Another woman (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012), whose two sisters and a brother lived in Vilnius, also mentioned that they went to their parents' home in a border village every Friday evening and stayed for the whole weekend. This tendency of circulating mobility (as a constant shift between urban and rural life (Harboe Knudsen, 2013, p.137)) had not only moral (devotion to parents and the native village) but also pragmatic reasons. On the one hand, even after moving to the city children were supposed to help their parents on household plots;[5] on the other hand, parents also supported their children with material means such as home-produced foodstuffs, for instance, which allowed new city dwellers to reduce their everyday expenses.

The second reason for the 'exodus' to Vilnius (as it is depicted in people's narratives) was the reliance on the network of relatives or village neighbours which played a significant role in the process of Soviet urbanization and the preference of the urban settlement. In the Ašmjany region this tendency was particularly strong among siblings. Some of the respondents from four–five-child families were the only sibling who remained in Ašmjany. Others moved to Lithuania. One of the respondents (Olga, Interview 7, October 2011), who after her graduation from a chemical college had been sent to Soviet Russia to work in the chemical industry in the course of so-called *raspredelenije*,[6] then had moved to Homel' and after the Chernobyl Catastrophe returned to Ašmjany, said that upon her return to her native village she had wanted to move further to Vilnius. The reason was that by the time of her return she did not have any relatives in her place of origin as her parents had died already and three of her sisters lived in Lithuania. However, it had been in the late 1980s and she had been denied registration in Vilnius by a municipality clerk who had told her (as she recalled), 'Go where you came from'. In her interview she

4 *Nu, ne xaceli vo tut na dzjarèŭne, u kalhase pracavac', xaceli ŭ horad.*

5 On a similar tendency of kinship obligations of urban children to their rural parents in contemporary rural Lithuania see Harboe Knudsen, 2013.

6 The Soviet practice of obliging fresh graduates to work on particular enterprises for 2–3 years after their studies.

explained such a reaction by the rising wave of nationalism among Lithuanians at that time (Olga, Interview 7, October 2011).

The appearance of such networks of relatives in Lithuania was also connected with marriage ties. For example, in one case (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012) two sisters of a respondent were married to two brothers from Lithuania and both of the families lived in Vilnius. As another interlocutor (Galina, Interview 2, August 2011) said, 'We had the only interest – to marry *into Vilnius*'.[7] However, despite such marital pragmatism stressed in the interview with the woman who was not married, in general marriages between Belarusians and Lithuanians were not part of a particular strategy *to marry a Lithuanian* but rather a consequence of intense human relations on the borderland in the course of daily life. As the informant (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012) whose sisters were married to the Lithuanian brothers recalled, they had not divided people as Belarusians or Lithuanians and had had many common activities with Lithuanians from neighbouring villages on the other side of the invisible border in her childhood and youth. Since she came from a village located only 1.5 km from the LithSSR, they shared many aspects of their everyday existence and leisure activities such as a public bath or dancing, for instance. This created possibilities for intense personal ties which were represented as connections between villages, rather than between two republics or nationalities.[8] These connections were also intensified through the common language people in the region shared. Although schoolchildren on the Lithuanian side attended lessons in Lithuanian, while their Belarusian peers learnt Belarusian, the language of everyday communication was a mixture of Russian, vernacular Belarusian and Polish. Moreover, these villages might also have been a part of the same Catholic parish and shared the same cemetery. Therefore, Belarusian women married not *into Vilnius* but rather into a neighbouring village located on the Lithuanian side. Afterwards, a couple could move to Vilnius in search of better life and in the course of the general pattern of urbanization. It is hard to prove, however, that marriages between Belarusian women and Lithuanian men prevailed over those between Belarusian men and Lithuanian women. In the sample only the former pattern was represented.

Nevertheless, it was not only local factors which mattered for people choosing to move to Vilnius. In the Soviet Union the Baltic republics in general were considered to be the most attractive for immigration due to their economic development, the highest standard of living and salaries which were above the average in the USSR (Parming, 1980; Lane, 2002). Although the average wage level was higher in Estonia and Latvia, in Lithuania it still exceeded the average

7 *U nas byl tol'ko odin interes – vyjti zamuž v Vil'njus.*

8 It is worth mentioning that the rural area in this region was extensively populated by people who identified themselves as Poles. However, in an interview one of the respondents refers to people from the Lithuanian side as Lithuanians. It might be connected with the fact that she considers them as Lithuanians only according to their passport nationality. Nevertheless, her sisters are married to ethnic Lithuanians.

level in the rest of the Soviet Union (Lane, 2002). Therefore, in general in the 1960s–1980s there was a flow of immigrants from the Belorussian SSR to the LithSSR since 'the living conditions in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were considered by [Belorussian] immigrants as those of a higher quality' (Manak, 1992, p. 53). Moreover, the growth in the number of Ukrainian and Belorussian immigrants to the LithSSR in that period was more significant than the growth among Russians (Kotov, 2001). In 1973, for example, Belorussians were the second largest group of newcomers (after Russians) settled in the Lithuanian SSR (4,905 and 10,672 accordingly) (SSSR. Central'noe statističeskoe upravlenie, 1975, p. 188–91). However, in the case of Belorussians the number of people who came from rural areas was more significant and represented 38.7 per cent of the total number of Belorussian immigrants (in the case of Russians the correlation between urban and rural population was 81.2 to 18.8 per cent correspondingly) (SSSR. Central'noe statističeskoe upravlenie, 1975, p. 188–91). Moreover, according to the BSSR statistics of 1975–1985, the most active loss of population in favour of the Lithuanian republic was observed in borderland regions, namely in the Hrodna and Vicebsk regions (BSSR. Central'noe statističeskoe upravlenie, 1976–1986).

Since salaries were higher in Lithuania, Ašmjany people went there mainly to work. Employment also guaranteed the possibility of arranging accommodation in the city. At first, people were provided with a dormitory room for workers but over time they could gain their own apartment. One of the respondents (Žanna, Interview 13, March 2012), who had moved to Vilnius in the early 1980s together with her husband, mentioned that when they had come they had not had any particular plans where to live and work. Soon they both found jobs at a radio details factory. The factory provided them with a dormitory room but later allocated an apartment. In return, the couple had to contribute 1,000 working hours to the building of the house.

However, employment in Vilnius did not mean ultimate migration. Plenty of people worked in the city but continued to live either in borderland villages or in Ašmjany. People recalled that there were special buses for workers which picked them up and carried them to Vilnius every weekday morning and brought them back in the evening. Ašmjany people were mostly involved in non-qualified labour which did not require any education except for a technical school in some cases. There were no stories of people from the region who obtained higher education in the Lithuanian SSR in the sample. Moreover, some respondents mentioned that for education people had preferred Minsk or Hrodna (Galina, Interview 2, August 2011; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012). The latter could be explained by the language issue. Although Russian was the official language in all Soviet republics including the LithSSR, Lithuanian remained in use at all levels of education (Kiaupa, 2002). Hence, while obtaining higher education might have required at least some language skills, non-qualified labour was available without any knowledge of Lithuanian. Neither was Lithuanian needed for daily survival in Vilnius.

Besides organized transport for people who worked in Vilnius, there was also a decent system of public transportation between Ašmjany and the city. People usually recalled that transport (buses and trains) had been extremely cheap and cost 'less than a rouble'. Moreover, in some cases Ašmjany was better connected with Vilnius than with adjacent villages in the BSSR. One of respondents (Galina, Interview 2, August 2011) mentioned that her family used to visit a Roman Catholic Church (*kascël*) in Medininkai (*bel.* Medniki), a Lithuanian village located 2 km away from the contemporary border. Although there was also a Church in Baruny,[9] a Belarusian village, the transport connection with Medininkai was better since the latter was situated near the road to Vilnius. Thus, cheap and regular transportation made a visit to Lithuania easy to implement.

However, not church visits but rather the practice of daily consumption oriented towards Vilnius were a priority on these trips. Actually, consumption was one of the first things which came up when people were asked about their border experience. People usually started recalling what they used to buy in Vilnius, how attractive Vilnius counters were in comparison with those in Ašmjany and how the border destroyed this experience. 'We were used to being fed by Vilnius; that is why we were against this border';[10] such a statement from one of the interviews (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011) sums up the sentiment shared by many people. It is worth mentioning that this image of Vilnius as a 'consumer Mecca' has persisted in Ašmjany until today and has played a significant role in the development of shuttle trade. However, if today this image is determined by Lithuania's membership in the EU, in Soviet times it was connected with the specificities of the Soviet planned economy and the hierarchy of cities. The situation in Ašmjany during the Soviet period is reminiscent to some extent of the situation described by geographer Olga Medvedkov (1990) concerning urban agglomerates around Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. Medvedkov (1990) argues that in these suburbs one could observe the scarcity of food and services which were concentrated in the core cities. Although Ašmjany was barely planned on purpose as a satellite of Vilnius, in practice the unequal distribution of resources between the capital city of Vilnius and the peripheral small town on the margins of the Belorussian Soviet Republic was significant. Moreover, Soviet Lithuania was known as the most dynamic producer of meat and dairy products in the Soviet Union (Lane, 2002). This might explain why people usually mentioned that not only the variety of foodstuffs had been much better in Lithuania but also the quality of products had been higher there. Furthermore, Vilnius had remained the source of 'luxury' goods for Ašmjany people such as fruit or fresh flowers. One respondent recalled,

> Well, I was going to Lithuania all my childhood. We did not have flowers in the town, so we brought them from Lithuania. March 8, the Teachers' Day,

9 In Ašmjany both Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches did not function during Soviet times. The buildings were turned into warehouses.

10 *My tol'ko pitalis' v Vil'njuse, vot počemu my byli protiv ètoj granicy.*

Figure 2.1 Tourists from Belarus. Vilnius, 1973
Source: © Antanas Sutkus, Courtesy of Antanas Sutkus

> where? To Vilnius. Where did we bring oranges from? From Vilnius. That is why we went to Vilnius all my childhood (Marina, Interview 5, September 2011).[11]

However, Ašmjany people did not satisfy only their 'basic needs' in Vilnius. Lithuania was also a source of leisure activities and cultural attractions which were scarce in a small town and even more so in villages. Both in interviews and a focus-group discussion in the local museum this issue was more regularly

11 *Oj, v Litvu vse detstvo ezdila, kogda v svoe detstvo za cvetami ezdili, v gorode ne bylo. 8 marta, Den' učitelja, kuda? V Vil'njus. Apel'siny otkuda privozili? Iz Vil'njusa. Poètomu my ezdili v Vil'njus vse detstvo.*

stressed by educated people. For some of them who identified themselves with *intelligentsia* it was important to mention that not only material things mattered during their trips to Vilnius (although this was not entirely denied) but also cultural ones. One woman (Anna, Interview 10, February 2012), a low-rank administrator at school, claimed, 'We took a bus and we went, well, not necessarily to shops, no, not only sausage stalls, but cinema, theatre and all so to say, all possibilities'.[12] Another one, a high-rank manager of a museum, echoed,

> Well, I used to go for foodstuffs probably twice a month. But naturally it was accompanied not only by shopping but also we went somewhere to see something, there were many things to see there. Vilnius has such a nice old town area (Focus-group discussion, February 2012).[13]

Concluding, it is worth mentioning that although on the level of everyday practices including their material but also cultural aspects there were no borders in the Belarus–Lithuania region and this borderland was to a great extent integrated, symbolic boundaries between the two localities (Ašmjany and Vilnius) as well as between the two 'Soviet nations' also existed. It was not only a matter of difference between a province and a city, neither was it merely about the disparity in the development of the two Soviet republics (although the BSSR was also one of the most economically successful republics in the USSR). Rather it was a sense of cultural difference which was stressed by some people. One of the interlocutors mentioned once in conversation that actually there had always been an invisible border in the region (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010). This idea was also pronounced in some other interviews where Vilnius and Lithuania were depicted as the 'Soviet West' and 'Soviet Europe'. However, even despite the recognition of some cultural differences, people regularly referred to Vilnius as to their second native city which they had been cut off from by the emergent border. It is noteworthy that such an attitude to Vilnius has been kept in Ašmjany until recently. In spite of the more than 20-year history of the border existence, many respondents still admitted that they did not have a feeling of being abroad in Vilnius, even though at present the city belonged to another geopolitical region. As one of the respondents (Marina, Interview 5, September 2011) explains,

> Vilnius is as it was for me. When I go to Poland, I feel that I go abroad. When I travel to Lithuania, I do not have this feeling. Probably because it is closer and

12 *My sadilis' na avtobus, my ezdili, požalujsta, neobjazatel'no magaziny, net, ne tol'ko kolbasnye rjady, a kino, teatr i vse, tak skazat', vozmožnosti.*

13 *Ne, nu a čto, za produktami ja, navernoe, 2 raza v mesjac ezdila. No èto soprovoždalos' že, estestvenno, ne tol'ko ž pokupkami, no schodili kuda-to, posmotret'-to tam est' čto. Vil'njus takoj krasivyj staryj.*

> more familiar. I feel in Vilnius as if I am in Ašmjany. I know everything, I know where I am, I am not scared.[14]

As the quotation above demonstrates, the geographical proximity of Vilnius as well as the integration of regular trips to the capital of the Lithuanian republic into the course of daily life in the town continues to play a significant role for Ašmjany people. Although Lithuania and Lithuanians in general have been perceived as culturally different, Vilnius has had a peculiar position in this process of boundaries construction and has been considered as the Ašmjany people's own city. Sometimes the respondents claimed that whenever one went to Vilnius, she necessarily met an Ašmjany dweller. The special meaning of the city for Ašmjany inhabitants should not be, however, confused with sentiments of some Belarusian historians who have regarded Vilnius as the centre of Belarusian culture illicitly taken away by the Soviets (see Siŭčyk, 1993; Majsenja, 1992, Širjaev, 1992; Šyraeŭ, 1992; *Zvjazda*, 1992). Rather, Vilnius has been seen as the lost paradise of daily consumption, the practice which was widespread in the region during Soviet times and which to some extent has influenced the development of shuttle trade activities across the Belarus–Lithuania border after the USSR collapse. Nevertheless, the birth of shuttle trade practices in Ašmjany during the Soviet period is connected to another country which is also mentioned in the respondent's narrative, namely to Poland. Being culturally much closer to Ašmjany people than neighbouring Lithuania, Poland is perceived as a foreign country not only due to the geographical distance but also due to the existence of the real border between Poland and the Soviet Union. Despite a general idea on the persistence of the Soviet borders, the Polish–Soviet border, however, was not ubiquitously closed for Ašmjany dwellers but was as *selectively open* as probably any other border in the world. The combination of this factor with the specificities of the Soviet planned economy brought into life sporadic petty trade activities among Ašmjany inhabitants. To explain this statement, a deeper excursus into the Polish history of the Ašmjany region is needed.

The Role of Poland and the Emergence of Ašmjany Shuttle Trade

Poles in the Ašmjany Region

As mentioned in Chapter 1, in the course of its complicated history Ašmjany was a part of at least five different state formations such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, Poland, and the USSR. All of them had some impact on the development of social, religious and ethnic

14 *Vil'njus kak byl dlja menja, tak i est' Vil'njus. Vot v Pol'šu edu, da, ja čuvstvuju, čto edu za granicy. V Litvu ja ne čuvstvuju. Nu, možet, čto bol'še znakomyj, bliže. Ja priexala, poexala, dlja menja t èto tože samoe, čto po Ošmjanam, poezdila i uexala. Ja vse znaju, ja znaju vezde, gde ja naxožus', mne nestrašno.*

specificities of the town; however, the influence of Poland was one of the most significant. Although Ašmjany is located more than 200 km away from today's literal borderland between Belarus and Poland, the ethnic and social boundaries brought into life by the former dominance of Poland in the region still play a role in the cultural identity of Ašmjany people. In this sense Ašmjany is an example of how dispersed and diffused borders can be and how 'the interlinkages between places and people are loosening the classic triangle between territory-identity-citizenship' (van Houtum, 2012, p. 407). Therefore, although geographically Ašmjany belongs to the Belarus–Lithuania borderland, which has been known as the part of Polish *Kresy Wschodnie,* the cultural and social significance of Poland has turned out to be more vivid in the town. In this part and then in Chapter 5 light is shone on how the Polish influence has affected the patterns of cross-border mobility of Ašmjany people throughout the town's contemporary history and to what extent 'the Polish factor' has mattered in the development of shuttle trade.

As already stressed, according to the last Census the number of Poles in Ašmjany is quite insignificant and represents only 5.7 per cent of the town's population (RB. National Statistical Committee, 2011, p. 120). However, the Vil'nja region has always been known for its high percentage of Polish people. Even after the intensive Sovietization of the western part of Belarus, which had belonged to Poland in the interwar period, the number of people who identified themselves as Poles was still high in particular Belarusian regions and mainly in rural areas, where the impact of Sovietization was not so tangible and where the Roman Catholic Church continued to play an important role in people's identification. According to the Census of 2009, Voranaŭski *raën*, for example, which also belongs to the Belarus–Lithuania border region, is still predominantly Polish. The number of people who identify themselves as Poles is approximately six times higher in this region than the number of Belarusians (24,615 against 3,963) (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2011, p. 9). At the same time most of Polish population of the Voranava region (73 per cent) lives in rural areas (ibid.).

The Polish population of the Vil'nja region (so-called *Vilenskija Paljaki*, *pol.* Polacy Wileńszczyzny) has its specificities. First of all, Poles in this region are a mainly autochthonous population which did not migrate to this area but 'obtained' their Polish identity in the course of Polonization. At the end of the nineteenth–beginning of the twentieth century peasants in this predominantly rural region used to designate themselves as *tutejšija* (locals)[15] and spoke the Belarusian language which they defined as *prosta mova*. As historian Theodor Weeks (2003, p. 213) argues, 'on the whole, Belarusian peasants […] derived their identity from village, religion, and social standing – not from "nationality", a category that had little meaning for their daily lives'. However, he also specifies that Catholic peasants (and the Vil'nja region has been predominantly Catholic) had pro-Polish sentiments due to the activities of the Roman Catholic clergy (Weeks, 2003, p. 216). Therefore, the second specificity of the Poles in the Vil'nja region was that they were

15 On the phenomenon of *tutėjšasc'* see, for example, Pershai, 2008; Kabzińska, 1999.

predominantly Catholic and that their religion actually was an important factor in their self-identification as Poles (Sadowski, 1995 cited in Kabzińska, 1999, p. 32; Smaljanczuk, 1997). According to this, Belarusian Poles in general (not only those from the Vil'nja region) are sometimes defined as Catholic Poles, or *kościelni Polacy* (Kabzińska, 1999, p. 21). The influence of the Roman Catholic Church determined also the third specificity of indigenous Belarusian Poles, notably the importance of their self-identification when 'the identity [was] stronger than its linguistic basis' (Ioffe, 2008, p. 52). Departing from the idea of Polish sociologist Andrzej Sadowski (1995), ethnographer Iwona Kabzińska (1999) argues that the intensity of the main features of a Pole from the Belarus–Poland borderland which Sadowski (1995 cited in Kabzińska, 1999, p. 32) distinguishes (such as self-identification, origin from a Polish family, Catholicism, attachment to Polish history and culture and the usage of the Polish language), might vary in individual cases depending on the proximity to the Belarusian–Polish border and the Polish cultural environment. This explains, according to Kabzińska (1999), why self-identification has been often considered as a leading criterion to distinguish Poles from non-Polish population.

Reliance on self-identification gave people some space to manipulate their identity in accordance with external circumstances and sometimes even pressure. For example, Polish demographer Piotr Eberhardt (1997, p. 113) argues that during the Polish Census of 1921 in the Belarusian territories 'many people who were far from being Poles stated the Polish nationality for opportunistic reasons'. In order to avoid this opportunism in the next census of 1931, the question of nationality was replaced by the question of a native language (Eberhardt, 1997). The results of that census, however, were again unsatisfactory since, according to Eberhardt, 'many Belarusians, Jews and Ukrainians who knew Polish, chose it as a native language for different, sometimes unexplainable, reasons' (p. 113) such as the aspiration to 'demonstrate a loyalty to the Polish state' and the fear of discrimination (p. 115). Nevertheless, in the case of the Ašmjany region the situation was less controversial because the number of people who chose Polish as their native language almost coincided with the percentage of the Catholic population (81.3 and 81.4 per cent accordingly) among which Polonization was indeed very intensive (Eberhardt, 1997, p. 117, 121). According to Eberhardt, Catholics were used to the Polish language through the Church service and, therefore, more easily accepted it than the Orthodox population did. In general, as Eberhardt (1997, p. 142) maintains, due to the high level of self-proclaimed Polish native speakers and members of the Catholic Church the population of the Vil'nja region, including Ašmjany and some other administrative units, 'were recognized in the interwar period as the population of Polish nation'.

After the Second World War the reversal process of re-Polonization took place in the region. Polish schools were closed, the Roman Catholic Church presence was minimized and a general course on Sovietization was taken. Moreover, in 1944–1946 the Ašmjany region experienced intensive resettlement of its population to Poland according to the mutual agreement between Poland and the BSSR signed on 9 September 1944. The agreement stipulated the right of Polish and Jewish

people who had had Polish citizenship before 17 September 1939 to resettle in Poland (Halicka, 2013; Mironowicz, 2005). According to the data of 15 June 1946, 3,141 families (12,233 people) were relocated from the Ašmjany *raën* (Vjaliki, 2005, p. 293). Taking into consideration that the population of Ašmjany after the war was only 3,460 people, the number of people who relocated from the entire region was quite significant. However, almost the same number (12,216 people) declined evacuation for different reasons (Vjaliki, 2005, p. 295). According to Belarusian historian Anatol' Vjaliki (2005), among the main reasons of voluntary renunciation was that by 1945 the Polish population of the BSSR had understood already that Poland had also become pro-communist and that in perspective it would barely differ from the Soviet State. Vjaliki cites (p. 145) a fragment from correspondence between the Communist party representatives of the Hrodna region where it was said that '*inter alia* also such an attitude dominates that there is no sense in resettlement since there will be Soviet influence in Poland anyway as well as NKVD. Therefore, it is better to live and not to ruin oneself'. However, the older respondents, answering the question about the circumstances under which they had stayed in Ašmjany while other members of their family had left in 1944–1946, also mentioned that it had been a matter of principle for their parents who had insisted that they had been born here and had to be buried in this land (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Valentina, Interview 6_add, December 2012). Property also mattered. One of the respondents (Anastasija, Interview 11, September 2012), whose uncle had left Ašmjany in 1945 and whose mother stayed, said that both her mother and second uncle had already had their own houses by the time of the resettlement and they had not been ready to leave them. At the same time the uncle who had left had not built a house yet, therefore, she explained, 'he had nothing to cling on'. This case also demonstrates that there were families which were partially divided in the course of the resettlement (actually most of the respondents belonged to such families). The latter had a significant meaning for the cross-border mobility of Ašmjany people during Soviet times.

Mobility across the Soviet–Polish Border and the Birth of Shuttle Trade in Ašmjany

The Polish past of Ašmjany which mainly came to an end after the resettlement of Poles in 1944–1946 and the official policy of turning the rest of self-identified Poles into Belarusian citizens in the course of passportization of the population[16]

16 In western Belarus before the War most people (especially peasants) did not have passports (Vjaliki, 2005). After World War II (although not in the first decade) they were supposed to get Soviet passports which contained information about nationality. It is a well-known fact (which has also been represented in this research) that many Poles were 'turned into' Belarusians in the course of passportization by the Soviet authorities who denied recognition of Polish nationality under different pretexts (see also Kabzińska, 1999). However, as two examples from the sample demonstrate, sometimes attempts to remain a Pole were successful (Galina, Interview 2; Natalija, Interview 4).

had, however, an important consequence for cross-border mobility in the region. Although the borders of the Soviet Union were usually depicted as completely impermeable for Soviet citizens (which was true to a great extent), in the case of Ašmjany dwellers the situation slightly differed. The resettlement of 1944–1946 created kin networks between Ašmjany and the People's Republic of Poland which allowed those family members who had stayed in the BSSR to visit their relatives in Poland regularly. Usually, however, such visits were affordable only once a year, mainly in summer when people had their official vacations. No formal restrictions on the number of visits per year were mentioned by the interviewees. Rather, since such visits required time and money, they simply could not be made more frequently (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011). Neither could the respondents recall any obstacles they experienced in the process of obtaining official documents which allowed them to visit Poland. The only thing they needed was an invitation from their close relatives according to which approval documents were issued. People did not even have to go to either Hrodna or Minsk in order to obtain these documents since they were sent directly from Ašmjany to the Polish consulate by the local passport office. Usually the whole procedure took approximately two weeks.

Although the initial aim of such trips was indeed determined by visits to relatives, sometimes they were also accompanied by sporadic involvement in informal trade. The regularity and intentionality of such trade varied in different cases. While some respondents (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011) insisted that they had sold some goods, which they had brought from Poland, only occasionally; others (Marina, Interview 5, September 2011; Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012; Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, August 2011) mentioned that they or their parents (in the case of a younger generation) had tried to supplement every trip with an additional profit which such trade could have brought. The situation rather depended on the person's ability to take a risk and on relations with Polish relatives. For example, two women who stated that they had not usually brought anything for trade also mentioned that their relatives in Poland were prosperous and they had been ashamed to ask them for help and cooperation in obtaining goods which could then have been sold in Ašmjany.[17] One of them (Valentina, Interview 6_add, December 2012) stated, 'Oh no, I did not do this, they were very rich and they would not have liked if I had been standing at the market selling things'.[18]

Informal trade in Ašmjany as in the Soviet Union in general emerged under the influence of the planned economy of shortage. As mentioned, a small provincial town on the margins of the Belorussian Soviet republic was poorly provided with

17 It is worth mentioning that during the socialist period private trade in the USSR in general was considered to be an immoral activity under the influence of the state ideology (Humphrey and Mandel, 2002).

18 *Oj, net, ja ètim ne zanimalas', oni u menja očen' bogatye, oni ne ljubili, čtob ja tam stojala na bazare, torgovala.*

even basic goods not to mention something more exclusive and peculiar. Vilnius, which was considered to be a source of everyday consumption, was also unable to satisfy people's demand for some particular goods such as footwear or clothes especially of Western origin since it was the part of the same (Soviet) economic system. Planned economy was also dominant in other countries of the Soviet bloc and members of COMECON[19] such as Poland, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Nevertheless, there existed differences in the economic development of these countries. In Hungary and Poland, for instance, private economic initiatives were not entirely forbidden (Williams and Baláž, 2002; Irek, 1998; Wedel, 1986). Moreover, both of the countries experienced a gradual easing of travel restrictions (Czakó and Sik, 1999; Irek, 1998). The latter facilitated informal economic exchanges between particular countries of the Bloc. As Williams and Baláž (2002, p. 326) explain, in Hungary the import of Western goods was permitted 'which – in the absence of exchange rate and travel barriers –was attractive to shoppers from Czechoslovakia and Poland'. Besides Hungary, GDR was another source of Western commodities, which were imported from Western Germany and then transported on to Poland since the border between Poland and Eastern Germany was relatively permeable from 1972 (Kochanowski, 2011). According to historian Jerzy Kochanowski (2011), Polish seaports such as Gdansk and Gdynia also played an important role in the import of Western goods to the country. In addition, tourists from Western and Soviet Socialist countries as well as Polish citizens who worked abroad were important 'vehicles' in this process (Kochanowski, 2011). Therefore, as Kochanowski (2011, p. 413) argues, Poland during socialist times was a kind of 'a mediator' between the Western economy and the Soviet Union and was supposed to satisfy a demand for 'everything that had something to do with the West'. This demand was particularly high among Soviet citizens. On the micro-level of the small town of Ašmjany local Poles were important agents in this more general exchange system.

However, to buy Western goods in Poland one needed currency because Soviet rubles did not have a high value there. Since the 1970s, US dollars were the most popular money in Poland where there was a well-developed black market of currency exchange (Kochanowski, 2011; Wedel, 1986). At the same time for ordinary Ašmjany dwellers not only US dollars but also Polish zloty were barely available. They received some currency from the state before their travel but the amount was negligible. Therefore, people imported Soviet goods to Poland, sold them, got some local currency and then bought commodities of presumably Western origin which they sold again upon return to Ašmjany. Among the exported goods which were most frequently mentioned in interviews gold prevailed. However, coffee, caviar, flax linen, some electronic equipment and even toys for children were also named. At the same time, for Poles gold had the highest value. As one interlocutor recalled (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, 30 August

19 The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance which promoted bilateral and multilateral trade between the Soviet bloc countries.

2011), Polish people could not understand how Soviet citizens could exchange gold for something less valuable, 'They said, "For us the gold is treasure, we hide it, and you exchange onto rugs which will wear out".[20] Another woman (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011) told a story about her Polish sister who had carried two gold rings across the border and these rings, which she had planned to sell at home and to use the money for house renovation, had got confiscated. The respondent mentioned that her sister had been so upset by that fact that she had even been going to hang herself. Certainly, it was rather an exaggeration; however, the role of gold in cross-border trips was indeed outstanding.

It is noteworthy that gold was mainly imported in the form of jewellery which was also not easily available in Ašmjany. In a critical commentary the local newspaper (*Krasnoe znamja*, 1989) wrote,

> Look at this picture: these women all at once turned away from the camera. They were staying in line on the stairs of our department store where that day "the golden rush" raged. In the expectation of the "yellow metal" passions were rising, rumors and conjectures were spreading.[21]

The latter fragment demonstrates that in order to obtain gold in Ašmjany (as well as many other goods) one had to spend time in queues, and that time was quite tense because after all one could have got nothing if the commodity had run out of stock already. Therefore, the commodities which were supposed to be taken to Poland were collected gradually, sometimes during the whole year (Galina, Interview 2, August 2011). People went to other cities and even republics (mainly Soviet Russia and Ukraine) to obtain gold. Some goods such as particular home appliances were brought from the Baltic States via informal networks (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011). Certain things were also available in Ašmjany, however, again with the help of friends or neighbours through so-called *blat*.[22] For instance, if someone had acquaintances in a local restaurant, he or she could obtain such a rare and expensive product as caviar (Galina, Interview 2, August 2011).

Since the eastern border of Poland was known for gold smuggling (Kochanowski, 2011), it was not an entirely easy task to carry it across the border. Two informants (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Marina, Interview 5,

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20 *Govorili: "Dlja nas zoloto – klad, my ego prjačem, a vy na anuči menjaete, kotorye snosite potom".*

21 "Zolotaja lichoradka" v Ošmjanskom univermage", *Krasnoe znamja,* 20.04.1989, N 48:

> *Vzgljanite na ètu fotografiju: kak družno otvernulis' ot ob"ektiva mnogie iz ženščin, stojaščie v očeredi na stupen'kax našego univermaga. V ètot den' tam buševala "zolotaja lixoradka". V ožidanii "želtogo metalla" nagnetalis' strasti, roždalis' sluxi i domysly.*

22 On the meaning of *blat* as 'the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply' in the Soviet economy see Ledeneva, 1998.

September 2011) recalled an unpleasant experience of personal examination by customs officers; another one (Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012) explained particular strategies to hide gold. As she mentioned, they had usually used puppets as containers where gold, wrapped either in an insulating tape or carbon paper, was placed. The latter two were believed to protect gold from being detected by the special equipment which customs officials used. The import of other commodities was also limited. However, the more family members travelled together, the more goods they could carry. One woman (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, August 2011) recalled that when she had gone to Poland with her husband and two children they could take two TV-sets with them along with some additional goods such as flax textile, for instance.

As mentioned, the demand for 'Western' goods was very high among Ašmjany inhabitants.[23] Although many of those goods (mainly clothes) might have had no particular value for a Western citizen, in the Soviet Union they were in short supply so their socioeconomic and symbolic meaning was very significant. On the one hand, goods from abroad were supposed to satisfy people's demand for cheap and quality commodities which the system of socialist production was not able to respond to (Verdery, 1996). On the other hand, as Katherine Verdery (1996, p. 27) argues, the consumption of Western commodities under socialism was an important part of 'resistant social identities' which enabled 'you to differentiate yourself as an individual in the face of relentless pressure to homogenize everyone's capacities and tastes into an undifferentiated collectivity'. In Ašmjany the latter aspect was determined not only by the construction of social boundaries through the consumption of unavailable goods but also by the strengthening of ethnic boundaries through underlining Polish identity. Respondent Galina (Interview 2, August 2011) for whom her Polish roots were an important part of self-identification emphasized in her interview,

> I want to say that all my clothes were Polish from the very childhood. I did not understand what it was – to wear another type of clothes. All my underwear was only Polish, all my clothes were Polish. We did not buy and wear anything else. That is how mom aspired to dress us, and that is how we were dressed.[24]

The reality behind this reminiscence was, however, more prosaic. It was not so easy to obtain particular clothes in the small provincial town and Galina's mother Natalija brought used ones from Poland which her relatives gave to her. At one moment of the interview she even expressed some skepticism about these clothes using the word 'castoffs' (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011). Nevertheless,

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23 These goods might have been produced in Hungary or Poland but they were perceived as being from the West.

24 *Ja xoču skazat', čto u menja vsja odeža byla tol'ko pol'skaja, s detstva. Ja ne ponimala, čto èto takoe, – nosit' druguju odeždu. Vse bel'e u menja bylo tol'ko pol'skoe, vsja odežda u menja byla pol'skaja. Drugogo my ničego zdes' ne pokupali i ne nosili. Vot tak mama stremilas' nas odevat', I my tak odevalis'.*

for Galina herself these 'castoffs' were an important part of stressing her ethnic identity and a means of differentiation from other Ašmjany inhabitants.

Both the shortage of particular goods and the aspiration of people 'to afford more than they had' (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, August 2011) made informal trade an easily implemented affair. As another respondent (Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012) recalled,

> **Informant:** When people found out that you came from Poland, they all came and came and bought.
>
> **Researcher:** But how did they find out that you had come from Poland?
>
> **Informant:** Well, you know how it is, neighbours, one to another, and the rumour is spread. Someone knows that you have been to Poland and that you are back, and then they come and buy.[25]

However, as specified already, until the late 1980s informal trade in Ašmjany had a sporadic character. First, it was irregular since it accompanied rather than initially motivated visits to Poland. Secondly, any form of such trade was considered illegal and not tolerated by the Soviet state. Therefore, people could rely only on informal networks to operate such trade. The situation changed significantly during *perestroika*. Private initiatives started being tolerated more and more and the border regime became less strict for socialist bloc citizens. It led to the significant increase of shuttle trade activities not only in Ašmjany but everywhere in the Soviet state. Although new national markets were gradually opened up for Soviet citizens, Poland continued to play a dominant role in supplying Western as well as Asian goods for trade.[26] Not only people from the Soviet Union went to Poland but also Polish people came to trade with Soviet republics. Kochanowski (2011, p. 414) gives an example according to which the number of Poles who came to the BSSR in 1988 was six times higher in comparison with 1987 (150,000 and 26,000 accordingly). As a consequence, Polish markets also emerged in the Belorussian, Ukrainian and Lithuanian Soviet republics (Kochanowski, 2011; Hohnen, 1998). Therefore, as anthropologist Pernille Hohnen (1998, p. 49) states, even in the early 1990s when the Polish influence on shuttle trade became less obvious, at one of the Vilnius markets people still referred to it as 'Polish style trade'.

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25 *My pryedzem z Pol'ščy, dyk use ŭžė dačulisja i iduc', iduc' i kupljajuc'.*
Nu a kak oni uznavali, čto vy s Pol'ši priexali?
Nu znaeš', jak hėta ŭ nas tut, pa-susedzku, adzin adnamu i pajšlo. Tut ža vot tak vo – znae, što ŭž paexaŭšy, njama, ŭ Pol'ščy, znae, što pryexala, dyk tady ŭžo iduc' i kupljajuc'.

26 According to Williams and Baláž (2002), by the late 1980s in Poland a well-developed trading system had been established. It emerged as the response of Polish citizens to the economic collapse of the early 1980s which 'left many Polish shops virtually empty' and made shopping trips to the neighbouring state socialist countries 'a necessity rather than a luxury for many Poles' (Williams and Baláž, 2002, p. 326).

Thus, Poland played a significant role in the emergence and development of shuttle trade in Ašmjany (and in the former Vil'nja region in general, as Hohnen's (1998) research demonstrates). Although the borders of the Soviet Union were perceived in popular imagination as impermeable barriers which restricted human mobility drastically, in reality the situation was more nuanced. Despite the fact that all Soviet citizens were proclaimed to be equal, social stratification did exist in the Soviet state. It was based, however, not on income inequality but rather on status (Gapova, 2005). Belonging to a particular social group (such as *nomenklatura* or *intelligentsia*, for instance) gave a person privileges which might have been unavailable to others. In the situation where income inequality was almost insignificant, these privileges were foremost determined by the possession of either material or symbolically valuable 'goods' such as rare books or imported furniture, for instance (Gapova, 2005). Under capitalism such goods are usually obtained through market and price regulation; under Soviet socialism they were either available through the black market or distributed by the state to the most privileged and politically loyal citizens. Cross-border mobility in the Soviet state can also be considered as such a commodity. It was a scarce resource, which was available to the privileged and as opposed to material goods could be obtained only through the state. Therefore, depending on the social group a person belonged to, the possibility of possessing this resource varied significantly. For the representatives of *nomenklatura* from Soviet capital cities the chance to go abroad (to other socialist countries or to the West) was higher than for working-class people or peasants from some remote areas.[27] However, in Ašmjany this privilege was not so much a matter of a person's social status but rather a question of ethnicity. Therefore, in this case *selective openness* of the border between the Soviet Union and People's Republic of Poland was based upon ethnic boundaries between Polish and non-Polish inhabitants of the town. These ethnic boundaries were also to some extent determined by locality: native-born people were more likely to have a Polish background than those who had resettled in Ašmjany during the Soviet period.

However, did mobility play any role in people's memories of socialism? Were the restrictions on cross-border movement which the Soviet state was known for experienced as a trauma? Did open borders significantly change the life of Ašmjany people? These questions will be addressed from two perspectives. The concluding part of the current chapter elaborates on the issue of mobility and nostalgia

27 In her article on Soviet tourism to Eastern Europe historian Anne E. Gorsuch (2006, p. 206) notes that while in Khrushchev's era Western tourism was mainly available to the representatives of political, cultural, scientific and sport elites; the countries of the Soviet bloc gradually became open for the wider categories of Soviet citizens who notwithstanding were rather 'from the middle' than 'from below'. She argues that regular workers and especially peasants remained misrepresented among Soviet tourists abroad. Therefore, Gorsuch (2006, p. 211) states, 'foreign travel was not a right, but still a privilege to be dispensed by the state'.

considering how people referred to their Soviet experience of cross-border and inter-republican mobility and to the changes which happened afterwards. Chapters 3–5 consider what happened in Ašmjany after the collapse of the USSR when borders were supposed to have disappeared.

Mobility and Nostalgia

The analysis of memories of the Soviet past cannot be complete without the issue of nostalgia. The concluding part of the chapter about the Soviet period of the Belarus–Lithuania borderland considers how people mainly referred to their Soviet experience and the extent to which the questions of mobility and borders were stressed. If the collapse of the Soviet Union had been supposed to bring into existence a new 'borderless' world, why did people express 'the feeling of loss' (Koleva, 2011, p. 419) when recalling their lives in the Soviet Union in general and their mobility in particular? What kind of shortage in their present did they try to cope with? In what follows light is shed on how nostalgia was represented, which aspects of the socialist past it touched upon and the role the border experience played in the construction of people's memories. To answer these questions the notion of post-socialist nostalgia is employed.

In her article *Hope for the Past? Post-Socialist Nostalgia 20 Years Later* anthropologist and historian Daniela Koleva (2006) considers three different aspects of post-socialist nostalgia. The first concerns 'a feeling of loss in a period of radical changes' on an individual, collective and broader cultural level (Koleva, 2006, p. 419). The second refers to 'a political strategy' or 'a political rhetoric' when nostalgic images are used either in election campaigns or in order to articulate particular political interests (Koleva, 2006, p. 420). The third aspect describes nostalgia as 'a form of cultural production' when the past is commodified and becomes a part of popular culture (Koleva, 2006, p. 420). Dealing with personal memories, the first aspect of Koleva's definition is primarily referred to, which she also designates as 'the longing for the past in personal narratives' (Koleva, 2006, p. 421).

Considering the results of 90 life-story interviews with elderly people from Bulgaria, Koleva (2006) distinguishes five main features of post-socialist nostalgic memories. First of all, she argues, post-socialist nostalgia is stronger in countries where return to the socialist system is not possible anymore. The same opinion is expressed by anthropologist Gerald W. Creed (2010, p. 37) who suggests that 'the term *nostalgia* only resonates when two criteria have been met: when there is no chance of going back and when improvement is evident'. Therefore, according to Koleva, people have nostalgia not for the socialist system in general but rather for particular aspects of daily life in the socialist past. However, these positive memories of the past do not always concur with the historical reality; in other words, post-socialist nostalgia is the idealization of the past, 'backward looking utopia', as Koleva (2006, p. 421) puts it. This idealization does not occur accidentally. Nostalgia, Koleva (2006, p. 427) stresses, manifests 'the deficits

of the present'. People are nostalgic about something they do not have anymore and, as they think, they used to have before. Thus nostalgia, according to Koleva, is not only about the past but also, and possibly to a greater extent, about the present. Hence, as Koleva (2006, p. 430, 432) maintains, post-socialist nostalgia can be understood as a strategy of coping with ongoing changes and as 'a form of re-negotiating the past "from below"' overcoming 'the disruption between the past and the present'.

Koleva's interpretation of post-socialist nostalgia and especially her view on the potentiality of nostalgic utterances to shed light on the disadvantages of the present is very useful. Nevertheless, she seems to follow the path of considering nostalgia as a mere idealization of the past and as only a memory of something that never happened, which is a view criticized in the recent scholarship about post-communist nostalgia (Oushakine, 2007; Todorova, 2010). Although Koleva herself (2006, p. 427) is critical towards understanding nostalgia as 'an escapist stance', she nevertheless seems to overstate the romanticized and imaginary side of nostalgic reminiscences. Certainly, as Svetlana Boym (2001, p. 3) argues, since the very early usage in medical discourse nostalgia has been associated with 'confusing past and present, real and imaginary events'. However, we should not consider every positive reference to the socialist past as a merely nostalgic (i.e. idealized and fictitious) sentiment. Otherwise, we might be deluded by the tendency to consider any positive evaluation of the Soviet experience as a non-representative fantasy of poorly educated people who forgot about the horrors and disadvantages of the Soviet socialist system. As anthropologist Ida Harboe Knudsen (2012, p. 14) argues, if one comes to reduce every positive sentiment related to the Soviet experience to the matter of 'Soviet nostalgia', the real decrease in people's living conditions may be overshadowed. In the same vein, Maria Todorova (2010, p. 7) states that 'the longing for security and stability often leads people toward stupidity, but it is not a stupid longing'.

Todorova (2010, p. 7) suggests approaching post-socialist nostalgia with three analytical questions: 'who is speaking or performing nostalgia?', 'what does nostalgia express?' and 'what are the spheres of life and particular genres in which nostalgia is expressed?' The first question presupposes that the extent and the direction of nostalgic memories vary across class, gender and other lines of social differentiation. As Todorova (2010) as well as Boyer (2010, p. 20) argue, nostalgia is 'a kind of discourse that is evoked to create and maintain social distinctions between groups and between persons […]'. This distinction is constructed not only when some social groups (mostly elites who more easily adjust to a new social reality) deny nostalgia and accuse it of being 'a bad memory' of devious people, but also when different groups or individuals express nostalgia in relation to various aspects of life which they miss mostly from their previous experience. This leads us to Todorova's second question of what nostalgia expresses. As Todorova (2010, p. 7) argues, among other things, nostalgic reminiscences contain 'the elements of disappointment, social exhaustion, economic recategorization, generational fatigue, and quest for dignity'. In this sense, post-socialist nostalgia

should be understood 'not as a search for a place, a home or nation, but as a sociotemporal yearning for a different stage or quality of life' (Boyer, 2010, p. 18). Consequently, to answer Todorova's third question about the spheres of life in which nostalgia is expressed, one can argue that it depends on which spheres of life are the most deteriorated by social, economic and political changes after the collapse of the socialist system.

Although in this study some positive aspects of the Soviet past were indeed overestimated by some respondents, there were post-Soviet changes which people did experience as negative and which caused nostalgic sentiments. These changes were primarily related to the border emergence and the disruption in the course of daily life which the border brought into existence. Since the border appeared as a result of the Soviet Union's collapse, memories about the life before and after the border were inseparable from memories of Soviet life in general.[28] People voiced a lot of criticism of the socialist system as such. Elder respondents mentioned the post-World War II famine and the constant deficit in foodstuffs in Ašmjany in the first post-war decades; younger women criticized the ban of the Catholic Church and the 'conversion' of Poles into Belarusians by the Soviet authorities. However, all of them were univocal – it was better in Ašmjany during Soviet times because the border did not exist and everyone could go to Lithuania. An elderly woman, Natalija (Interview 4, September 2011), an ethnic Pole, who had struggled to defend her Polish identity from the Soviet authorities and who mentioned nationalist sentiments of Lithuanians against Belarusians and Poles during Soviet times, nevertheless, stated,

> **Informant:** And then when this border, you know, we didn't like it. We were used to being a single state. We couldn't acknowledge that now we were alone. Now Belorussia, Belorussia is separately, right? But anyway I watch Russian TV-channels and I feel for them. It seems that it is all yours, your native … .
>
> **Researcher:** And do you have such a concern about Lithuanians?
>
> **Informant:** Well, you know, yes, yes, yes. All of us are a single folk, I think. Although they were nationalistic, these Lithuanians … .[29]

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28 A similar parallel between a newly emerged border and social and economic changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union has also been observed by Tatiana Zhurzhenko in her research in villages on the Ukrainian–Russian border (Zhurzhenko, 2006).

29 *I potom uže kak granica, to, znaete, nu ne nravilos' nam. Kak-to my uže privykli, čto my odno gosudarstvo. My odni ne mogli priznat', čto èto my gosudarstvo otdel'noe. Sejčas vot Belorussija uže otdel'no, da? No vse programmy-to smotriš' rossijskie i pereživaeš' za nix. Vot kažetsja, vse èto tvoe rodnoe.*

Nu a za litovcev tože tak pereživaete?

Nu, vy znaete, nu da, da, da. Vse èto odin narod, mne kažetsja. Nu xotja oni byli takie nacionalisty, litovcy.

In other words, although Natalija herself was skeptical about pronounced multi-nationality of the Soviet state, she, nevertheless, tended to depict the Soviet Union as a single unity, a space without visible borders at least. *Družba narodov* [the friendship of people], a formula of the Soviet propaganda, was inherited by people and appeared in other sources as well (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012; Valentina, Essay 1, 2011). However, in these cases it did not look like an entirely empty propagandist utterance adapted into a personal narrative but rather as an attempt to put into available words the experience of life on the borderland, side by side with Russians, Poles and Lithuanians. That is why women who mentioned this multi-national specificity of the Soviet state did not refer to abstract peoples or nationalities. They rather appealed to the particular national groups which had indeed inhabited this region and with whom they had used to share not only TV images but also different aspects of daily life.

The appearance of the border and the consequent reduction of people's mobility was the most important loss according to the memories of Ašmjany people. In other words, in their memories people were longing not for the whole Soviet socialist system but rather for a very definite aspect of their everyday life which the collapse had destroyed. Some of the respondents depicted the border's appearance as a general worsening of life conditions in the town. Galina (Interview 2, August 2012) claimed, 'They sort of cut the artery of life when they closed the border'.[30] Another woman, Olga (Interview 7, October 2011), who had actually not lived in the town until 1989 and never stopped visiting Lithuania after 1991 since her sisters had always provided her with an invitation for visas stated, 'It became worse, life became worse for us when they closed Vilnius. Everything was always cheaper in Vilnius. Constantly. We went there for foodstuffs, for clothes, and some people even went to work. Now there is less work'.[31] Hence, the loss of inter-republican mobility which, however, did not always coincide with the personal biographies of the people who pronounced this loss, was a general sentiment which many dwellers of Ašmjany shared. At the same time, the lack of cross-border mobility, which the Soviet Union had been known for, was not mentioned at all in people's narratives. Therefore, notwithstanding a general idea according to which the dissolution of the Soviet socialist bloc was supposed to open borders and to increase the mobility of former Soviet citizens, in Ašmjany the situation looked quite the opposite. People who expressed their frustration by the fact than now they had to deal with the border, simultaneously nostalgically mentioned how much they had travelled in Soviet times and how many places (inside the bloc) they had been able to visit.

On the one hand, such ignorance of the lack of mobility in the Soviet past might be explained by the nostalgic idealization of Soviet times caused by the lack

30 *Èto byla takaja arterija žizni perekryta, kogda zakryli granicu*.

31 *I xuže nam stalo, stalo žit'-to nam xuže. Vil'njus kak prikryli. Vse-taki u Vil'njuse vsegda bylo vse deševle. Postojanno. Tuda ezdili i za produktami, i za odeždoj, i na rabotu ezdili daže nekotorye. Seičas raboty-to men'še stalo.*

of mobility in the present. The latter was not necessarily determined by external circumstances such as the increase of transport costs or the establishment of new border regimes in the previously borderless regions. Personal reasons such as old age (on age and mobility see Chapter 4) and poor health also mattered here. The mixture of objective and subjective aspects provoked people to recall their past as the time when they had been more on the move, notwithstanding whether the current lack of mobility was indeed caused by post-Soviet transformations or was rather determined by personal circumstances. On the other hand, the permeable borders of the former Soviet bloc, which were supposed to open the world for Soviet citizens, remained an abstract possibility for many Ašmjany people, who had never crossed them anyway, before or after the collapse. At the same time, the emergence of the concrete border nearby and the disruption in the course of daily life which the border led to, seemed to be a traumatic experience indeed for the inhabitants of the town. Even when almost the entire European Union became open to Ašmjany dwellers with Schengen visas, they still tended to use them not to discover new places and possibilities but to obtain what they had lost with the border's appearance, notably their regular visits to Lithuania. Therefore, among the respondents as well as other people talked to during the fieldwork only a few had visited any other countries besides Lithuania and Poland. Moreover, the possibility of going to Vilnius on an everyday basis – something that people lost after the USSR's collapse – was considered to be the highest priority and the main reason to apply for a visa.

Thus the 'sentiment of loss' (Boym, 2001, p. xiii), which people expressed recalling Soviet practices of mobility and comparing them with today's possibilities (or the lack of them), can be explained by dual reasons. On the one hand, people sometimes did idealize the picture of their mobility eliminating the fact that they had not been entirely free to choose where and when to travel during Soviet times.[32] On the other hand, for many of them the situation did not change significantly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. New borders appeared between the former Soviet republics and the old ones re-emerged as the result of EU enlargement. The increasing transport costs and the breakdown of state-sponsored organized tourism with cheap tourist vouchers (*putevki*) made people feel that they had actually lost more than they gained. Although they had not been able to travel abroad during Soviet times, the opportunity to travel across the Soviet Union had really been valuable. Some women (Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011; Olga, Interview 7, October 2011) proudly recalled that they had visited 'a half of the Union'.[33] Another woman who took part in the essay contest claimed how nice it had been to

32 This concerned not only trips abroad but also travelling across the Soviet Union. Historian Christian Noack (2006, p. 281) argues, for instance, that internal tourism, according to the Soviet state, also had to be planned and organized. Therefore, although individual tourism flourished in late socialism, tourists who 'violated' state's plans were regarded as unwanted.

33 *Oj, ja, oj, ja tut polsojusa proezdila*; *Oj, ja za svoju žizn' iskolesila*.

visit different Soviet cities with organized excursions and how bad it was that the new borders had ruined this tradition (Focus-group discussion, 16 February 2012).

Today, however, these possibilities are barely affordable not only because of borders (there is no border between Belarus and Russia, and the Belarusian–Ukrainian border is highly permeable) but rather due to economic reasons. The latter explains, in particular, the frustration of Žanna (Interview 13, March 2012), a citizen of Lithuania born in Ašmjany who recalled her Soviet past with peculiar warmth,

> Life was not bad. We had a garage, a car, everything. We worked and we went on holidays. We went to Palanga, to Sukhumi, to the Black Sea coast, everywhere. We got tourist vouchers and went on holiday for 30 rubles (*smiles*) for 24 days with board and lodging included, with everything.[34]

In 2012 when the interview took place many borders were open for Žanna as for a Lithuanian citizen. However, the only foreign trip (besides Belarus) which she mentioned in her interview was her trip to Finland, where she had been an agricultural seasonal worker for three months. Žanna's salary of a salesperson at one of Vilnius supermarkets barely allowed her to travel on holidays. However, she regularly crossed the Belarus–Lithuania border on her way to Ašmjany, where she visited her mother and brought some clothes for sale.

Conclusions

Three main features of Ašmjany Soviet history have had an important impact on the development of shuttle trade activities after the collapse of the Soviet Union. First, the mass migration of people from the Ašmjany region to Vilnius created an extensive cross-border network on the Belarus–Lithuania borderland, which is still actively exploited by Ašmjany inhabitants who want to obtain Lithuanian and Schengen visas. Secondly, the Soviet practice of daily consumption oriented towards Vilnius became a substantial prerequisite for the flourishing of petty trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border in the following periods. Vilnius is still regarded as a consumer paradise by Ašmjany inhabitants; therefore, the demand for goods from Lithuania remains high in the town. Moreover, people still rely on their knowledge of Vilnius and especially of the city's consumer places which they obtained during the Soviet period. Thirdly, Ašmjany inhabitants of Polish ethnicity had Soviet experience of petty trade activities across the Soviet–Polish border. Although the borders of the Soviet Union were highly persistent for common citizens, they were *selectively open* for particular social groups. In the Ašmjany

34 *... nu, žit' bylo neploxo, i garaž imeli, i mašinu, i vse. I rabotali, i otdyxat' ezdili. Ezdili i v Palangu, i v Suxumi, na Černoe more, vezde, putevki polučali, za 30 rublej s pitaniem exali otdyxat' na 24 dnja, s pitaniem, so vsem.*

case the people whose relatives had resettled in Poland after World War II had the privilege of visiting Poland regularly combining their visits to relatives with petty trade in Western or socialist goods, which were otherwise barely available to the dwellers of the BSSR provincial town.

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union was supposed to open borders for all Soviet citizens, the reality of the Belarus–Lithuania border region turned out to be different. The Belarus–Lithuania border, which had emerged in the early 1990s, did change many aspects of daily life in Ašmjany. Besides very concrete and painful disadvantages which the border created (such as, for example, the impossibility of visiting the graves of relatives who were buried in Lithuania), general dissatisfaction with these changes was frequently stressed in the nostalgic reminiscences of Ašmjany inhabitants. However, it would be unjust not to mention that people adapted to the border quite rapidly. Moreover, they quickly realized how to benefit from the new circumstances. That is why the early 1990s in Ašmjany were characterized not only by people's constant attempts to adjust to the new border but also by the flourishing of shuttle trade in the region. How both of the phenomena were connected will be described in the following chapter.

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Chapter 3
The Emergence of National Borders, the Flourishing of Trade: Shuttle Trade in Ašmjany in the Early 1990s

Scholarly literature on the early development of shuttle trade (Humphrey, 2002; Morokvasic, 2003; Sik and Wallace, 1999) regularly stresses the open borders as one of the leading factors in the flourishing of this phenomenon in post-socialist countries after 1989. Nonetheless, the situation looked different in Ašmjany. Mass shuttle trade appeared almost simultaneously with the first attempts to regulate cross-border movement in the region where, as the previous chapter demonstrates, people were used to crossing the administrative boundary between the two Soviet republics any time they needed. Moreover, the development of mass shuttle trade and the border establishment were inseparable from each other. Trade and the deficit of commodities in Belarus and Lithuania shortly before and after their independence were among the main reasons for establishing border (customs) control on the Belarus–Lithuania border. Therefore, the initial aim behind the border's appearance was the economic security of the two countries in the context of economic and social transformations of the early 1990s, which pushed people to consider trade as a means of survival and made shuttle trade a mass phenomenon in Ašmjany. This chapter analyzes the earliest (*infant*, to use Baud and van Schendel's term (1997, p. 224)) stage of the Belarus–Lithuania border development and the specificity of shuttle trade across it at that time. First, how the border was set up will be considered. Secondly, how shuttle trade was organized at that time and which particular favourable circumstances made it a popular option for local people will be demonstrated. Thirdly, how people learnt to live near the border and the difficulties in their daily life they underwent will be examined.

The Belarus–Lithuania Border in the Early 1990s

The establishment of the Belarus–Lithuania border in the early 1990s was a gradual process. Changes started in 1990 but it took at least five years to develop the border into a real political entity aimed at the protection of the national sovereignty of the states which had appeared after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The emergence of the political border between the two Soviet republics was inseparable from the wider historical context of the early 1990s and from significant political changes, which were brought to life, first, by the period of *perestroika* and then by the collapse

of the Soviet Union. The first important event in this process was the restoration of Lithuanian independence. It was declared by the recently elected pro-national Lithuanian Supreme Council on 11 March 1990 (Purs, 2012). The Lithuanian SSR was the first Soviet republic to take this step. However, independence was a consequence of a chain of events in the Baltic States[1] and in the Soviet Union in general determined by the politics of *glasnost'* and *perestroika*, which had been introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev a few years earlier. Notwithstanding the liberalization of the political climate, which had been provoked by *perestroika*, the restoration of Lithuanian independence was not recognized by the authorities in Moscow. In such a situation the designation of political borders around the newly independent state was an important matter. The first attempts to detach border and customs control from the Soviet authorities were discussed in March 1990. On 20 March the Lithuanian Supreme Council obligated the Council of Ministers to initiate preparations for border demarcation (Kumetaitis, 2010). Ten days later in his interview with the Lithuanian newspaper *Lietuvos Rytas*, chief of Lithuanian Republican Customs Algirdas Cegelis mentioned the resolution of the Lithuanian Supreme Council according to which customs as well as other centrally controlled organizations and enterprises were supposed to be subordinated to the Lithuanian authorities (Gaivėnis, 1990). However, in the interview Cegelis also expressed his doubts about the readiness of Moscow to accept such changes. These doubts were proved one year later when the Lithuanian border and customs posts became targets of regular attacks by the Soviet OMON. The best-known incident happened on 31 July 1991 at the customs post of Medininkai on the Belarus–Lithuania border. During that attack five customs and two police officers were killed by (presumably) Soviet paramilitary forces.

Although the first customs and border guard posts on Lithuanian borders played the role of 'makeshift symbols' of independence to a certain extent (Purs, 2012, p. 92), they were significant in yet another way – to protect Lithuania's economic interests. Moscow did not officially respond after Lithuania declared its independence but one month later it imposed economic sanctions on the republic (Lane, 2002; Purs, 2012). To deal with them, the Supreme Council of Lithuania issued the Law on Temporal Measures under USSR's Economic Blockade (LR, 1990). Among other provisions, the law stipulated control over trade in the most substantial goods such as flour, sugar, salt and fuel. Moreover, it also prohibited the export of commodities and raw materials across the border. However, customs posts to control the movement of goods appeared only half a year later, in November 1990.[2] Lithuania's decision

1 For more on the history of this period in Lithuania and the Baltic States see Purs, 2012; Lane, 2002.

2 See, for example, the official web-page of the State Border Guard Service at the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania (in Lithuanian) http://www.pasienis.lt/index.php?3441269358 (last accessed 7 January 2015) and the official web-page of the Customs of the Republic of Lithuania (in English) http://www.cust.lt/web/guest/apiemus/istorija#en (last accessed 7 January 2015).

Figure 3.1 The monument to Lithuanian customs and police officers who were killed on the border post Medininkai in 1991
Author: Olga Sasunkevich

to organize customs posts on its border with the BSSR urged a reciprocal reaction from the Belorussian side that took analogous measures. On 7 November 1990 the Ašmjany local newspaper informed its readers about two 'customs' checkpoints operating on the border with Lithuania (Drozdova, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1990). The work of those posts was also aimed at preventing the export of goods from the Belorussian republic. According to the newspaper, one was allowed to carry only 200 grams of sausage, a bottle of vodka or wine and two loaves of bread.

Hence the first attempts to regulate the Belarus–Lithuania border were made in 1990, a year before the Soviet Union collapse. But even after the USSR disintegrated the border remained *porous* for several years, although various attempts to arrange official border and customs control were undertaken. The first measures, especially from the Belarusian side, were aimed at establishing control over commodities. Since Lithuania deregulated prices almost immediately after the independence, there appeared a significant disparity in food costs between the two countries. It was a matter of constant concern for Ašmjany local authorities who could not manage the deficit of basic foodstuffs because they were constantly transported to Vilnius (this aspect will be considered in more detail in the next part). The situation was complicated by the fact that until 1993 there was no

official customs control in the Ašmjany region. Although Ašmjany customs was established in November 1991, its real arrangement only started in the summer of 1992 (Ošmjanskaja tamožnja, 2006). And only on 12 January 1993 did Ašmjany customs begin to implement customs control on the border officially (Ošmjanskaja tamožnja, 2006). Until that time, according to the memories of locals (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010; Galina, Interview 2, August 2011; Žanna, Interview 13, March 2012) and written account in a local newspaper (*Put' Il'iča*, 1991) customs control on the Belarusian side of the border with Lithuania had been implemented by the representatives of the militia. At the same time on the Lithuanian side official customs control came into existence in 1991 after the Customs of Lithuanian Republic had been recognized on 26 August 1991 (*Lietuvos Rytas*, 1991). Thus to cross the border in the direction of Lithuania people had to pass, first, the control of the Belarusian militia and then Lithuanian customs control (Antonaŭ, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1992). At the same time, according to the memories of local people (Olga, Interview 7, October 2011; Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, 7 October 2010; Hryhor'eŭ, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1993), control on the Belarusian side had had a sporadic character before and even after official organs were introduced in 1993.

A turning point in the border's history, which prompted people to recognize its importance, was the introduction of a visa regime by Lithuania. On 27 August 1993 the Lithuanian government approved resolution N 660 which presupposed the imposition of the visa regime for citizens of former Soviet republics (except for Estonia and Latvia) (LR. Pravitel'stvo Litovskoj Respubliki, 1993). The visa regime for entry to Lithuania was supposed to be implemented on 1 November 1993. However, two months after the resolution was approved an exclusion for the citizens of Belarus was made. On 28 October 1993 resolution 660 was changed and the visa-free regime for Belarusian citizens was prolonged, first until 1 January 1994 (LR. Pravitel'stvo Litovskoj Respubliki, 1993a), and then, according to a special bilateral agreement, until March 1994 (RB and LR, 1994). But even after that, until 1 July 1994, it was enough to have only a Lithuanian invitation to enter the country. The Belarusian side, again, gave a similar response and introduced a visa regime for Lithuanian citizens from 1 April 1994 (*Ašmjanski vesnik*, March 1994). The introduction of the visa regime was considered by Ašmjany dwellers as a significant fact in the border's history. Some of them actually connected this change with the appearance of the border. Before that, people stressed, the border did not exist for them (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010; Olga, Interview 7, October 2011; Anna, Interview 10, February 2012). At the same time the respondents were not sure when precisely this had happened and often got the dates wrong. In one case (which will be analyzed in detail below) the respondent (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012) was convinced that she had not needed a visa in 1999. And even the traumatic experience of a three-month imprisonment for an illegal border crossing had not changed her opinion. In the interview she insisted that she had been caught by the border patrol for crossing the border outside of a border post but not for a visa regime violation.

Generally, 1994–1995 could be characterized as a period when important steps to border institutionalization were taken. They will be considered in more detail in Chapter 4. However, as, for example, the case mentioned above demonstrates, these institutional changes were not necessarily accompanied by the immediate transformations of daily life practices. People had to learn how to adjust to the new realities of existence on the borderland and they needed time to do this. Moreover, sometimes the locals could consciously sabotage the new rules, regarding free cross-border movement as their integral right inherited from the Soviet past. For these reasons the practices of illegal sporadic visits to the border region by inhabitants from both of sides persisted even after the border was officially institutionalized. Therefore, the first period of the contemporary border history is marked rather by certain practices of adapting to the border than by a particular timeframe. These practices, which are further considered, had a mass character in the early 1990s but could still be found at the end of the decade, though, according to statistics, in 1996 the official number of border violators dropped significantly.[3] One of the most important practices of illegal cross-border movement was mass shuttle trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border.

Mass Shuttle Trade in Ašmjany

Mass shuttle trade in Ašmjany in the early 1990s was not an exclusively local phenomenon. Its development was a consequence of broader transformations which took place in the former Soviet Union at that time. Foremost, this trade was people's reaction to the economic instability brought into life by the USSR's disintegration. As Jakovlev, Golikova and Kapralova (2006, p. 3) argue in their article on shuttle trade in Russia, most people who were involved in this activity during that period were 'necessity entrepreneurs' who chose shuttle trade in the unfavourable circumstances of the deficit of other employment possibilities and means of economic security. Although Ašmjany had not experienced mass unemployment, people still recalled that salary payments had been constantly delayed and petty trade had been the easiest and the most accessible way to get at least some money quickly (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010; Olga, Interview 7, October 2011; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012). However, it was not only negative motivation which pushed people to start shuttle trade. Its flourishing went hand-in-hand with the general development of entrepreneurial activities, which were abandoned by the law and questioned by the moral code of the Soviet period. It is worth mentioning that people who chose trade deliberately usually represented a minority. Jakovlev, Golikova and Kapralova (2006), for example,

3 According to the statistics of Belarusian Border Guards Forces, 3,000 border violators were arrested in 1994 (*Ašmjanski vesnik*, January, 1995). In 1995, according to Lithuanian data, this number was 5,000, in 1996 – only 845 (LR. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2015a).

refer to the survey of traders in Syktyvkar, Russia conducted in 1996. According to it, only one in 10 entrepreneurs consciously chose trade as an entrepreneurial strategy (Il'ina and Il'in, 1998).

Notwithstanding that shuttle trade was usually considered mainly as a post-Soviet phenomenon, to a great extent it continued the tradition of the informal economic practices which had been formed during socialist times. Consequently, as will be further demonstrated, the early forms of shuttle trade were a mixture of elements from the old and the new economic systems and in some sense were 'a form of intermediary between the market and the planned economy, as much in the socialist past as in the capitalist present' (Van der Velde and Marcińczak 2007, p. 172). Moreover, in Ašmjany mass shuttle trade of the late 1980s–early 1990s was a continuation of the Soviet past in a literal sense. To some extent it was developed on the basis of sporadic petty trade in Polish goods which had arisen in the town several decades earlier, as the previous chapter demonstrates. Those sporadic practices of petty trade in Poland and in Polish goods turned into a mass flow in the late 1980s to early 1990s and kept its significance throughout the entire decade. At the same time, a new type of mass trade also emerged in the town – food trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border.

Informal Trade across the Belarus–Poland Border

Although the primary focus of this research is trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border, its understanding would be incomplete without a brief overview of trade across the Belarusian–Polish border after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. In many aspects this informal trade practice replicated the well-known strategy of shuttle trade at Polish markets and the import of goods from Poland to the neighbouring countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. However, examining 'Polish trade' in Ašmjany in the 1990s can expose the process of informal trade development in the town in general. Instead of giving a detailed account on the specificities of the implementation of this kind of shuttle trade which has already been made by other scholars, reconstructed here are, first, people's motivation to engage in shuttle trade during that period and, secondly, the influence which 'Polish trade' might have on the development of a similar activity across the border with Lithuania.

The mass shuttle trade across the border between Poland and the former Soviet republics that ex-Soviet citizens were engaged in has been the subject of several studies. In their article on open-air markets in the Łódź region before and after the implementation of the Schengen Agreement by Poland, geographers Martin van der Velde and Szymon Marcińczak (2007) consider post-Soviet 'tourists' as the main stimulus for the development and blossoming of OAM and private businesses in Poland in the first post-socialist decade. Their idea resonates with an earlier study by historian Keith Sword (1999), who sees the activity of shuttle traders from Lithuania, Belarus and Russia as a significant input into currency reserves held by the Polish National Bank in 1995–1996 as well as into the Polish

economy in general. Sword (1999) also considers in detail how this trade was organized at one of the largest Polish markets known as the Warsaw Stadium. The sociological picture of such trade and the social portrait of traders from the former Soviet countries in Poland were drawn by demographer Krystyna Iglicka (1999). In her study of petty trade shuttle migration to Poland in the early 1990s Iglicka gives a detailed account of the gender, age and professional characteristics of this group of migrants. According to her findings, the most typical trader was a young woman with a relatively high level of education, unemployed in her country, mostly from a large city in Russia, Ukraine or Belarus (Iglicka, 1999, p. 124–5). Anthropologist Pernille Hohnen (1997) presents a meticulous anthropological description of 'Polish trade' implementation based on interviews with traders from *Gariūnai* (the biggest market in Vilnius). In their narratives traders explicated stories of their failure and success during trips to Poland and mentioned the main obstacles they had faced on their way to a successful and profitable trade.

The stories of Lithuanian traders presented by Hohnen correspond to the memories of that period reproduced by Ašmjany dwellers, who stressed that trade at Polish markets and in Polish goods in Ašmjany had become a mass activity in the town for a certain time. Some traders managed to turn their profit from this activity into economic capital, which was later invested into professional business development. Others considered such trade as a temporary means of overcoming the unfavourable economic situation or as an occasional attempt to earn some money from a popular activity. Since in the latter case trade had a rather spontaneous character, it did not bring significant financial gain. Although the activity might look to be easily implemented (and this explains in some way why so many people chose it), some specific knowledge and experience was still necessary. Hohnen (1997) argues, for example, that in her research traders tended to underestimate the need for at least some knowledge and special training and considered shuttle trade primarily as hard physical labour. However, the same people shared stories of their failure in Poland determined precisely by the lack of experience and understanding of basic rules. Such a story of failure in 'Polish trade' is also represented in the sample here. Respondent Natalija (Interview 4_add, September 2012) recalled how she and her colleague had gone to Białystok and failed there for two reasons. First, they took baby clothes to sell in Poland in order to get some money initially. However, when they arrived they found that no one at the market was interested in such a commodity, although Natalija had followed the advice of her daughter's more experienced friend. The explanation might be connected with the fact that demand for particular goods at Polish markets was constantly changing. As Hohnen (1997, p. 66) mentioned, there was a pattern 'that if some goods [were] selling well, the market [was] immediately flooded by them'. Therefore, most likely that by the time Natalija came to Białystok the demand for baby clothes had been satisfied. The second failure was connected with fraud. Natalija was cheated by 'a customer' who distracted her attention and took her money. Again, she did not know basic market rules and was not told that Polish markets in the early 1990s were full of swindlers and pickpockets, a fact which

more successful entrepreneurs (Marina, Interview 5, September 2011) were well aware of.

Nevertheless, Natalija herself explained her failures by the lack of an inherent ability to trade. According to her, successful traders were those who 'had it in their DNA, in their blood' (Interview 4_add, September 2012). Financial achievements of 'natural-born' traders made people believe that their success was a matter of personal fortune and of a specific individual character rather than the result of hard and time-consuming labour, and Natalja's essentialist interpretation of successful traders proved it. At the same time the memories of another respondent – Marina (Interview 5, September 2011) – who had been involved in trade on a professional basis from the very beginning, demonstrates how dangerous and unsatisfactory the whole trade could have been. Without any regret or compassion for herself Marina recalled how a bus they travelled on had been stopped by a Ukrainian racket gang and how they had had to pay a 50 USD 'racket fee' per person (which could be the whole profit from one trip); how they had been constantly approached by customs officers; how they had had to look for overnight stays at farms and villages since hotel infrastructure had not been developed in Poland yet and how they had been afraid of being robbed at the Warsaw market, where different types of crime had been thriving. However, in Marina's case the prosperity she gained from trade was worth the risks she had taken. Marina and her husband had built their own house and developed their trade into a professional business, which they were still running when interviewed (her case will be more thoroughly considered in Chapter 4).

Such stories of success, which most likely represented only a minor part of people's trade experiences, nevertheless, developed into an idea that shuttle traders had been among the richest people in Ašmjany at that time (Galina, Interview 2, August 2011; Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012; Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, August 2011). To some extent, this common opinion, which was also supported by local media, inspired people to try their own efforts, notwithstanding that the attitude to trade remained dubious. In 1989–1995 Ašmjany's local newspaper, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, regularly raised the issue of speculation arguing that traders made an easy, quick and high profit in a situation when others had to suffer from deficit and sky-high prices (Bojarovič, 1989; Xarko, 1992; *Ašmjanski vesnik*, September 1993; Aljakseeva, 1994; Vožykaŭ, 1995). However, real stories of trade were much more diverse than the popular imagination depicted, and people who went to Poland due to necessity still prevailed. For example, *Iŭeŭski kraj* (1992), a newspaper published in Iŭe, a town 60 km from Ašmjany, published the story of a woman who complained that she had been called a speculator by a passenger on a bus on her way to Poland. The woman who felt insulted by such a definition claimed,

> But am I a speculator? My husband works as a construction worker but for several months already he hasn't had any work since there have been no orders for him. I have a salary of an unskilled worker but it is not enough for a family of

> four to survive on. I decided that if the state does not care about me, I will save myself from poverty through 'buy-and-sell'.[4]

Besides deliberate (as Marina) and forced (the unknown woman from the newspaper story) entrepreneurs, one could also distinguish another group – occasional traders. Instead of planned trips to Poland, these people sought to use increasing cultural contacts with the Polish state and the interest of Poland in the former *Kresy Wschodnie*. For example, Galina (Interview 2, August 2011), who had been in her early twenties at that time, recalled that she had travelled to Poland to see the Pope during his visit in 1991. Her mother, who used to go to Poland during Soviet times, made Galina take gold jewellery along according to the established Soviet practice of such visits. Galina, however, was not able to sell these commodities because, according to her memories, she did not know where and how. Another story also came from the *Iŭeŭski kraj* newspaper (Nexvedova, 1992). Reacting to a reader's letter, the newspaper published a critical analysis of a health-improving trip for schoolchildren from the small border town of Iŭe to Poland at the invitation of a Polish religious organization. The most sensitive issue in the story was the fact that the children had brought commodities for sale with them. The teacher who had accompanied them complained that host families had been disappointed to find out that Belarusian children had been selling the goods at the market instead of attending events organized for them. Moreover, she stressed, on their way back the participants of the journey had carried bags so heavy with Polish goods that 'even adults had not been able to hold' (Nexvedova, 1992). The teacher said that she had had to explain the children's behaviour to the insulted Poles by the hard economic situation in Belarus.

Thus in the early 1990s shuttle trade, which used to be an irregular practice available to a certain social group during Soviet times, turned into a mass economic activity and to some extent became a basis for the development of another type of trade – food trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border. The respondents who had been involved in food trade also shared their experience of trade in Poland. However, this experience was less significant for them since after a couple of unsuccessful trips determined by a lack of planning and calculation they had usually quit. Therefore, they treated trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border as their second chance to earn additional money in the circumstances of economic and social discrepancies. Moreover, people who observed the failures of their friends and neighbours in Poland also preferred to choose a 'business' that was less risky and more easily integrated in the course of their daily life. Consequently, while trade with Poland gradually became a niche for professional entrepreneurs, shuttle trade on the Belarus–Lithuania border turned into a gold

4 *Tol'ki jakaja ja spekuljantka? Muž u mjane pracue budaŭnikom, ale ŭžo katory mesjac sjadzic' bez pracy, njama zakazaŭ. Na maju zarplatu raznarabočaj sjam'ja z čatyrox čalavek ne pražyve. Ja rašyla, što kali dzjaržave napljavac' na mjane, to ja sama budu ratavacca ad haleču z dapamohaj 'kupli-pradaży'.*

mine for occasional and forced traders who, on the one hand, were pushed to trade by the new circumstances which the disintegration of the USSR had brought to life, but on the other hand, tried to take advantage of those circumstances, turning them into an economic practice.

'Sour Cream Business': Porous Border, Mass Trade

If trade across the Polish border existed in Ašmjany during Soviet times, food trade across the border with Lithuania (as well as the border itself) was a completely new phenomenon. However, to a great extent it was also based on the practices and knowledge of the Soviet epoch. On the one hand, the transportation of foodstuffs was already an established tradition in the Ašmjany region. The change was that now people had to transport them from Belarus to Lithuania and not vice versa as it had been before, and to sell those goods to Lithuanian customers. On the other hand, the way this tradition was put into practice under the new circumstances was also inherited from the Soviet past. For example, since mass trade and general economic turbulences created (or rather continued) the deficit of products in Ašmjany, these valuable goods were obtained through informal practices that former Soviet citizens were well aware of. In 1989–1993 the criminal chronicle in *Ašmjanski vesnik* was full of reports about thefts and fraud by the employees of Ašmjany food factories, public catering and groceries who stole or withheld products and either carried them to Vilnius themselves or sold them to other occasional traders (*Krasnoe znamja*, April 1989; Kuz'menka, 1992; *Ašmjanski vesnik*, January, March 1993; Puzinoŭski, 1993). While pilfering from the workplace was a more general pattern of informal economy in non-socialist countries, selling scarce goods taken from the state trade system[5] or holding them back for distribution through informal networks was the practice which echoed the socialist past to a great extent (Sampson, 1987).

Cross-border food trade in Ašmjany started developing in 1991 when Lithuania took a course of liberalization. Market economy as the aim of the transformations was proclaimed at the meeting of the Baltic prime ministers on 30 October 1991 (Lane, 2002). Almost immediately after that meeting the Lithuanian government liberalized prices on foodstuffs and industrial products, which caused an essential difference in the cost of foodstuffs in Lithuania and Belarus. Belarus had expressed concern about food security several months earlier. In June 1991 *Ašmjanski vesnik*, discussing Belarus–Lithuania mutual measures to guard their border, mentioned the 'commercial plans of some Belarusians' who sold animals (mainly pigs and cows) to Lithuania (Kuz'menko, 1991). After November 1991 such concerns only increased. The protection of the Ašmjany food market from Lithuanian consumers

5 As Harboe Knudsen (2012, p. 46) argues, stealing collective goods from a factory or a collective farm was often understood by former socialist citizens as their right according to the logic 'that if everything belongs to all, then something also belongs to the individual person'.

and Belarusian traders began to be considered as the primary aim of border control. It is not accidental that on 31 October 1991 the first page of *Ašmjanski vesnik* contained two major new items – about the liberalization of prices in the neighbouring country and about the establishment of customs control on the borders of Belarus with the Baltic states (*Ašmjanski vesnik*, October 1991).

At first sight, food trade was organized in a very simple manner. Locals bought food products (mainly dairy[6] and meat but also yeast and pastry) in Ašmjany and carried them to Vilnius, where they could be sold at twice the price (Antonov, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, October, November, 1991; Luhin, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1992). However, there were three main obstacles in their way. Firstly, the mass involvement of locals in trade created an outstanding shortage of goods in demand and left Ašmjany shops almost empty (Kuz'menka, Hryhor'eŭ, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1993; Navicki, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1994). Secondly, although border control was sporadic at that time, it was primarily aimed at preventing food trade; therefore, people preferred not to take the risk and tried to avoid control posts. Thirdly, Lithuanian police started controlling Vilnius markets and a street trader could have been penalized for illegal activities. However, due to the common chaos of the early 1990s in both Belarus and Lithuania such risks were manageable and could not prevent people from mass involvement in food trade across the border. Moreover, people had several tactics to avoid the abovementioned risks and to satisfy their 'entrepreneurial' eagerness.

First, to go to Lithuania one had to obtain goods to sell, which due to the mass scale of trading had become a quest in itself. Not only were foodstuffs hard to buy but also the amount of meat and milk products sold per person was limited (Anna, Interview 10, February 2012; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012; *Ašmjanski vesnik*, March 1993). There were several opportunities to succeed in this situation. As mentioned already, people stole some goods from their workplaces. Although no such cases appear in the sample, some of them were discussed in *Ašmjanski vesnik*. For example, there were several reports about employees of the public catering industry who either traded in stolen products or were caught by the militia trying to transport them to Vilnius (*Ašmjanski vesnik*, 23, 31 January, March 1993). In the first case, for instance, the scale of theft was impressive. During one day 101 kg of sour cream, 25 kg of cottage cheese and 20 kg of butter were sold by two employees of a canteen at an Ašmjany agricultural college. It is most likely that the dairy produce was sold to potential traders through informal networks. Informal connections were also activated to obtain goods withdrawn from the official trade by salespersons. However, people who did not have such connections resorted to the strategy of accumulation. They went from shop to shop and bought as many foodstuffs as possible. Moreover, some locals also used their private households to produce some goods to sell in Vilnius. For example, one respondent (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012) recalled that she made

6 For this reason *Ašmjanski vesnik* called this trade 'sour cream business' in an article with the same title (Kuz'menka, 1992).

cottage cheese from the milk of a cow she owned but also bought meat from the households of other Ašmjany dwellers or villagers who sold self-produced foodstuffs at Ašmjany markets.

After obtaining the goods, one had to carry them across the newly emergent border. Notwithstanding the loose control over cross-border movement, which to some extent had made trade possible on a mass scale, people had to avoid border posts in order to protect the goods they carried from detection and confiscation. For this reason they had to cross the border in less controlled areas. The most common loophole mentioned in many interviews was located approximately 25 km from Ašmjany, between two villages – Belarusian Hrihi and Lithuanian Tabariškės (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010; Galina, Interview 2, August 2011; Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011; Julija, Interview 9, December 2011; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012; Karaneŭski, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1998). First, people went by bus or private vehicle from Ašmjany to Hrihi. Then they crossed the river Meračanka (*lith.* Merkys) through an improvised bridge arranged by the local population in the pre-border period and reached Lithuanian Tabariškės. From Tabariškės they again either took a bus or hired a private vehicle (even a horse cart) to go to Vilnius. Although from the beginning of the border's history this area, located at a distance from the main routes, had been less carefully observed, people still got caught there regularly. This usually meant the end of the whole enterprise since the foodstuffs were confiscated and the person was returned to the Belarusian side (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Kuz'menka, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1992; Navicki, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1995). However, people took such sporadic failures easily since they did not result in serious consequences for them. In interviews such reminiscences were usually represented with a lot of self-irony and laughter, as adventurous rather than tragic stories (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Julija, Interview 9, December 2011).

The culminating moment of food trade was selling products in Vilnius. Traders usually went to a certain place which they designated as *Padhalija* or *Pad Halej* in their interviews (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010; Galina, Interview 2, August 2011; Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Nina, Interview 8, October 2011; Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012). At first, this seemed to be the name of an old Lithuanian food market situated near Vilnius train station, at least that is where people said *Padhalija* was located.[7] However, this name had a deeper meaning. Actually, it referred not to the market itself (called *Halės* in Lithuanian) but to an adjoining area where informal trade practices took place. The word *Padhalija* (literally, by *Halija*) was the creative invention of Ašmjany dwellers. Instead of describing the area as a place near *Halės*, they gave it an alternative name as if ironically admitting an alternative and self-sufficient space in which their practices existed. At the same time, since this local neologism originated from the official name of the market, it in some

7 Another 'Belarusian market' was situated at Gariūnai (Hohnen, 1997, p. 44).

sense designated an area which was not simply opposed to the formal space of trade (inside *Halės*) but was also viewed as its extension. Unfortunately, it was impossible to reconstruct actual relations between the formal and informal market spaces at *Halės* at that time but such a symbolic identification also mattered. On the one hand, as Harboe Knudsen (2012, p. 119) argues, in post-socialist countries 'officially approved markets and dubious semi-legal markets [were] separated from each other through spatial distinctions'. Such spatial differentiation occurred in the case of *Halės* as well, because to trade **in** *Halės* and **by** *Halės* meant to trade in accordance with different rules. On the other hand, this spatial division was still organized around the same marketplace and represented different modes of market existence. On a symbolic level, it meant that formal and informal practices of trade were not contradictory but rather mutually determining. Violating the rules, informal traders sold the goods which they had obtained through formal trade (although in another country). But at the same time the disadvantages of formal trade (deficit and high prices in Lithuania) created favourable circumstances for these informal practices. Moreover, *Padhalija* traders benefited from their proximity to the formal space of *Halės* which was a popular destination for Lithuanian customers.[8]

Padhalija was known not only among traders but also among Vilnius inhabitants,[9] who willingly bought Belarusian products. The respondents (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012) mentioned that it had usually taken only a couple of hours to sell what they had brought. Customers did not pay much attention to the fact that food was sold directly from bags lying on the ground. Nor did they care about the quality of the products or their expiry dates. Such a brisk trade could not have remained unnoticed by the Lithuanian authorities, and the Vilnius police was the main threat for street traders. Police officers could confiscate goods and charge a penalty. Although such cases did happen (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010), people often managed to avoid the police control. The strategy was as straightforward as the trade itself – when traders saw police approaching, they just packed their bags and disappeared. After the police officers left, the traders came back (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012). Evidently, such

8 This conclusion is based on Harboe Knudsen's ethnographical observations of a similar strategy at Marijampolė market in 2007. As she argues, traders who sell dairy products outside a legal market space 'benefit from the flow of customers who have to pass them in order to enter the market inside' (Harboe Knudsen, 2012, p. 119). It could be suggested that in the case of *Halės* market of the early 1990s people could come to *Padhalija* instead of *Halės* intentionally (this again confirms the self-sufficiency and independence of this space) because the prices in the formal trade were unaffordable for many Lithuanians. Nevertheless, it is evident that at least at the beginning Belarusian traders took an advantage of *Halės*' popularity among Lithuanian customers.

9 See, for instance, an interview with a trader from Vilnius in Hohnen, 1997, p. 68; also Interview with Elena (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010).

Figure 3.2 ***Halės*** **market and** ***Padhalija*** **20 years after**
Author: Olga Sasunkevich

a strategy would have been barely effective had the police not turned a blind eye to the traders. It is most likely that dealing with petty traders had been far from a priority issue for the police because they were occupied with more serious crimes. Nor could the police gain a lot from petty traders in terms of a bribe, as it was at the large Vilnius market of *Gariūnai*, for example, where police were connected to local racket groups (Hohnen, 1997).

Since shuttle trade at Vilnius markets was a mass phenomenon, respondents (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010; Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011) recalled that the whole territory near *Halės* had been occupied by traders not only from Ašmjany but also from other Belarusian border towns), it did not bring much profit but at the same time required substantial physical efforts. To carry goods by hand from Hrihi to Tabariškės was not an easy task for Ašmjany women. They recalled their trade foremost as a physically exhausting activity and mentioned that they would have never done it if it had not been necessary (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012). Moreover, some women (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Vera, Interview 10, February 2012) also felt ashamed of their involvement in petty trade. Interestingly, the shamefulness of trade appeared to be a transient problem. Talking about their informal economic activity today, the same women seemed

to have overcome their negative understanding of trade which they had shared in the early 1990s.[10] At that time it could be explained by the continuing influence of Soviet moral rules which considered trade to be an unacceptable activity, although in general, the impression is that even then this moral code was not so strict among Ašmjany citizens, who seemed to tolerate mass shuttle trade much more than the official media discourse, for instance.

The last issue, touched upon here and analyzed in Chapter 6, is the idea of social solidarity among Ašmjany women in the face of harsh economic circumstances. Since the Belarus–Lithuania border was porous in the early 1990s, it could not play the role of a filter on people's way to shuttle trade. Actually, anyone who was ready to make an effort and take a slight risk was able to implement this activity. As mentioned already, the mass character of trade created obstacles for the traders themselves. Foodstuffs were not easily obtainable, competition was high among traders and prices were not sustainable. However, those who had been involved in trade already had an important resource – information about how and where to cross the border, what to carry to trade and where to sell the goods. To share this information with newcomers meant to decrease potential profit and to increase risks, since, for example, in the case of illegal border crossing the more people crossed it in the same place, the higher the possibility of being caught by border guards. Nevertheless, this information was indeed actively distributed among people and seemed not to have any significance to those with this knowledge. When the respondents were asked how they found out or realized that trade was a possibility to earn some money, they often mentioned that someone (a friend, a neighbour or a relative) provided them with such information. An elderly woman Nina (Interview 8, October 2011), who had moved to Ašmjany from Krasnodar in the early 1990s and had had neither the knowledge of Vilnius nor experience of trade but had been forced to start it due to the severe illness of her husband, remembered the person who had helped her with information with peculiar warmness. When asked how she got this idea, she said,

> You know, the world is not without good people. I talked to one woman, I told her, "What should I do? Should I sell my apartment? I need money for medicine". And she says … Many people went [to Vilnius] at that time. And she said and I went … But if someone had not had suggested me to go, I wouldn't have … As I say, the world is not without good people, someone always helps. Not necessarily with money but at least with a piece of advice … .[11]

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10 The most vivid examples are represented in Interviews 2 (August 2011) and 10 (February 2012).

11 *Vy znaete, mir ne bez dobryx ljudej. Nu tože s odnoj pogovorila, ja govorju: "Nu čto delat', nu čto, kvartiru prodavat'? Nu nado že den'gi na lekarstva". Nu i ona govorit … Zdes'že togda ezdili mnogie. I ona skazala, i ja poexala. No esli by kto-to ne predložil, ja by ne … Nu, ja govorju, svet ne bez dobryx ludej, kto-to objazatel'no pomožet. Neobjazatel'no den'gami, no xot' sovetom … .*

The domination of social relations over economic rationality could be explained by the fact that food trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border did not have any strategic character but rather represented a survival *tactic* (in de Certeau's terms) which was 'not necessarily "economically rational" according to the models of supply, demand and efficient self-interest' (Pine and Bridger, 1998, p. 11) but was deeply integrated into a particular social context determined by the necessity to survive with old resources in new circumstances. Therefore, although trade itself was the product of the new social and economic situation, the ways to implement it were borrowed from the previous reality. Food trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border relied to a great extent on informal networks and reciprocal relations which had dominated the social life of the Soviet past and it was also based on disappearing daily life practices. In this sense, shuttle trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border was distinguished from the trade in Poland by its tactical (as opposed to strategic) character. For this reason, the failures of Ašmjany inhabitants at Polish markets in the early 1990s could be explained along the same line. Aspiring to use their daily life practices at Polish markets, people burnt their fingers because the economic reality of those markets was already different.

In general, the shuttle trade of the early 1990s represented a form of 'continuity between Soviet and Post-Soviet strategies' (White, 2004, p. 108), and the border, across which people had to carry goods in order to survive in this transitional situation, was a literal embodiment of ongoing changes. It symbolized the distortion of the local daily order and an entirely new situation to which people had to adapt. Besides being a survival tactic, shuttle trade was also a tactic of such adaptation. Nonetheless, even a momentary economic profit, which the locals learnt to gain from the new circumstances, could not help overcome the general dissatisfaction that the border inevitably brought. This chapter concludes by shedding light on how people coped with the border at the earliest stage of its development and the problems they faced in their 'learning' process.

To Lithuania through the Forest: Learning to Live with the Border

Mass shuttle trade was but one practice of subverting the new order of daily life which the border had brought into existence. As stressed above, the political development of the Belarus–Lithuania border was a lasting process. But even if the border had appeared in one day, it was still hard to imagine that people would have adjusted to the new situation immediately. It is worth mentioning that borders always exist on multiple levels. On a macro-level they are often a part of global political changes, and in this sense the appearance of the Belarus–Lithuania border was not just an issue between two former Soviet republics and two newly independent states. After all, this border was the result of a new world order which the end of the Cold War designated. However, the states did play a significant role in the border's establishment and institutionalization. From the

very beginning of the border history it was both Belarus and Lithuania who took the responsibility for the new political situation that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the previous political reality in general. The first part of this chapter outlines the steps which each of the states took in this direction. However, as the example of the existence of shuttle trade demonstrates, the success of those steps was not immediate. The memories about the earliest years of the border's history make it clear that the state's and people's practices of border development overlapped to some extent but did not coincide. There were attempts to prevent the transportation of goods but instead it turned into mass cross-border trade. The aspiration to control people's cross-border movement made locals cross the border outside of the control posts. The reliance on the local population in preventing illegal crossing caused hostility and suspicion among people and a feeling that the local code was broken. Generally speaking, this early period of border existence exemplified 'the conflict between the natural tendency of the state to integrate its territory and the interests of the individuals and social groups who profit from the contacts and interaction with the neighbouring state territory' (Lunden and Zalamans, 2001 cited in Zhurzhenko, 2010, p. 258). This conflict can be explained not only by frustration which people felt in relation to their daily life changes, but also by an attitude inherited from the Soviet past according to which the subversion of the state rules was considered as a routinized daily practice (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 76). As during socialism, such subversion did not have any organized or strategic character in the case of Ašmjany dwellers. Rather it represented what anthropologist James C. Scott (1985, p. xvi) calls an everyday form of resistance which does not require any coordination, is built on 'implicit understandings and informal networks' and does not presuppose any 'direct confrontation with authority'. Further, I consider what this daily resistance on the Belarus–Lithuania border looked like and the reasons people resorted to circumventing the practices of border crossing.

To begin with, I turn to the story of Vera (Interview 14, 4 September 2012), a middle-aged woman from the Ašmjany region. Vera was born in a village located only 1 km from the administrative boundary between the two Soviet republics. During Soviet times, visits to Lithuania were the part of a daily routine for Vera and her family. The woman's native village was a small one and many everyday necessities were obtained in the larger Tabariškės on the Lithuanian side. Vera had four siblings, three of whom (two sisters and a brother) had moved to Lithuania during Soviet times and stayed there after the USSR's disintegration. Another sister had worked in Vilnius before 1990s but then returned to Ašmjany, where Vera and her husband had also moved after they had got married in the late 1980s. For Vera and her sister the period of the porous border (as Vera herself designated it) lasted longer than for the average Ašmjany citizen. Until 1999 both women crossed the border freely without obtaining visas and not following any particular requirements which already regulated border crossing practices. To do so they used the area described previously between the two border villages, which was located right behind Vera's parents' house.

Figure 3.3 The bridge across the river Merkys between Belarusian village Hrihi and Lithuania village Tabariškės (the picture is taken on the Belarusian side)

Author: Olga Sasunkevich

However, in 1999 on their way to Vilnius, where they planned to attend the wedding of their niece, Vera and her sister were caught by the Lithuanian border patrol. The women were arrested and sent to *Lukiškės* prison in Vilnius. According to the Lithuanian Criminal Code of that time, women might have been sentenced for to up to five years of imprisonment for the violation of the state border (LR. Lietuvos Respublikos Teisingumo Ministerija, 2000, p. 145). To avoid the punishment, Vera approached the Belarusian Embassy and with diplomatic help the sisters were released from the court room three months after the incident.

Vera's story is particularly interesting given that visa requirements for entering Lithuania had been established by 1994. Also, by that time cross-border posts had been constructed and the border control had become a reality. However, asked whether she really had not had any visa until 1999, Vera declared that she actually had not needed one. Further, she, nevertheless, admitted that actually they had understood that they had been doing something illegal but they had not expected that the punishment could have been so severe and that illegal border crossing had been a part of the criminal, not of the administrative, code. This ambiguity of Vera's reasoning could be explained by the real multiplicity of arguments why

in the first few years after the emergence of border control people still tended to cross the border illegally. As Vera's case demonstrates, the lack of knowledge and experience of obtaining visas was indeed an important reason. Although, of course, there were sources of the necessary information, such as *Ašmjanski vesnik* (September 1993; January, September 1994), for instance, that published rules and changes in visa procedures regularly, people still did not entirely understand what a visa was and why it was so necessary to acquire it. As one of participants of the focus-group discussion (February 2012) put it, 'Not everyone understood what a visa was, we did not face it previously, during the Soviet times'. Moreover, even people who got a visa still did not respect all of the rules which the visa regime presupposed. A respondent Natalija (Interview 4, September 2011), for instance, told a curious story about a woman from Minsk whom she and her daughter met in Vilnius during one of their trade trips.

> On our way back we met one woman from Minsk. My daughter started talking to her and she asked whether we had visas. The daughter said, "No, we don't, we are through the forest". "Well, – this woman said, – then I will go with you and the visa will be preserved for the next time". […] When we were caught, they told us to write an explanation how we reached Lithuania and how we managed to come back. This woman told them, "But I have a visa". "Why did you then go through the forest, not across the border?" And she said, "Just to keep company" (Laughs).[12]

Thus, in the words of Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2010, p. 259), people rejected the formal rules of border crossing because 'they often just follow[ed] routine and [did] not see illegal crossing as a crime'. To put it differently, it was hard for people to overcome their previous experience of limitless and regular visits to the neighbouring republic which the locals considered as their inalienable right.[13] A journalist of *Ašmjanski vesnik* recalled how border guards gathered villagers together trying to explain the new rules to them and how the meeting turned into a scandal because the attendees (mostly elderly women) would not accept that they could not visit their relatives from a neighbouring village on the other side of the border anymore (Focus-group discussion, February 2012).

Such a reaction also might be connected to a belief shared by some people that the border was a temporal phenomenon and that the situation would reverse

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12 *Nazad vstretilas' ešče minčanka odna, s moej dočer'ju razgovorilas', sprašivaet, est' li u nas vizy. A dočka ej govorit: "Net, my prosto čerez les". "Nu xorošo, – govorit èta ženščina, – togda i ja s vami, pust' èta viza na sledujuščij raz soxranitsja". [...] Kogda nas slovili, oni skazali nam pisat' ob'jasnitel'nye, kak my v Litvu dobiralis', kak popali obratno. Èta minčanka im govorit: "U menja viza est". "Tak čego Vy šli čerez les, ne čerez granicu?". A ona govorit: "Za kompaniju!" (Smeetsja).*

13 On similar observations from other parts of the Belarus–Lithuania border see Kabzińska-Stawarz, 1994; Cegliński, 2005.

to 'normal' (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011). Meanwhile people tried to behave as they had before the border appeared.[14] Moreover, particular legal loopholes still existed. For example, there was an agreement between Belarus and Lithuania about the simplified cross-border movement of the border inhabitants who were allowed to visit the border regions of Belarus and Lithuania on special occasions (LR and RB, 1994). To use this right people needed a particular permission which should have been granted by the local authorities. However, the implementation of these regulations was precarious. There was no solid understanding of how long this permission was valid for and who was authorized to obtain it. Therefore, successful border crossing often depended on the situation and the particular border guard who made a final decision (Nalatija, Interview 4, September 2011). Such inconsistency also facilitated an ambiguous understanding of border regulations when people preferred to rely on their fortune rather than to follow special rules.

Sometimes people violated the rules unintentionally. Usually such cases were connected with a routine practice to pick mushrooms and berries in the forest or to graze cattle in fields where the borderline was located but was not properly designated (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012; Focus-group, February 2012; Cegliński, 2005; Belickaja, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 2002). Border guards normally closed their eyes to such situations because the resources to deal with every one of them were scarce (Kuprovič, Zjankevič, *Iŭeŭski kraj*, 1995; Antonov, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1996). However, this forced tolerance of petty violators made the locals believe that border patrols followed some local code according to which border guards and customs officers who at that time were still recruited from the local population had to let people go even if they managed to catch them. As stressed in one of the contest essays (Alina, Essay 2, 2011), 'people would not accept that a local boy could arrest them'.[15] Another person (Galina, Interview 2, August 2011) arguing against her sister's will to work as a customs officer mentioned that she could not bear the thought that a member of her family would 'rummage in bags of Ašmjany people'. Neither could she understand how her former classmate or a parent of her pupil working at the border would not have helped if it had been necessary. Nevertheless, when people talked about the current situation, they noted that those expectations had gradually disappeared. First of all, the strategy of recruiting border and customs officers was changed. Today people from Ašmjany rarely work at the border posts close to the town and are usually sent to other regions. The attitude of the locals also transformed. After some corruption scandals they became more understanding of the duties of the border officials, notwithstanding their origin and belonging to the local community. As one interlocutor (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010) put it,

14 The same conclusion was made by Polish ethnographer Łukasz Cegliński (2005) during his research on the Lithuanian side of the border in the early 2000s.

15 *V golovax ljudej ne ukladyvalos', kak svoj xlopec' možet ix zaderžat'.*

> They have their own work to do, they are also under control and they are also scared. There are so many of our customs officials in jail. Now people stick to their job, neither kith nor kin matters.[16]

Hence, it had taken time before people recognized and accepted their new situation. The stories similar to Vera's appeared in other sources as well (Jadviga, Interview 12, August 2012; Karaneŭski, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1998). The only peculiarity of Vera's story is that in her case the period of the porous border lasted the longest. Other respondents (those who had not gone to Lithuania for a long time after the border establishment) usually mentioned that they had stopped crossing it approximately in the mid-1990s (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010; Galina, Interview 2, August 2011; Interview 3, Irina, September 2011; Anna, Interview 10, February 2012; Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010). Such persistence of illegal cross-border practices in Vera's case is most likely because she had originated from a border village where, back in the 1990s, her parents still lived. It was easier for people from this region to pick an appropriate moment and location to cross the border, bypassing border and customs control. Vera might not have even been caught if she had not been reported on by one of the villagers who cooperated with border guards. However, it is worth mentioning that from the mid-1990s border control did become stricter. Although people continued circumventing border regulations, the number of border violators decreased and in general remained under 1,000 persons per year through the 1990s.[17] In addition, people's motivation to cross the border changed. By the mid-1990s shuttle trade stopped being a mass activity and became available only to particular social groups which were largely determined by the border regime regulations.

Conclusions

The establishment of the Belarus–Lithuania border in the early 1990s was closely connected to more general historical processes and events in Eastern Europe at that time such as *perestroika*, the fall of the Berlin Wall and, finally, the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The first attempts to control the movement of goods and people in the region were made almost immediately after Lithuania had proclaimed its independence in March 1990. By 1993–1994 the most important steps in the direction of the border institutionalization had been made. In 1994, when Belarus and Lithuania established the visa regime, the border was recognized as an inalienable part of the new social reality.

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16 *U nix rabota, u nix tože kontrol' i oni bojatsja. U nas stol'ko ljudej poperesaživali, tamožennikov ètix našix. Poètomu deržatsja raboty ljudi, ne važno, brat tam ili svat … .*

17 Except for the year of 1999, when slightly more than 1,000 people (1,029) were caught (LR. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2015a).

However, throughout the first decade of the border's existence and especially during the first four–five years after its appearance, the border between Belarus and Lithuania remained highly porous for local people. The locals had to learn to live near the border. Those attributes of the border existence, which today are mainly taken for granted such as visas or the necessity to cross the border in designated places, were unknown to people who had lived in the previously borderless region. Therefore, people often violated the border regime unintentionally without taking into account possible legal consequences of such violations. Nevertheless, the purposeful circumvention of border rules also happened since people considered free cross-border movement as a part of their daily life inherited from the Soviet period. From the beginning the violation of border regulation was closely linked to mass shuttle trade in food products which thrived in the region after the border appeared. Moreover, the first measures to set up border control were primarily aimed at the prevention of this informal economic practice and even more so of the deficit in foodstuffs which Ašmjany experienced due to extensive transportation of Belarusian goods into neighbouring Vilnius.

Mass shuttle trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border was built primarily upon the knowledge and practices from the previous historic period. Goods were obtained through *blat* relations and sold in Vilnius in the places which used to be a part of Ašmjany dwellers' daily consumption practices during Soviet times. This type of trade was more accessible to regular Ašmjany inhabitants than 'Polish trade' which also flourished in Ašmjany in the same period. Unlike petty trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border, trade in Poland and in Polish goods required more substantial resources including knowledge that not everyone in the town possessed. Therefore, while shuttle trade in Vilnius had a mass character and brought low profit, 'Polish trade' was operated at a more professional level. Some people who had been involved in this activity in the early 1990s were able to develop it into a more efficient business later.

Chapter 4
Maturation of the Border, Professionalization of Shuttle Trade (1994–2007)

Using the organic metaphor of 'life cycle' in relation to the development of borders over time, Baud and van Schendel (1997) suggest singling out two stages at which a border becomes a reality – the stage of an *adolescent* and the stage of an *adult* borderland. The first one, they argue, designates a period when the border is already 'an undeniable reality but its genesis is still recent, and many people remember the period before it existed' (Baud and van Schendel, 1997, p. 224). During this period, according to the authors, social networks start 'to be confined by the existence of new border' however, they 'still form powerful links' across it. The second stage of the *adult* borderland refers to the moment when the border becomes an unquestionable social reality, it is perceived as 'eternal' and 'deeply embedded' in the social life of the border region (Baud and van Schendel, 1997, p. 224). At this stage social networks 'implicitly accept and follow the contours of the border' (ibid.) and even if cross-border links continue to exist, 'they are increasingly viewed as problematic' (ibid.). Baud and van Schendel (2007, p. 225) themselves admit the discussable character of their model caused by its 'evolutionary and deterministic implications'. Therefore, it would be too speculative to apply this 'life cycle' model to the history of the Belarus–Lithuania borderland unconditionally. On the one hand, the border between Belarus and Lithuania has already become a social reality and, even though most people still remember their life before the border, its existence barely causes any doubts or questions. On the other hand, even today cross-border social networks continue to play an important role in the region and do not entirely coincide with the line of border demarcation. Hence the distinction between the adult and adolescent life cycles of the borderland are not followed here literally but ideas about the *maturation* of the border, which is understood here as the development and clarification of border regulations, their acceptance by the local population and the discursive formulation of the border importance, is important. All these significant changes were taking place during the second stage of the border development in 1994–2007. Therefore, this chapter considers the main aspects of the period of the Belarus–Lithuania border maturation and how the social stratification which the development and strengthening of the border had brought into life influenced the practices of shuttle trade in the Ašmjany region.

'No Porous Borders Anymore': Changes in Politics, Discourse and Practices of Border Regulations

As stressed in the previous chapter, the first attempts to control the border were made in the early 1990s. In 1994–1995 several important documents in regard to border regulations were approved. First, as has been mentioned, Belarus and Lithuania established visa requirements in 1994. Then on 25 February 1994 they also accepted the *Temporal Agreement on Mutual Trips of Citizens* (further – Temporal Agreement) which presupposed some privileges in visa regulations for particular groups of travellers as well as simplified the procedure of border crossing for inhabitants of border villages (LR and RB, 1994). In 1996 both of the countries also ratified the *Treaty on the Belarus-Lithuania Border* where the problem of demarcation was stated (RB and LR, 1995). The steps which Belarus and Lithuania took in the direction of border control strengthening were connected not only to the aspiration of the political elites of the newly independent states to proclaim and defend the sovereignty of their countries but also to a new geopolitical situation in the region. In 1994 Lithuania applied for NATO membership and in 1995 it signed the Europe Agreement which marked Lithuania's course towards full membership in the European Union (Lane, 2002). At the same time, Belarus remained in the sphere of Russia's interests. In 1995 Alexander Lukashenka and the first Russian president Boris Yeltsin signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation which resulted in the foundation of the Community of Sovereign Republics in April 1996 and the Belarus–Russia Union one year later (Marples, 1999). In such circumstances the common border between Belarus and Lithuania became a concern not only for the two small states but also for greater powers such as NATO and the EU on the one hand and Russia on the other.

To draw a clear picture of the heterogeneous forces which led to border maturation during this period this process needs to be considered on three levels: the level of official documents which regulated cross-border movement at that time, the level of political discourse about the border and the level of border practices. To begin with, it has to be specified that on the documentary level this period is divided into two sub-periods. The first one was marked by the Temporal Agreement of 1994 which recognized the importance of clear border regulations for good neighbourly relations but at the same time stipulated the loosening of visa restrictions for particular groups of Belarusian and Lithuanian citizens (RB and LR, 1994). For instance, people over 65 were allowed to travel across the border without visas (Article 6). Children under 16 could obtain visas free of charge (Article 13). Moreover, free visas were also intended for those citizens who studied in one of the two countries or travelled there in order to visit the graves of their relatives (Article 13). Article 8 of the document also stated a special agreement on simplified cross-border travel for the inhabitants of villages adjacent to the border. This agreement was also signed in February 1994 but came into action in 1995 (LR and RB, 1994). Besides the simplified procedure of cross-border movement which the agreement specified, it also contained the list of 21 border

points across which the movement of border village dwellers had to be arranged. Those points were supposed to have a local character and to help the indigenous population keep their connections with relatives in neighbouring villages on both of the sides of the border. Moreover, they were supposed to follow the contours of Catholic Church parishes which had existed from the times when the entire area had belonged to the Vil'nja region. However, the plan to set up those points and to organize cross-border movement in accordance with the agreement was never entirely achieved. According to the newspaper *Iŭeŭski kraj* (2002), by October 2002, two months before the agreement was cancelled, only five of the 21 cross-border points had been established.

The termination of the agreement on simplified cross-border movement was caused by the denunciation of the Temporal Agreement of 1994. In 2002 Belarus and Lithuania ratified a new version of the Temporal Agreement which came into force in 2003 and designated the second sub-period of border maturation at the level of documental regulations (LR and RB, 2002). The new version of the agreement eliminated almost any possibility of visa-free cross-border movement (besides the one for two very specific professional groups, such as aviators and mariners (Article 6)) but, nevertheless, kept the opportunity to obtain visas free of charge for special groups of citizens, such as, for example, people under 16 and over 70 (Article 9). Additionally, according to the Temporal Agreement, the inhabitants of border villages were to pay only 30 per cent of the visa cost and did not need invitations to apply for a visa (Article 10). The establishment of a fully-fledged visa regime (although with some aforementioned exceptions) was initiated by Lithuania (*Ašmjanski vesnik*, December 2002) and was most likely connected to Lithuania's plan to become a member of the European Union in 2004. However, visa relations between Belarus and Lithuania were regulated by this agreement after Lithuania entered the EU on 1 May 2004. Only in 2007, when Lithuania implemented the Schengen *acquis*, was the visa regime between Belarus and Lithuania changed again, that time in accordance with the rules stipulated for the members of the Schengen zone.

The significance of the border issue for the geopolitical courses of Belarus and Lithuania, which had been chosen by the two states in the mid-1990s, had become evident even before substantial documentary changes such as the establishment of the full-fledged visa regime between the two countries were made. In 1997–1998 there occurred an important shift in the political discourse on the border. It was officially stated by the Belarusian side that the Belarus–Lithuania border would not remain porous anymore (*SB. Sovetskaja Belorussija*, 30 August 1997; Antonov, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 1997; *Ašmjanski vesnik*, September 1997; *Ašmjanski vesnik*, January 1998). The same concern was also expressed by the representatives of Lithuania who claimed that the porous border with Belarus prevented Lithuania from the establishment of a visa-free regime with European countries, in particular with Germany (*SB. Sovetskaja Belorussija*, 23 August 1997). A legal and secure border with Russia and Belarus was also considered to be an important factor for Lithuania's prospects for membership of NATO and the EU (Gricius, 2002).

The concern about the shared border which arose on both of the sides during the same period was in fact awakened by a political scandal between Russia and Belarus, which historian David Marples (1999, p. 118) designates as 'the ORT affair'. The scandal happened in late July–August 1997. It was caused by provocative TV-reportage about the lack of control on the Belarusian side of the border (Zvozskov, Pastuxov and Panfilov, 1999). Putting together a report, which was later shown on Russian TV-channel ORT, journalist Pavel Šeremet and camera operator Dmitrij Zavadskij[1] crossed the Belarus–Lithuania border several times without any obstacles. The reportage was regarded by the Belarusian side and personally by president Alexander Lukashenka as a politically motivated insult aimed at disrupting the status of the Union between Russia and Belarus proclaimed on 2 April 1997 (Pivovar, 1997). Putting aside the actual political circumstances in which the report was made and consequences which it had for Belarus afterwards (see Marples, 1999), it is worth mentioning that the incident and the consequent inclusion of the Belarus–Lithuania border into a political game signified its geopolitical importance in relations between Belarus and Russia, Russia and Lithuania (who demarcated their borders at the same time (Lane, 2002)), and Lithuania and the European Union. It also symbolized a new geopolitical reality in the formerly unified region.

This new political reality could not leave untouched the third level of border maturation – the level of practices. It is maintained in the previous chapter that some practices of the period of the infant and porous border outlasted documentary and political changes. Nevertheless, transformations on this level also gradually occurred. Although by 1996 the number of border violators had dropped significantly, it remained relatively high throughout the 1990s. However, the closer to EU membership Lithuania got, the more positive tendencies its statistics reported. If in 2001 750 border violators were detained on the Belarus–Lithuania border, in 2003–2004 the number was 366 and 214 accordingly (LR. Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba, 2015a). After Lithuania joined the EU, a further drop took place. In 2005–2006 the number of border violators did not exceed 154 persons per year. In 2007, for the first time this number decreased below 100 persons. Moreover, the composition of border violators was changing as well. In the 1990s to the early 2000s the media reports published in *Ašmjanski vesnik* paid more attention to the informal activities of the local population (Kuz'menka, 1995; Vožykaŭ, 1996; Antonov, 1996, 1997; Mixajlova, 1997; Karaneŭski, 1998, 2001; Sanjuk, Nov, Dec 2000; Belickaja, 2002). In 2003–2007, during the second sub-period of border maturation, the issue of illegal migration from third countries such as Russia and Georgia became more sensitive (Sanjuk, 2003; Bud'ko, 2005; *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 2006, 2007). The level of practice also included problems of

1 Both of the names are well known in Belarus. Dmitrij Zavadskij is one of several persons who disappeared under precarious circumstances and is considered to be one of the victims of president Lukashenka's political regime. Pavel Šeremet is a Russian-Belarusian journalist and the co-founder of an oppositional on-line resource *BelPartizan*.

border delineation as well as of border and customs control strengthening. The process of border demarcation continued throughout the whole period and came to an end in 2008 (*SB. Belarus' Segodnja*, 2008). Cross-border points were also organized properly and the biggest and the most important one – *Kamenny Loh* – was reconstructed according to international requirements in the early 2000s with financial help from Russia and the EU (Koxanovskaja, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 2002).

The changes in the border regulations inevitably influenced the cross-border mobility of the local population that gradually became a less significant group of border violators. Moreover, if illegal cross-border practices of the inhabitants of adjoining border villages continued to be regarded as a problem by border authorities in the early 2000s, Ašmjany dwellers' participation in this local 'movement' was by that time less prominent.[2] Simultaneously, the possibility of crossing the border legally was also not easily available to all Ašmjany inhabitants. To obtain a multiple-entry Lithuanian visa one had to provide the consulate with an invitation which was accessible only to those who had contacts (preferably relatives) in Lithuania (although this group was not a small one, taking into consideration the mass migration from the region to the LithSSR during Soviet times, which is considered in Chapter 3) (LR. Pravitel'stvo Litovskoj Respubliki, 1997). A single-entry visa at the same time was quite expensive for the average Belarusian citizen. For example, from 1997 to 2000 a regular Lithuanian visa cost 20 USD (LR. Pravitel'stvo Litovskoj Respubliki, 1997a) which oscillated between 20–25 per cent of an average monthly salary in Belarus in different years of that period. Partially for this reason, several respondents reported a 13–15-year gap in visits to Lithuania (Elena, Interview 1, September 2010; Galina, Interview 2, August 2011; Irina, Interview 3, August 2011; Anna, Interview 10, February 2012; Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010).

However, there were some social groups that continued to enjoy their mobility and profit from it in the situation when the neighbouring country had become unavailable to many other Ašmjany dwellers. First of all, people who had relatives in Lithuania never interrupted their regular trips there and did not see the border as a significant problem (Marina, Interview 5, September 2011; Olga, Interview 7, October 2011). Secondly, until 2003 elderly people over 65 years old had also experienced a high level of cross-border mobility since they had not needed visas. These two social groups were most distinguishable among those who turned their cross-border mobility into a shuttle trade activity. Nevertheless, the ways they operated trade substantially differed. Younger women with the permanent possibility of crossing the border legally and with useful contacts on the other side of the border made shuttle trade a professional enterprise. Their elderly

2 For example, according to the statistics of local border authorities, there were 157 violators detained in 2000. Among them 64 persons originated from Ašmjanski *raën* and only 19 of those 64 were Ašmjany inhabitants (Karaneŭski, *Ašmjanski vesnik*, 2001). In 2003 another newspaper report stated that attempts to violate the border in 2002 and in the first half of 2003 were mostly made by the inhabitants of border villages (Bud'ko, 2003).

counterparts considered it as an advantageous but precarious opportunity which could disappear as easily as it began. However, for both of the groups of women the border had become an important resource of economic stability and to some extent even a way to prosperity.

From Spatial to Social Mobility: the Professionalization of Shuttle Trade

According to sociologists Vincent Kaufmann and Bertrand Montulet (2008, p. 38), a close link between spatial and social mobility has become an explicit axiom in many studies of human mobility which depart from the point that 'an increase in spatial mobility reflects a process of "democratization" of the "freedom" to move and – by extension – an increase in social mobility and equality in general'. Although Kaufmann and Montulet (2008) themselves question the unconditionality of this thesis, at the same time they admit the important resource potential which geographical movement may have for the upward change in the social status. The sociologists even suggest considering mobility as a capital in its own right, on a par with other forms of capital such as economic (money), social (relational networks) and cultural (knowledge).

This idea partially corresponds to the arguments of some feminist scholars. In her article on gender and mobility, geographer Susan Hanson (2010) argues that mobility often has an empowering aspect for women and is seen as a means of access to opportunity. To support her thesis, she gives an example of the study of female traders in Benin by geographer Jennifer Mandel (2004, p. 260), who states that 'women's ability to configure a beneficial livelihood strategy may largely depend on their degree of mobility' as 'the distance from their residence women travel in the exercise of their daily activities' (p. 257). In her research Mandel (2004) demonstrates that in the specific situation of women from the capital city of Porto Novo the possibility of obtaining profitable goods for trade requires substantial mobility. Those women whose geographical movement is restricted by the intersection of cultural norms, a family situation and a life-course phase can experience limits in access to the most beneficial economic activities. Returning to trade in post-socialist Europe, sociologist Mirjana Morokvasic (2004) draws similar conclusions in relation to the new patterns of short-term mobility in Eastern and Central Europe after 1989, including female shuttle trade. The scholar sees this widespread pattern of female mobility as a way of adapting to 'the new context of post-communist transition' and as capitalization of 'a specific resource – [people's] capacity to stay mobile for a long time – which is an immense advantage in comparison to those who do not or cannot move' (Morokvasic, 2004, p. 13).

Acknowledging the resource potential of geographical mobility, the aforementioned authors (Kaufmann and Montulet, 2008; Hanson, 2010; Morokvasic, 2004; also Savage, 1988) also warn scholars against taking for granted the necessarily positive link between spatial and social mobility. More careful studies, they argue, should shed light on historical, social and political

circumstances in which mobility takes place. As Mandel (2004, p. 258) points out, 'various forms of capital (assets) are only one ingredient in the types of livelihood strategies individuals and households can configure. Various institutions reflecting geographically and historically specific social, economic, and political settings also play a key role in people's ability to effectively use their assets'.

Departing from these theoretical suggestions, this sub-chapter considers two cases of women who are professional traders and who have managed to capitalize on their free circulation between Ašmjany and neighbouring Vilnius and to turn it into an important economic resource. It was the period of border maturation and strengthening of the visa regime when both of the women organized their activity. Therefore, not only mobility itself but also the border regime (which differentiated between those who could and could not move) played a significant role in the development of professional shuttle trade in the town. Nevertheless, starting almost during the same period and obtaining similar resources, the women ended up at different social levels. Although both of them experienced social mobility determined to a certain extent by their opportunity to move across the border, other resources also had an important meaning. Therefore, the unequal possession of some of them as well as a substantial difference between the women's motivation and circumstances to start their businesses led to differences in the scale of the business, income earned and social positions that the respondents found themselves in after more than 15 years of their involvement in shuttle trade. To stress the argument that spatial mobility does not automatically lead to upward social movement, the conclusion considers the case of 'a courier', a woman who was not a trader herself but who helped traders transport goods between Belarus and Lithuania. This case demonstrates that mobility does not necessarily provide women with a sense of social and personal achievement but can be perceived as an oppressive practice which people have to rely on to cope with economic necessity.

Case 1 – Marina

Marina (Interview 5, September 2011) is a highly educated woman in her late forties. She originates from Ašmjany and is a typical Ašmjany dweller, having relatives in Poland and Lithuania and visiting the Roman Catholic Church. Her contact details were obtained from another respondent, whom she had worked with at one of Ašmjany schools. The meeting was at a local indoor market that, as it turned out, partially belonged to Marina. Besides being the co-owner of this centrally located shopping place, Marina also ran a trading business in clothes imported semi-legally from Russia, Poland and Lithuania. Additionally, Marina's family dealt in foodstuffs and imported used cars. Moreover, Marina and her husband kept their jobs in the state sector. Her husband had changed positions several times during that period and Marina herself had worked as a schoolteacher during all the years of her entrepreneurship.

Marina's business had the form of a family enterprise. In the beginning, Marina's mother-in-law, a salesperson with considerable experience and a former

chief of one of Ašmjany stores, helped her in the business. When Marina's sons grew up, they also entered the family business venture. Interestingly, Marina's husband had gradually stopped being closely involved in the business which was mostly run by Marina and her sons. At the same time, her husband was responsible for keeping the house and for land cultivation which, as Marina stated, he was doing at a professional level.

Marina got involved in the trading business almost immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union with shopping trips to Warsaw and Bialystok, where she and her husband bought women's underwear and sold it in Ašmjany upon their return. At first, they did business informally, not at a formal Ašmjany market but nearby, 'on the street, by a fence'. However, when the legislation of entrepreneurship became clearer and stricter in Belarus, Marina registered her business officially. The geography of their trips also changed over time and spread to Lithuania and Russia. Marina said that Vilnius was most convenient because it was within easy reach and safe to go to even when alone. At the same time, trips to Poland and Russia required the help of a man, as Marina mentioned. Therefore, she went there mostly on organized shopping tours while she travelled to Vilnius regularly on her own either by bus or by car.

Marina's shopping trips to Vilnius started when Lithuania and Belarus introduced a mutual visa regime for their citizens. Visa requirements decreased the number of local people who could afford to go to Vilnius regularly. This situation created favourable trading conditions for those people who had an opportunity to obtain Lithuanian visas. In Marina's case, this opportunity was guaranteed by invitations from her brother, who lived in Vilnius. Even when her brother passed away, she had still managed to get an invitation from his family until this possibility was withdrawn by the requirement that a direct relative came to the Lithuanian migration department in person. At the point of our meeting, Marina travelled to Lithuania with a Schengen visa issued by the Polish Consulate for business trips.

Marina's story clearly demonstrates that in her case shuttle trade is not about survival but rather a well-thought business strategy. Starting with the simplest form of 'Polish trade', Marina and her husband managed to develop their small family business into a serious enterprise on a local scale. The business also helped them achieve a certain level of prosperity and influence in the town. As Marina mentioned several times, the process of the indoor market construction had been initiated by the local authorities, with whom she had good professional relations. According to Marina's interview, the maturation of the Belarus–Lithuania border had played its role in her business development. Foremost, a significant part of Marina's business was connected to Lithuania. She bought some clothes at *Gariūnai* in Vilnius which allowed her to cut down expenses on long-distance trips to Poland or Russia where she also went but less frequently. Their car business was also tied to the neighbouring country from where they brought cars to Russia and Belarus. Besides, the border regime itself mattered. When Marina was asked whether she would have liked the border regime to become less strict she expressed her doubts clearly. On the one hand, she said, it would have been nice if people had

been able to go to their relatives in Lithuania without any problems. On the other hand, after some reasoning, she stressed that this would have adversely affected her business,

> **Researcher:** Would you like Ašmjany to become a part of the border territory[3] they talk about all the time?
>
> **Informant:** Of course, of course. First of all, a half of Ašmjany people are married in Lithuania, everything is interwoven, but how then the business will proceed I don't know. I think it will be very something … Or, maybe, they will not allow carrying anything, not a big deal […] Well, I don't know how this all, probably, probably there has to be a bit of the border but, perhaps, kin ties should be broader […] Well, I don't know. It looks a little scary and, as I have heard, our chairman is strongly against this, to have our region in this border zone, precisely because of trade, how it will develop in the region. If people start bringing goods from there, who will go to local stores?[4]

In other words, Marina regarded the border as an important resource for her business which limited the cross-border movement of local people, who otherwise could have obtained goods in Vilnius themselves. Consequently, the combination of Marina's cross-border mobility with the filtering function of the border in relation to other groups of people allowed her trade enterprise to stay afloat.

Case 2 – Olga

The second case is of a 65-year-old woman (Olga, Interview 7, October 2011) from a village neighbouring Ašmjany that is located approximately 2 km from the town centre. Olga was introduced to the study by her daughter, whom I had met on a local bus from Ašmjany to Vilnius (Olga's daughter studied at one of Vilnius universities, her case will also be considered in Chapter 5). Olga's biography differs from that of Marina. Olga was also born in Ašmjany but after she graduated from a college in Hrodna, she was sent to Siberia as a young specialist to work at

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3 Here an agreement on local border traffic between Belarus and Lithuania is meant (see Chapter 1, footnote 24).

4 ***Vy by xoteli, čtoby Ašmjany vošli vot v ètu prigraničnuju zonu, o kotoroj vse vremja govorjat?***
Konečno, konečno. Vo-pervyx, tut polovina ošmjancev ženaty/zamužem v Litve, vse perepletaetsja, tol'ko kak togda budet torgovlja, ja ne znaju. Mne počemu-to kažetsja, èto budet očen' kakoj-to … Nu a možet, ne razrešat ničego vezti, ničego strašnogo. Nu, vot ne znaju, vot kak èto vse, vot možet, nemnožko, navernoe, vse-taki granica dolžna byt', no, možet, rodoslovnost' vot èta, rodstvennye otnošenija rasširit'. Vot, ne znaju. Mne kažetsja, kak-to strašnovato, ja daže naskol'ko slyšala, čto naš predsedatel' očen' daže protiv, čtoby naš rajon vošel, imenno iz-za togo, čto vot kak potom budet torgovlja v rajone. Esli ljudi načnut privozit' ottuda tovary, kto togda v magazinax pokupat' budet?

a Soviet chemistry enterprise. She met her husband there and after five years they both returned to Belarus, to the city of Homel' in the southern part of the country located on the border with Ukraine. In Homel' Olga's two children – an elder son and a younger daughter – were born. In the late 1980s, when the Chernobyl disaster became a publicly discussed issue, Olga's family returned to Ašmjany, where, as settlers from the affected territories, they were given a house. For some time after the relocation, Olga worked at an Ašmjany branch of a Vilnius radio details factory. When the factory was closed due to the collapse of the Soviet economic system, Olga started working on a collective farm (*kolkhoz*) located near the village she lived in. Still working there, in 1994 she began bringing clothes from Lithuania and selling them illegally at an Ašmjany market. In 1995, after Olga's husband's death, she quit her work in the *kolkhoz* and put all her effort into shuttle trade.

Olga was not the first to think about starting her trade business. Her sister's husband, who traded at one of Vilnius markets at that time, suggested the idea. He was bringing goods directly from China and together with his wife, Olga's younger sister, was selling them at *Gariūnai*. Olga was taking the commodities (mostly clothes) from him and carrying them to Ašmjany. The sister's family also provided Olga with invitations for obtaining a multiple-entry Lithuanian visa. Being an additional source of income for Olga in the beginning, shuttle trade gradually became the primary one. The salary on the collective farm was frequently suspended at that time and was negligible in allowing Olga to raise her two children after she had been widowed. After being involved in illegal trade for a while, Olga officially registered as an entrepreneur, rented a stall at the Ašmjany market and started selling clothes there on a permanent basis. At the time of the interview, she still traded at the market but less regularly. Since her children were independent already and she herself had a pension as another source of income, shuttle trade stopped playing such an important role in Olga's well-being. She did not go to the market every day and usually worked there only 10 days per month.

As Olga recalled, when she started her activity in 1994–1996, things had run very smoothly. Since Ašmjany shops stayed empty in the 1990s, a local bazaar was supposed to fill people's demand for decent and affordable clothes and house utensils. Even the position of *Ašmjanski vesnik*, which blamed shuttle traders for speculation and easy moneymaking in the early 1990s (see Chapter 3), started changing. Both car and clothes trade began to be recognized as hard and useful labour (Drazdova, 1995; Leonova, 1996). As was stated in one of the articles, if state trade was not able to satisfy people's demand for affordable goods of high quality, than probably a bazaar had to be developed and not suppressed by the state (Leonova, 1996). In such circumstances, as Olga mentioned, she had earned a relatively high income in the first years of her business while many expenses such as transport costs, taxes and import duties (which Olga avoided by not declaring goods on the border) had not been very substantial. Although this favourable situation was gradually changing (since the late 1990s Belarusian authorities constantly hardened regulations on small-scale trade; moreover,

customs requirements and control also became stricter), Olga still managed if not to succeed in her business, then at least to turn it into a stable and proper form of income. She also broadened the geography of her trips to include Russia and Belarusian regions on the border with Poland, but Lithuania, where her relatives lived, remained the most important trade destination.

After all, with an income from trade Olga raised two children alone and paid for their higher education. The house where the meeting took place and where Olga lived by herself after the children had left (her daughter, as mentioned, lived in Lithuania and her son in another EU country) was run properly. Although the furniture and interior looked a bit outdated, the house had new windows and, in general, was of urban rather than of village appearance. Olga also owned a car which she had learnt to drive relatively recently at age 52. In her interview Olga expressed some tiredness of her business but even more so of her self-reliance since, as she said, she had to do without any help. At the same time, she was also proud to some extent of her independence and especially of financial self-sufficiency which she had gained through shuttle trade. Foremost, she was satisfied that she had been able to provide for her children, who had finally become independent and did not require financial input anymore.

Although trade ceased to play a survival role for Olga's family, she, nevertheless, was also concerned about possible facilitation of the border regime. Her reasoning was similar to that of Marina,

> **Researcher:** Would you like Ašmjany to become a part of the border zone?
>
> **Informant:** (Sighs) Well, this is a complicated question. If Ašmjany does, I don't know, all people say that then it will be a visa-free regime. Well, it is better, on the one hand, to visit relatives. But on the other hand, everyone will go and buy for herself, and then no one will buy anything at the bazaar. This is the only thing we are afraid of. Then we can just close down […] Me personally, I do not want this (Laughs). There is no point for me. When I quit my business, then it is OK.[5]

Thus for both Olga and Marina the stricter border regime which had been developing since 1994 as well as the possibility of cross-border mobility which both women had kept thanks to relatives in Lithuania did become an important resource for change in their social status. The women started out from different

5 ***Vy by xoteli, čtoby Ošmjany vot v ètu prigraničnuju zonu vošli?*** *(Vzdyxaet) Oj, tut složnyj vopros skazat'. Esli vojdut Ošmjany, ja ne znaju, vse govorjat, čto togda budet že bezvizovyj režim. Nu, bezvizovyj, s odnoj storony, lučše, k rodstvennikam možno ezdit'. A so vtoroj storony, každyj poedet sebe kupit, na bazare togda voobšče nikto pokupat' ne budet. Vot èto nas pugaet edinstvennoe, čto my togda vse, èto možno zakryvat'sja spokojno. Poètomu ja ličnо ne xoču (smeetsja). Mne èto nevygodno. Brošu torgovlju, togda puskaj.*

positions. While Marina was a young schoolteacher who over time turned into a successful professional businesswoman with a certain influence in the local community, Olga improved her status from an unskilled worker on a collective farm to a professional and self-reliant trader. At the same time, notwithstanding that the women were involved in very similar types of trade in the beginning, the benefits which this activity brought to them were different. Marina's enterprise led her and her family to real prosperity at least at the local level. Olga's trade remained mainly a source of her family's economic stability and was not developed into another kind of more professional and prestigious business. In the end, although the attitude to bazaar trade among Ašmjany dwellers has improved significantly during the last 20 years, it still remains a precarious activity from the point of view of both status and profitability. Therefore, mobility was but one resource which women needed to succeed in shuttle trade. A comparative analysis of these two cases demonstrates that other assets were also necessary, and family support was one of the most important among them.[6]

The significance of family in her life and business was stressed by Marina in several parts of her interview. First of all, the support of her parental family mattered. At the beginning of the interview, when Marina talked about herself, she stressed almost immediately that she had been driving a car from the age of 18.[7] Since no specific question on this was asked, it seemed that car driving, placed in context with a range of other facts, which were supposed to represent Marina's personal achievements, was supposed to embody Marina's independence and self-confidence which she had gained from her earliest years.[8] However, it was her father who supported Marina's aspirations and helped her when she was rejected as a participant of the free driving courses which back in the 1980s were only open to male students of Ašmjany schools. Secondly, Marina's brother who had moved to Lithuania during Soviet times helped her obtain multiple-entry Lithuanian visas. After the brother's death, his family continued helping Marina with this issue. Thirdly, when Marina married at the age of 20, she found herself in the family of a professional Soviet salesperson with good connections in the town. Marina's mother-in-law's trade experience and her networks helped the family establish a food-selling business. Not only did the experienced woman

6 On the importance of family support for livelihood strategies of small towns' inhabitants see also White, 2003.

7 In the 1980s car driving was a very uncommon activity not only among Ašmjany women but also among the town's inhabitants in general. Cars were a scarce commodity in the Soviet Union and it was not easy for a regular Soviet citizen to buy one (Siegelbaum, 2011). Therefore, car driving had a mass character neither in the Soviet Union in general, nor in provincial towns of the BSSR in particular. Moreover, car driving among women was even less popular in the USSR (see, for instance, Kuhr-Korolev, 2011). Marina herself acknowledged the uniqueness of her situation in the interview.

8 More on the connection between driving and female identity during Soviet and post-Soviet periods see Kuhr-Korolev, 2011.

have important connections among the suppliers of commodities but as a former head of one of the Ašmjany stores she was also granted some specific privileges to possess (together with other colleagues) a building where the family's food-trade enterprise was first located. Finally, the most important family support was provided by Marina's husband who not only helped her run the earlier trade in Polish underwear, but also had taken on all household responsibilities by current stage of their business. Talking about the Polish period of their entrepreneurial activity, Marina stressed explicitly that her husband's help was crucially significant for their success. As she mentioned, it was, firstly, more secure to travel to Poland together and, secondly, two family members could bring back more goods than Marina would have managed on her own. Moreover, it is also worth mentioning that neither the trade nor other businesses had ever been the single source of family income. As stressed already, both Marina and her husband kept their positions in the more secure and stable state sector, which gave them the opportunity to take additional risks and to develop their business without putting the family in an insecure position. Furthermore, in her interview she also specified that her husband cultivated land around their house, which Marina herself considered to be another important resource for the family's self-sufficiency.

Olga's situation was apparently different. Although her sister's family was also very supportive both in raising children and in operating the business (including support with the visa invitation), Olga had to rely on herself significantly. As a widowed mother, she was barely able to invest in the development of her trade business because most of the money she earned was spent on the family's needs. The children had been too young at first to provide Olga with substantial help in her business, although her daughter mentioned that when she had been a school-girl, her mother had taken her to Vilnius not only to visit relatives but also to help carry goods across the border afterwards. After the children finished school, however, they left Ašmjany. Both of the children studied for five years at universities in Minsk. Then Olga's son moved to an EU country, where he set up his own car trade business (he exported used cars to Belarus and Russia). Her daughter went to Lithuania to obtain her second bachelor's degree at one of universities in Vilnius (Olga's sister's family also helped in this regard providing her daughter with accommodation and food free of charge). Therefore, Olga had to be responsible not only for her business but also for the house and the plot around it. She mentioned in her interview that she had had to learn to do work which had traditionally been regarded as a male responsibility such as, for instance, chopping wood for the stove which had been used to heat Olga's house. Moreover, the lack of help from family members also limited Olga's capability to turn land cultivation into a supplementary livelihood strategy. This would have required more physical effort and time than Olga could have afforded taking into consideration given that she was a single person in charge of the whole trade process – from importing goods from Lithuania to selling them at the market. Recently, after Olga's daughter married, her son-in-law started helping on her plot. In addition to the lack of family support, Olga was also older than Marina when she started her business

(48 compared to her early thirties in Marina's case). Moreover, she began to trade in less favourable circumstances (the husband's death, and the dubious, almost non-paid work on a collective farm) than Marina did.

These considerable differences between the women's positions and resources they could allocate for starting and developing their business determined the ways they saw their activity after 15 years of entrepreneurial experience. It is clear that for Marina trade was an important resource of her self-confidence and evidence of her personal success. She was proud of her experience and of the position she had reached in her life and business. For instance, she underlined that thanks to the trade she and her husband managed to build their own house which was represented by Marina as a symbol of the family's prosperity. At the same time, when she was asked who she thought was rich in Ašmjany, she tactfully did not include herself in this group arguing that she did not want to calculate people's money and that other people calculate hers. For her, however, prosperity was defined by people's cleverness in making money work. She considered conspicuous consumption rather negatively and claimed that she would not have perceived a person who invested in status goods as rich,[9]

> Well, I don't know whom to consider rich, because I … I can say that sometimes people think that I have much money, for example. But I don't have money, all of it is here, invested. Therefore, to define someone as rich – is it someone who drives a jeep and is dressed up? I would never go for this.[10]

In Olga's case necessity was the leading explanation of her achievements. She considered not only the trade itself but also, for example, her driving skill (as mentioned she had learnt to drive at 52) in terms of enforcement and unfavourable life circumstances. As she said several times, 'the life forced me'. At the same time, as stressed already, Olga also expressed modest satisfaction with the progress she made in her life and especially with the well-being and stability of her children. Although she mentioned that she had been ashamed to trade at first, she argued that she had got used to this activity and did not experience emotional discomfort anymore.

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9 Such aspiration not to demonstrate one's prosperity and accusation of such behaviour might be connected with the rural ethos which predominates in Ašmjany society. In a small community, where all people are in sight of each other, conspicuous consumption as well as other forms of demonstrative behaviour is considered to be an inappropriate violation of local norms. In some other interviews the demonstrative consumption of Ašmjany new rich in the early 1990s was also condemned. On the opposite phenomenon of the conspicuous consumption of expensive and hardly affordable Western goods as a way of articulating a Western identity in an Estonian village after the USSR's collapse see Rausing, 2002.

10 *Nu, k bogatym ja daže ne znaju, potomu čto ja … Ja mogu tak skazat', čto poroj ljudi dumajut, čto, naprimer, u menja deneg mnogo. U menja deneg netu, oni vse vot, vloženy. Poètomu nazvat' kogo-to bogatym – èto čto, tot kto ezdit na džipe i razodet? Nu ja kak-to k ètomu ne sklonjus'.*

Notwithstanding the positive (although different) results which cross-border mobility brought to Olga and Marina, there are other women whose constant circulating movement between Ašmjany and Vilnius has not lead to any significant financial or social improvements. One such stories is represented by Žanna, a 55-year-old inhabitant of Vilnius who started her activity much later than Olga and Marina but still within the same period of the border's history.

Case 3 – Žanna

Žanna (Interview 13, March 2012) is a Lithuanian citizen but since her mother (who actually introduced me to Žanna) lives in Ašmjany, Žanna has obtained a multiple-entry Belarusian visa every year in order to visit her Belarusian family. Both Žanna and her husband were born in Ašmjany but moved to Vilnius in the early 1980s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the radio detail factory where Žanna and her husband had been working was closed down. However, Žanna's husband quickly found his way, starting to work in an automobile repair business. In the early 1990s Western used cars flowed into Lithuanian markets and became a flourishing enterprise. Žanna's husband's work was well-paid and allowed the family not only to adjust to the new economic reality quite easily but also to prosper. After losing her job at the factory, Žanna herself stayed at home with her new-born daughter. Even when the child reached the age appropriate for kindergarten, Žanna did not return to work because her husband provided for the family himself and wanted Žanna to stay at home and to look after the child.

At some point, her husband abandoned Žanna and their two children (she also has an elder son). In 1998, after a seven-year break in her work experience, Žanna managed to find a job at one of Vilnius supermarkets. By the time of the interview, she had changed her job several times; nevertheless, during the last 14 years she had always worked as a salesperson. Žanna supplemented a low salary, which she earned from her official job,[11] with the petty smuggling of Belarusian alcohol and cigarettes and with cross-border courier activities, which she had started in 2002. Žanna was a part of a distinguishable group which, as mentioned in Chapter 1, had been observed by the author several years before the research project in Ašmjany commenced. As Žanna explained, they became a group by pure accident. Once on her way back from Ašmjany to Vilnius, Žanna was asked by an unknown woman to carry several female suits across the border. The woman was a professional trader who imported female clothes from China through Russia and Belarus to Lithuania. After this first spontaneous trip Žanna started carrying goods regularly (first, to Lithuania, later – from Lithuania to Belarus) and was paid for every commodity she brought across the border. In the course of her courier work, she had also got to know other women, many of whom she had worked with.

11 In 2012 it was only 1,000 LT or 290 EUR against 1,651.4 or 478 EUR of average net monthly earnings (Statistics Lithuania, 2013).

Žanna's behaviour was very different in the completely separate environment of her private apartment. The interview was a matter of luck, although the most visible group of petty traders, couriers were also the least accessible. As those women often travelled as a group, they were hard to approach. On one occasion conversation was initiated with one of Žanna's colleagues while helping to carry some goods across the border. The woman agreed to give an interview at first but then changed her mind. At the point of giving up on securing an interview with this group, Žanna's mother, who was among the respondents, advised contacting her daughter in Vilnius. Even on the way to Žanna's home in March 2012 for the interview, I did not know whom I was going to meet. The following fieldwork diary entry about Žanna was made during the first year of research in Ašmjany (September 2010),

> This woman is a very impressive person. She is tall, loud, speaks trasjanka.[12] She is very business-like, well dressed, about 50–55 years old. An ideal respondent.

Thinking of Žanna and other participants of this loud, vulgar and annoying female company as of self-confident reckless smugglers, it was surprising to see a quiet and tired woman who even did not look particularly tall, as she had seemed at first. It turned out that Žanna and her colleagues were involved in a very dependable and low-paid type of cross-border activities. Moreover, it also appeared that the conditions of Žanna's life were very modest. She lived in the two-room apartment on the edge of Vilnius which she and her husband had been given while still working at the radio factory before the Soviet Union's collapse. Four family members shared the apartment. Žanna and her 21-year-old daughter occupied one room. Her elder son's family consisting of him, his wife and a child took the other one. The interior of the apartment was outdated and looked like it had not been refurbished for a long time. It was also quite cold in the apartment, the windows were very old and did not seem well-insulated. At the same time, Žanna also complained that utilities were a substantial part of their family budget. In the winter of 2012 they paid 700 LT per month which was more than a half of Žanna's official salary.

It seemed that Žanna's 10-year circulation between Ašmjany and Vilnius had not improved her financial or social position substantially. As she admitted herself, money she earned from her mobility (approx. 300 LT per month, or 90 EUR) was a significant part of her monthly income which she would not have survived without. As she said, 'Of course, if I had earned enough for a living, why would I have been involved in it?'[13] When Žanna was asked whether she ever considered the possibility of starting her own trade business, she only laughed and reasonably noted that she

12 Actually, in the interview Žanna mostly spoke Russian. However, when her friend and counterpart R. (whom I also remembered from the cross-border experience) called, she switched to *trasjanka* and was more like she was during the trips. The meaning of such sudden 'reincarnation' will be discussed in Chapter 6.

13 *Konečno, esli by xvatalo na žizn', tak začem bylo by zanimat'sja?*

would have needed financial capital for that which she did not possess. Thus Žanna's story demonstrated a different pattern of cross-border mobility which she was not able to convert into something more profitable due to the lack of other resources (such as money, for instance) but also because of the difference in circumstances in which she started her activity. To some extent, Žanna's situation was similar to that of Olga's. Both of the women lost their husbands and had to support two children. However, Olga had the help of her Lithuanian relatives at least at the first stage of her trade. Moreover, she started her business eight years earlier than Žanna and in a more encouraging situation determined by the still-developing law regulations and the deficit of affordable fancy clothes which Ašmjany experienced. Finally, the environment of the capital city of Vilnius a few years before Lithuania was supposed to enter the European Union and join the common European market differed significantly from that in the small border town of Ašmjany located away from the consumer possibilities of Belarusian cities and separated from neighbouring Vilnius by the border. Therefore, the start of a trade business in Vilnius with its several large open-air markets and shopping malls would have required more substantial investments, which were unavailable to the salesperson with a low salary, two dependent children and a lack of social networks.

To conclude, it is important to admit that among the three respondents the most successful, Marina, was the youngest when she started her business. Neither of the women stressed the problem of aging and cross-border mobility explicitly. However, when, for example, Olga and Marina talked about their driving experience, it was clear that age mattered. Marina, who started driving at 18, considered herself as an experienced driver. As mentioned already, for her driving as a means of mobility was inseparable from the overall positive evaluation of her achievements. At the same time, Olga perceived her driving in terms of necessity. Moreover, she regarded age as a barrier to proper driving experience. As she mentioned, she avoided going to Vilnius by car since she was afraid of inattention determined by her age which could have led to a car accident.

Therefore, the problem of age and mobility, which was even more pronounced in interviews with elderly women, deserves attention in the context of female shuttle trade history. At some point, the elderly women who enjoyed visa-free entrance to Lithuania for people over 65 in 1994–2002 formed a particular group of traders whom, according to their memories, border guards gently called 'grannies' (*babuli*). The concluding section considers the advantages and disadvantages of age as a social characteristic which may determine access to cross-border mobility in border regions.

Adventurous *Babuli*: Age and Cross-Border Mobility

In 1994–2002 people above 65 were granted permission to cross the Belarus–Lithuania border without visas. Older women seized this opportunity immediately and continued the practice of mass trade which had appeared in Ašmjany in the

early 1990s. Throughout the first decade of post-Soviet transformations particular commodities, including dairy products, meat and some industrial goods remained cheaper in Belarus than in Lithuania. The same was true of cigarettes and alcohol – goods which are still much less expensive outside of EU countries. Hence, although the mass scale of spontaneous trade which the region experienced in the first years after the USSR's collapse was reduced significantly, the established form of trade survived border regime restrictions and began to be operated by a specific social group of retired women. The implementation of this trade was very similar to that described in Chapter 3. Women bought dairy or meat products in Ašmjany and carried them to Vilnius where they were sold to Lithuanian buyers, the same elderly people for whom every opportunity to save some money purchasing foodstuffs from Belarus a little cheaper was of crucial importance (Nina, Interview 8, October 2011; Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012). There were also women (Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011) who carried tiny metal details for different kinds of home appliances. These commodities were bought in Minsk at big open-air markets where mostly Chinese goods imported through the porous border between Russia and Belarus were sold. Metal details as well as cigarettes and alcohol were usually given to particular people with whom the women had a preliminary agreement. Money earned from such trade practices was mainly exchanged into foreign currency (US dollars), which was seen as the best way to keep savings for special needs. The income gained was hardly outstanding, nevertheless, as respondents (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011; Nina, Interview 8, October 2011; Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012) remembered, it was an important supplement to their modest pensions.

The stories of the elderly women who participated in shuttle trade during that period clearly stressed the issue of mobility and age. With age the scale of geographical mobility may become limited. Some gerontologists note, for instance, that the fear of a fall, which is very high among elderly people (Kenny, 2005), may cause 'tremendous anxiety for older people who can develop a resistance to physical activities because of it' (Dannefer and Phillipson, 2010, p. 359). Being aware of such limits, elderly people tend to consider mobility as an important means of their independence and life-quality allowing them 'to avoid the boredom and monotony of a life confined indoors through immobility' (Gabriel and Bowling, 2004, p. 687). Although the aging body might cause significant constraints on long- and short-distance geographical movements, age can also have a positive impact and raise the level of mobility because after retirement people are freed from the restrictions placed on them by their previous work responsibilities (Gabriel and Bowling, 2004). Thus, age can play an ambiguous role in people's mobility. On the one hand, it can give people additional resources, such as time, which they did not possess in their previous life. On the other hand, it can be also perceived as a significant barrier to people's geographical movement, especially when infrastructure and special equipment are not developed enough to make this mobility more easily implemented by people with different kinds of disabilities including those determined by age. This ambiguity of age influence was perceptible

in the interview with elderly Ašmjany women who enjoyed a high level of cross-border mobility in 1994–2002. At first glance, age gave them particular benefits, which concerned not only formal regulations easing cross-border mobility for senior citizens (who, in comparison with traders of the early 1990s, could cross the border legally) but also some other aspects which should be further considered. At the same time, age was also perceived as a significant barrier to people's ability to travel. The latter was determined, foremost, by physical constraints, although subjective understanding of age also mattered. Age also played a role in how people represented their experience of trading. Both negative and positive attitudes were to a certain extent determined by the dimension of age.

Criticizing the tendency to overshadow the positive experience of aged women in gerontological literature, Australian feminist scholar Diane Gibson (1996) stresses that some aspects of women's lives such as women's longevity, their social networks and their coping skills should be seen as advantages for aged women. For example, scholars often interpret women's longevity and longer life span as a problem for them (Gibson, 1996). As Gibson (1996) argues, elderly women indeed experience higher level of disabilities and lower levels of income than men do. However, the reason for this is that men often do not live to the point when these problems become overwhelming. Taking into consideration that life expectancy for men in Belarus is less than 65 years (see Chapter 6), many of them would not have made it to the age when they were allowed to cross the border without visas. In other words, aged women were more likely to enjoy this opportunity. Thus, they found themselves in a more favourable position in comparison not only with elderly men but also with people of a younger age.

Women's longevity also means that women have a longer retirement period than men do. When women quit the labour market, they possess free time that becomes available for other activities. Time was mentioned as an important resource in getting involved in cross-border trade in interviews with Ašmjany women. The possession of free time was seen as the major stimulus to start trading activities. As 80-year old Jadviga (Interview 12, February 2012) claimed,

> After retirement, when I had a pension already, I went. Because when you work, there is no time to go. But then [after retirement] you have free time already and therefore you get yourself ready and go.[14]

Another resource that Ašmjany 'grannies' relied on in their trade activities was their social networks. As Gibson (1996, p. 438) underlines, '[w]omen, with a lifetime of experience in maintaining and establishing social bounds within families, friendship networks, neighborhoods, voluntary associations, school associations, and so forth, are simply better equipped to maintain and redevelop their social networks when confronted with the vicissitudes frequently attendant

14 *Tady posle ŭžo pensii, jak ja ŭžè pensiju palučala, ezdzila. Tamu što, jak rabotaeš, dyk tak njama kali exac'. A potym ŭžè svabodna vrèmja, tak vybiraešsja i ezdziš.*

on old age'. For Ašmjany elderly women the whole trade business was organized around the collective trips to Vilnius when several women (being relatives, friends, former colleagues or neighbours) shared with each other their experience of trading and travelled across the border together. Actually, the network through which those women were recruited into the sample was a replica of such a network of traders who used to go to Vilnius together in the mid-1990s to early 2000s.

The organizational meaning of networks for trading businesses is considered in Chapter 6 in more detail. In the following section the emphasis is on the aspect of emotional support that Ašmjany women found among their peers. As Gibson (1996) argues, emotional support, which elderly women possess through their social connections, is positively associated with their capacity to cope with stressful life conditions. In this sense, 'grannies'' ability to consider their trade as adventurous and satisfying rather than necessity-driven and a risky experience was striking. For the retired women whose previous social life was mostly organized around the work place, shuttle trade was, among other things, a substitute for this lost experience.[15] Therefore, not only were their trips and border tricks important but also the people with whom they travelled together and who some respondents warmly recalled as their 'company'. Thus some of the women (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011; Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012) expressed particular pleasure reminiscing about their activities. Jadviga (Interview 12, February 2012), for instance, joyfully recalled her adventures on the border and the way she and her 'partners' tricked customs officials,

> The other time if you carried something unacceptable or if they found something above the limits, they turned us away. Well, we combined things then, saw that another car was approaching, got into that car and *again crossed the border* [stressed] (Laughs).[16]

Valentina (Interview 6, September 2011) claimed, 'but I liked it, I liked it. I liked the bazaar, it was hard, but I liked it. People were nice. Coin to coin and there was something saved. It was a good life for pensioners'.[17]

In this sense, Ašmjany elderly women are closer to the type of 'adventurous earners of supplementary income' distinguished in Bettina Bruns's (2010, p. 236) sociological study of border smuggling on the border between Poland and Russia. As Bruns (2010) argues, such traders are initially motivated not by economic necessity but rather by more positive factors (such as possession of free time, for example) and see trade not as hard labour but more as an adventurous and entertaining practice.

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15 On similar conclusion, see Bruns, 2010.

16 *Druhi raz i što-nebudz' tam, moža, ne toe vjazeš, naiduc' lišnee i nazad varačaec'. A tady kumbinuem, tut idze, druhija mašyny iduc' i znoŭ sjadaem na druhuju mašynu i* ***znoŭ peraedzem****" (Smeetsja).*

17 *No mne nravilos', mne nravilos'. Bazara nravilas', tjažko bylo, no nravilos'. I ljudi xorošie. Po kopejke, po kopejke soberem. Èto dobra žylos' pensioneram.*

This type of trader considers a potential failure at the moment of border crossing not as a harmful and frustrating risk for their business but rather as a remarkable and exciting experience. Although for Ašmjany retirees shuttle trade did have an important economic meaning, the way they coped with the failures in their activities and the positive memory of this experience was close to Brun's description.

Even the most unpleasant part of a cross-border journey – communication with the border guards and customs officials – did not seem to bother the 'grannies' significantly. Due to the cultural perception of elderly women as mostly harmless people, customs officials often turned a blind eye to petty violations of older shuttle traders. Moreover, negotiating with customs officials about the possibility of crossing the border without confiscation of goods for trade, women relied on what could be seen as another resource determined by age, notably on compassion that people often feel in relation to elderly people. Women (Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011; Nina, Interview 8, October 2011) recalled that when customs officials were mad at them and did not want to let them go, the women, like children, begged them to calm down and not to scold them. This tactic of almost childish obedience did not look, however, like a symbol of their oppression. On the contrary, some women were laughing at themselves telling those stories as if celebrating their small victories rather than regretting their losses. The suggestion here is that age was the resource which allowed elder women to obey and beg without losing their dignity. As one respondent recalled,

> They [customs officers] scolded us, of course. "When will you, grannies, stop coming with this rubbish?" (Laughs) "What do you earn from this, do you earn at least a couple of dimes?" "A few, – we say, – are left if we continue coming" (Laughs). "Not many, – we say, – but still something". "Well, then go". (Laughs). They were kind. I would not say that they treated us badly. Whether they did not understand that we had to live? A clever person always understands.[18]

Sometimes customs officers even encouraged women to use the tactic of coaxing on their less compliant colleagues (Nina, Interview 8, October 2011). However, the success of begging had not always been the case and, as respondents stated, had depended on the particular customs officer, the scale of violation and goods which had been carried. Most likely, cigarette and alcohol smuggling was much less tolerated than carrying foodstuffs and other goods. As Nina (Interview 8, October 2011) recalled, she had once been attacked by a customs officer who had detected cottage cheese in her bag. His colleague, whom she complained to, asked her whether she was carrying vodka. When the woman assured him that she

18 *Rugali, konečno. "Kali vy, babuli, ŭžo prèkracice ezdzic' sa s vaim hètym baraxlom? (Smeetsja). Što vy z hètaga maece, xoc' vy troxu kapejku kakuju imeece?" "Troxu ž, – kažam, – astaecca, esli ezdziš" (Smeetsja). "Mnogo-to net, – govorim, – no nemnožko čto-to ž est'". "Nu togda vjazice" (Smeetsja). Čto ž oni ne ponimajut, čto žit' nado? Umnyj čelovek – on vsegda pojmet.*

had only cottage cheese for sale, he advised her to beg the officer to let her cross the border with the product. Then he actually got involved himself and persuaded his colleague to let the woman go.[19]

Thus, though shuttle trade could be seen as an oppressive practice that required substantial physical effort, which was even harder for elderly women due to their age-related physical limitations, it could be satisfying. Notwithstanding that the main reason for this satisfaction was financial stability given by an additional source of income, its entertaining potential also mattered. Moreover, for some elderly women shuttle trade was an alternative to their previous job. As, for example, Valentina (Interview 6, September 2011) mentioned, she chose this activity because she wanted to earn a little more than her pension at that time was but she was fed up with her life-long work in bookkeeping.

At the same time, there were women who regarded trade as an oppressive and frustrating experience. Nina (Interview 8, October 2012), a 78-year-old woman, recalled her trade as a disgraceful and humiliating activity. Such emotions were foremost determined by the circumstances which drove Nina to trade. Her husband had a severe disease and, in order to provide him with expensive medicine, Nina, who herself survived cancer, was forced to make regular trips to Vilnius. Therefore, not only the circumstances, which had prompted Nina to start trade, but also her imperfect health conditions were mentioned in her interview among the main reasons for dissatisfaction with the trade experience. While cancer in Nina's case was a disease which was not directly determined by age, other types of health conditions specified in interviews with other women were related to the aging body. Natalija (Interview 4, September 2011) suffered from high blood pressure which had also impacted her legs. She complained that she had not been able to go to Vilnius for pilgrimage recently because she had not been sure that she could stand such a trip. Valentina (Interview 6, September 2011) also mentioned a problem with her thyroid gland and general body weakness as the reasons why she had refrained from any kind of long-distance travelling, not to mention the physically demanding trips required by shuttle trade activities. Both objective (mostly health constraints) and subjective ('I am too old to travel') experiences of age were represented as one of the main obstacles to long-distance mobility by older women.

The establishment of the full-scale visa regime between Belarus and Lithuania complicated age-determined cross-border mobility constraints even further. In 2003 the conditions of visa-free cross-border movement for citizens of the two countries were changed. Visas became obligatory for most categories of people. For some time, however, a visa could be still obtained directly in Ašmjany through special agents who helped fill in application forms and carried them to the Consulate in Hrodna for a modest fee. When in 2005 Lithuania decreased visa

19 In her study of petty smuggling on the Ukrainian–Polish border, Byrska-Szklarczyk (2011) gives an opposite example of communication between customs officials and female smugglers. According to her interlocutors, mostly *middle-aged* women, customs officers were smugglers' great enemies and, as her respondents put it, worked 'to humiliate [smugglers], show them domination and contempt' (Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2011, p. 100).

costs from 20 to 5 EUR (LR and BR. Susitarimas *Dėl mokesčių tarifų nustatymo už vizų …* , 2005), people indeed used this opportunity to go to Vilnius at least for a single short-term visit. Moreover, some special facilitations of the visa regime for those whose relatives had been buried in Lithuania continued to exist. People were allowed to visit cemeteries without visas on strictly regulated special occasions. The situation changed significantly after Lithuania accepted the Schengen *acquis*. The obligation to apply for a visa in person which Schengen rules stipulated became an insurmountable barrier for elderly people. Today to visit a cemetery in one of Lithuanian border villages located 30–40 km away from Ašmjany or to see adult children in Vilnius located 50 km from the town one has first to travel the more than 800 km of two back-and-forth trips to Hrodna in order to obtain a visa. As 77-year-old Valentina, whose entire family (parents, two brothers and a sister) were buried in Lithuanian Norviliškės, told me sadly,

> I don't have much health and the only thing I need is to be permitted to visit the cemetery. But I cannot do this. I have to pay 60 EUR for a one-time visit,[20] I have to go to Hrodna several times. This will be a golden cemetery. I hope they forgive me. I cannot come.[21]

Conclusions

The practices of cross-border petty trade were reconfigured during the period of the Belarus–Lithuania border maturation in 1994–2007. The mass shuttle trade of the early 1990s was gradually replaced by three major types of petty trading, which have existed in the town until today – professional arbitrage, casual trade and courier activities. The development and strengthening of the border regime saw a decrease in the number of people who kept using the possibility of crossing the border freely. However, several social groups continued to enjoy their cross-border mobility during that period and implement shuttle trade activities. Firstly, people who had relatives in Lithuania or, on the contrary, in Belarus were able to obtain multiple-entry Lithuanian or Belarusian visas which gave them the possibility of visiting these countries regularly. Secondly, until 2003 the bilateral agreement between the two countries also stipulated visa-free cross-border movement for older people (over 65). These two groups represented the most active participants of shuttle trade activities in the period described. However, while for older women

20 In fact, according to the mutual agreement between Belarus and Lithuania, visas for people whose relatives are buried in either Belarus or Lithuania are free of charge. Therefore, the lack of information on this issue most likely demonstrates that Valentina might have never tried to find out how to apply for a visa because, again, the whole enterprise and necessary efforts seemed to be too demanding for the older woman.

21 *U menja vo, njama zdorovja, mne tol'ko razrešili by ezdit' na kladbišče. No ja ne mogu ezdit'. 60 evro plati, odnorazovaja, sjezdi v Grodno, sdaj, zabery, i potom poed'. Tak èto kladbišče zolotym budet. Prostjat menja. Ne mogu priexat'".*

shuttle trade had a side meaning and was mainly a spontaneous practice rather than a particular business strategy, for women with a permanent visa status their trading business or courier activities became an important means of economic well-being and even prosperity. In this sense, the border had an important resource meaning for those people since it prevented mass cross-border mobility in the region but at the same time opened the opportunity to profit from it for those women who were able to stay on the move in accordance with the visa regime requirements.

Cross-border mobility in the Belarus–Lithuania border region was but one factor of social mobility for some women. The comparison of three cases of petty traders from the groups of professionals and couriers demonstrates that other resources such as family assistance, the appropriate time to start business, the locality where trade is operated, professional status and age also mattered for the results which shuttle trade could bring. Consequently, there was some evidence of connections between spatial and social mobility but the more nuanced picture which the chapter has drawn shows that the relations between these two kinds of mobility are not univocal and largely depend on the particular context and situation. This ambiguity is applicable not only to the causality between spatial and social mobility but also to the experience of geographical mobility as such. The ambiguous influence of cross-border mobility was strikingly represented through the case of older women. On the one hand, the retired women enjoyed their cross-border mobility which they perceived as not only the source of economic stability but also as a space of communication with their counterparts and an adventurous experience as opposed to the daily routine of their normal life. On the other hand, the older body was considered to be a substantial barrier to this experience. Since at the time of the interviews elderly respondents were 10 years older than they had been when they were going to Vilnius regularly, they did not regard shuttle trade as even a potentially possible activity because their physical conditions would have barely allowed them to implement this ‘business’. Nevertheless, it did not mean that elderly women were completely indifferent to the border question. On the contrary, for some of them the border was a problematic issue. Women whose relatives were buried in Lithuania or whose children lived in Vilnius could not visit the neighbouring country because the procedure of applying for a visa, especially after Lithuania joined the Schengen Agreement, was an insurmountable barrier for elderly people who found it difficult to travel twice to Hrodna for a visa.

The period of the border maturation came to an end with the enlargement of the Schengen zone to the Belarus–Lithuania border. Schengen changed again the patterns of mobility in the region. Nevertheless, although some social groups such as older women, for instance, did experience this change as a frustrating experience, it would be too simplistic to consider only the negative influence of Schengen on the mobility and trade practices of Ašmjany people. The more careful micro-study of the town’s case has demonstrated that not only did some previous groups of permanent travellers keep taking advantage of their opportunity to visit Vilnius, but also new groups of regular visitors to Vilnius appeared at the most contemporary stage of the border history.

Chapter 5
Persistence of the Border, Disappearance of Trade? Shuttle Trade in Ašmjany After Schengen (2007–2011)

The resource potential of the Belarus–Lithuania border and its importance for the professionalization of shuttle trade in Ašmjany has been stressed in the previous chapter. As argued there, professional traders did consider the border's existence as an important factor for the success of their businesses. At the same time, the border had to keep its permeability or, rather, *selective openness*, in order to provide prosperity for particular people (as specified, the most distinguishable among them were those who had relatives in Lithuania and people over 65). This chapter examines what happened to shuttle trade in Ašmjany after the Belarus–Lithuania border reached the most recent and, at the same time, the most persistent stage, that of the Schengen border. Although Belarus and Lithuania had kept the bilateral border agreement on mutual trips of citizens, on 20 December 2007 it was adjusted in accordance with the Schengen *acquis* (RB and LR, 2007). Departing from debates about the impact of Schengen on people's mobility outside the European Union, I consider here the extent to which the new border regime affected the mobility of Belarusian citizens in general and Ašmjany dwellers in particular. Sharing a critical tone on the discriminatory character of the Schengen Agreement, which these debates are built upon, this section follows Anssi Paasi (2011, p.12), who designates as stereotypical a tendency to consider the EU borders as 'simply becoming lower inside the Union and stronger around its outside'. Studying particular cases of Ašmjany dwellers allows analysis of how the Schengen border keeps its selective permeability and how this differentiating porosity brings into life new patterns of cross-border trade in the region. Concluding the history of shuttle trade development on the Belarus-Lithuania borderland, it is demonstrated that after 20 years of its existence shuttle trade has taken its course on normalization and has become an integral part of everyday life for Ašmjany inhabitants.

Mobility across the Belarus–Lithuania Border in the Context of the Schengen Agreement

On 21 December 2007 three of the five countries with which Belarus shares its borders (Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) officially became the part of the Schengen area. This meant that all of three states abolished control on their borders with

other EU countries but at the same time reinforced the persistence of their borders with neighbouring non-EU states including Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Besides bringing formal changes into border regulations, the event was also considered to be a turning point in the post-socialist history of the East European region and a symbolical re-emergence of the previous East–West division, which was supposed to disappear after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Not only metaphors of 'fortress Europe' or 'gated community' but also the idea of a new Iron Curtain appeared in some scholarly literature in relation to the Schengen borders after 2007 (Gawlewicz and Yndigegn, 2012). As political anthropologist Karolina Szmagalska-Follis (2009, p. 398) argues in her article on the Polish–Ukrainian border,

> Insofar as the reinforcement of the EU borders reproduces […] cultural, political and social anxieties, it is indeed *like* Iron Curtain. Only this time, the divide is erected farther to the east. Its engineers are backed by all the legitimacy of the EU. And the protests uttered by those left behind sound like faint grumbles from behind the high-tech border fence.

The Schengen area was initially created with an idea of the free movement of people inside the EU. In 1985 France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands signed the Schengen Agreement that on the documentary level united the Benelux Common Travel Area and the proposed open border agreement between France and Germany (EU, 2009; Anderson, 2010). In 1990 the five countries also signed the Schengen Application Convention which implemented the Schengen Agreement (The Schengen *acquis*, 2000). The documents together with supplementary rules and practices have become known as the Schengen *acquis* in terms of the European Union. By 1996, when the abolition of border control on the EU internal borders stipulated by the Convention came into force, the Schengen *acquis* had been accepted by most EU members (except for the UK and Ireland). Moreover, according to the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, the Schengen *acquis* was integrated into the EU framework. Therefore, Schengen has become to be directly associated with EU membership. However, in practice membership of the EU does not necessarily bring a country into the Schengen zone. In the case of Poland, Latvia and Lithuania three years had passed before they, as newly accepted EU members, became an official part of the Schengen area.

Among the key rules of the Schengen cooperation mentioned on the European Union official web page are the removal of checks on persons on internal borders; a common set of rules and conditions for people crossing the external borders of the EU; police and judicial cooperation and the establishment and development of the Schengen information system (EU, 2009). Most of these rules are a part of the EU security policy aimed at the protection of the common European territory in the situation when control on internal borders is abolished. Therefore, being particularly favourable to the interests of the EU member-states citizens, the Union's security policy has been at the same time criticized for its discriminatory

and excluding character in relation to people from outside of the European Union (Anderson, 2000; Zielonka, 2003; Szmagalska-Follis, 2009). Strict control measures, which the EU exercises on its external borders, are foremost determined by the fear of illegal migration and the threat of global terrorism. While the latter concern has been extensively stressed after 9/11, the former has been closely connected with political transformations in Eastern Europe after 1989. As political scientist Jan Zielonka (2003, p. 2) maintains, it was the fear of mass migration from the impoverished 'East' that 'prompted West European governments to reassure their voters that the abolition of internal EU frontier controls would be complemented by the preservation of tough external border controls'.

According to political scientist Heather Grabbe (2000), the border policy of the EU today is driven primarily by a micro-security approach. As she argues, in comparison with 'macro-security' anxieties of the Cold War, which were mostly determined by military threats from the Soviet bloc, the micro-security approach sees private individuals as the main object of border control. Therefore, the major difference between the Iron Curtain and the Schengen zone is that the latter 'is neither the wall, nor even the gate or fence of a border checkpoint. The new iron curtain is a paper curtain […] built up from formalities, official wrists and bans – visas, invitations the non-inhabitants need to possess, insurances, confirmations, fees and payments that have to be delivered, agreements and proceedings' (Gawlewicz and Yndigegn, 2012, p. 191). A complicated process of visa application as well as sometimes the humiliating experience of border control is a part of a well-developed system of surveillance which Schengen relies upon. This system 'involves all activities and operations of prevention of people circumventing official border crossings in order to evade checks when entering or leaving the European Union' (Brunet-Jailly, 2012, p. 106). In this sense, the system of the EU border control extends beyond cross-border points and locates itself in the territories of third countries (in the forms of consulates or airport checkpoints) and inside European societies including the use of identity cards and monitoring of work places (Andreas, 2000). This scrutinized surveillance has become an important concern for European citizens and for people from outside of the EU alike. While the former may experience such policing as 'the pervasive presence of the state in their everyday life' (Andreas, 2000, p. 3), the latter often perceive the EU defensive policy as an oppressive and discriminatory practice.

Schengen as a frustrating experience for East European people from outside of the EU has been the object of several studies already. In their research of Polish and Ukrainian students who had to cross the Polish–Ukrainian border regularly, border scholars Anna Gawlewicz and Carsten Yndigegn (2012, p. 193) demonstrate that Ukrainian youth considered Schengen as a discriminatory practice which excluded people 'from the club of "the privileged"'. As the authors argue, Schengen was a far less sensitive and significant issue for Polish students who did experience the disadvantages of border control on the Poland–Ukraine border but did not consider this control as a consequence of the EU border policy. A negative attitude to the excluding character of European borders was also expressed by famous Ukrainian

writer Yuri Andrukhovich in his interview cited in the article by Szmagalska-Follis (2009). As the scholar maintains, for Andrukhovich as well as probably for other Ukrainian intellectuals the new border regime was not only a matter of 'endless visa application processes, rude border guards, and intrusive customs officers' (Szmagalska-Follis, 2009, p. 398) but rather, and foremost, a symbolic barrier which excluded Ukrainians from the European intellectual and cultural context.

A more material explanation of Schengen's negative influence was represented in the previously mentioned study of 'ants' on the Polish–Ukrainian border. Byrska-Sklarczhuk (2012, p. 105) argues that Schengen was seen by her interlocutors as 'a border killer'. As she demonstrates, such a reaction was articulated not only by Ukrainian traders, for whom the Schengen border became a significant barrier on the way to smuggling, but also by the Polish inhabitants of the border region who experienced substantial economic downturns due to the lack of Ukrainian customers after December 2007. A similar economic influence on market trade in the Polish city of Łódź is also stressed by van der Velde and Marcińczak (2007), who argue that Poland's preparations to accept the Schengen *acquis* led to a decrease in the revenue which Łódź markets used to make during the times of permeable borders between Poland and former Soviet republics, in particular Ukraine and Belarus. According to the authors (Van der Velde and Marcińczak, 2007), the introduction of the visa regime by Poland in October 2003 led to the drop of Ukrainian and Belarusian customers, who tended to spend more money at Polish markets than local citizens. This tendency only intensified after Poland became a part of Schengen. As Bettina Bruns et al. (2010, p. 144) stress in their article on cross-border trade on the external borders of the EU after Schengen, visa costs, which increased from 10 to 60 EUR, became an important reason for Belarusian traders in particular to re-orient their trade trips to Russia and Ukraine instead of Poland.

The enlargement of the Schengen zone to Belarusian borders indeed affected the mobility of many Belarusian citizens (not only traders from border regions) across the EU's external borders. According to the statistics of the number of visas issued by Lithuanian and Polish consulates,[1] in the first year after the enlargement the drop was significant (Figure 5.1). In the case of Polish consulates, the decrease reached almost 75 per cent; in the case of Lithuanian consulates – 50 per cent. In 2009 the Stefan Batory Foundation prepared a report on changes in visa policies and their influence on the mobility of non-EU citizens. In accordance with the report, among the main reasons which led to such a decrease in visas issued for Russian, Belarusian, Moldavian and Ukrainian citizens not only visa costs (60 EUR for both single- and multiple-entry visas) but also the length and complexity of the application procedure as well as time investment required for obtaining a Schengen visa were mentioned.

1 Latvian consulates in Belarus are excluded from the analysis for the reason that Latvian border policy does not have such an important meaning for Ašmjany people as Polish and Lithuanian ones. Moreover, Poland and Lithuania traditionally issue the highest number of Schengen visas to the citizens of Belarus (Yeliseyeu, 2012).

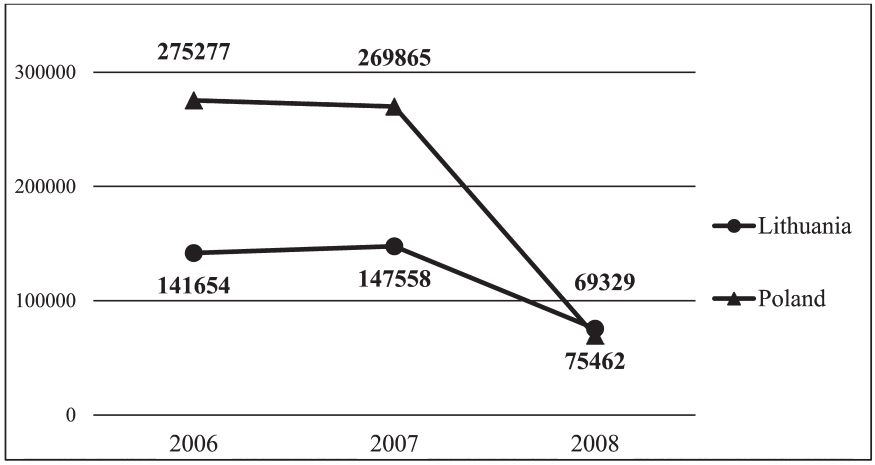

Figure 5.1 The number of C[2] visas issued by Polish and Lithuanian Consulates in the Republic of Belarus in 2006–2008

Data Source: EU Council Note, 2007, 2008, 2009.

However, since 2009 the visa situation for Belarusian citizens has begun to improve. This advancement concerned not only quantitative changes (the number of issued visas, Figure 5.2) but also the qualitative aspects of obtaining a visa. As Belarusian expert Andrei Yeliseyeu argues in his report, in 2010–2011 the percentage of negative decisions made on the visa applications of Belarusian citizens decreased, while the percentage of multiple-entry Schengen visas issued in Belarus grew (Yeliseyeu, 2012, p. 2). Polish and Lithuanian consulates occupied a leading position in this positive development (Yeliseyeu, 2012). Moreover, in 2011 Poland introduced a special type of 'shopping visas' (*na zakupy*) for Belarusian citizens (Yeliseyeu, 2012) that broadened substantially the list of those who could potentially apply for a multiple-entry Polish visa without providing a consulate with an invitation from relatives.[3] As a result, in 2011 the number of C visas issued by Polish consulates increased by 64 per cent in comparison with 2010; while for Lithuanian consulates the increase made was only 36 per cent.

2 Type C Schengen visa is a short-stay visa for purposes of business and/or tourism. Therefore, the statistics on this type of visas is most relevant in the context of shuttle trade practices.

3 Shopping visas allows their possessors travelling to Poland primarily with the aim of consumption. To apply for this type of visa Belarusian citizens should provide consulates with proof of financial capability, special contacts with Polish traders or previous consumption experience (in the form of receipts from Polish shops, in particular).

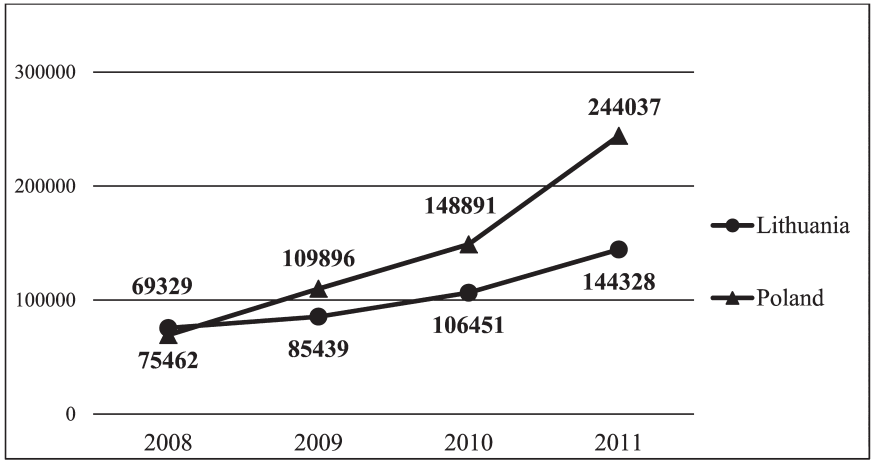

Figure 5.2 The number of C visas issued by Polish and Lithuanian Consulates in the Republic of Belarus in 2008–2011

Data Source: EU Council Note, 2009, 2010; EU Commission. Department of Migration and Home Statistics, 2015.

Thus, three years after Poland and Lithuania had become a part of the Schengen space the number of visas issued by the embassies of the two countries in Belarus almost reached the pre-Schengen level. Notwithstanding that by the end of 2011 Belarus did not have a visa facilitation agreement with the European Union,[4] Belarusian citizens possessed the highest number of Schengen visas per 1,000 people in comparison with other post-Soviet republics, excluding the Baltics (Yeliseyeu, 2012). However, if one differentiates statistical data between two Lithuanian consulates (those in Minsk and Hrodna), they would notice an important dissimilarity (Figure 5.3). In the case of the Hrodna consulate, where residents of the Brèst and Hrodna regions, including Ašmjany, apply for visas, the situation did not improve significantly. In 2011 the number of visas issued there was still almost twice as low as in 2007. At the same time, the Minsk consulate actually exceeded the number of visas which it issued before Schengen. For Polish consulates in Hrodna and Minsk the picture looked similar. Nevertheless, it is important to admit that, although in 2011 the Hrodna consulate of the Polish Embassy still issued fewer visas than in 2007, the disparity between 2007 and 2011 was less significant (23.6 per cent) than in the case of the Lithuanian consulate in Hrodna where the difference with the pre-Schengen level was 45.2 per cent.

4 A visa facilitation agreement of the European Union with third countries is a special agreement which promotes more favourable conditions for obtaining Schengen visas by citizens of the countries with which the agreement is made. Among post-Soviet States such agreements are concluded with Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

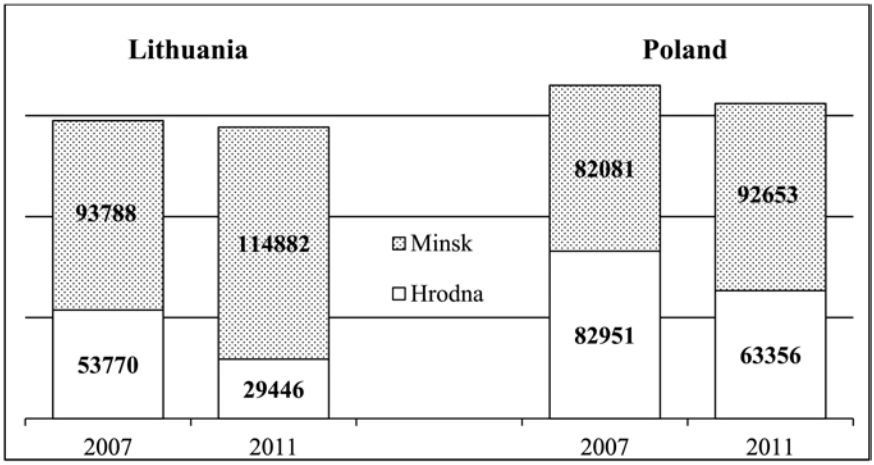

Figure 5.3 The number of C visas issued by Polish and Lithuanian Consulates in the Republic of Belarus in 2007 and 2011: Regional Comparison

Data Source: EU Council Note, 2008, EU Commission. Department of Migration and Home Statistics, 2015.

Moreover, in 2012 the number of visas issued by the Polish consulate in Hrodna exceeded pre-Schengen numbers (EU Commission, Department of Migration and Home Statistics, 2015).

In other words, despite the fact that in the three years after Schengen both of the embassies improved the visa situation for Belarusian citizens, in the Hrodna region the Polish consulate seemed to recover quicker. However, after the enlargement of the Schengen zone the difference in visas issued to the residents of the Hrodna region by both of the countries did not reflect the actual dissimilarity in the level of mobility across the Lithuanian and Polish borders. In other words, the lower number of visas issued by the Lithuanian consulate in Hrodna did not mean that fewer people were able to visit the country. On the micro-scale of the Ašmjany region, people who could obtain a Schengen visa through the Polish consulate willingly used it for their trips to neighbouring Lithuania afterwards. As some town inhabitants mentioned, the demand for Polish visas did indeed grow after Poland and Lithuania had joined the Schengen area. Besides, for some Ašmjany people Polish visas were easier to obtain. Due to historical specificities of the Ašmjany region explained in Chapter 2, those who did not have relatives in Lithuania might either have relatives in Poland or be of Polish origin. Thus, paradoxically, Schengen did not interrupt the practice of shuttle trade across the Belarus–Lithuania border in the region. On the contrary, it gave some people the possibility of resuming their regular trips to Lithuania with Polish visas. The same interviewees who complained about the negative impact of the EU and Schengen

on their mobility somehow did not notice that it was actually after 2007 that their regular trips to Lithuania had become possible again. Therefore, notwithstanding the initially negative impact of the Schengen rules on the mobility of people from countries adjoining the EU, which was stressed by scholars and experts in relation to different border regions of Eastern Europe in the first years after Schengen, the situation improved substantially over time. Not only did new EU members tend to preserve established economic and cultural relations with neighbouring non-EU countries, lobbing for more favourable visa conditions for their citizens, but also people from those countries adapted themselves to altered circumstances and found new ways to keep persistent borders selectively open. In the Ašmjany situation *selective openness* of the Schengen border has its specificities which will be considered further.

New Tactics of Obtaining a Visa, New Practices of Shuttle Trade

Despite the statistical drop in the number of visas issued by the Polish and Lithuanian consulates in Hrodna, the rupture in patterns of pre- and post-Schengen cross-border mobility was not so dramatic in the case of Ašmjany dwellers. As it is specified in Chapter 4, there were two noticeable groups of town inhabitants involved in petty trade in the pre-Schengen period. The first were aged people from Ašmjany (older than 65) who enjoyed visa-free cross-border mobility until 2003. After the visa situation changed for this group of people, most of them ceased their engagement in petty trade practices. Although the introduction of the visa regime by Lithuania for most categories of Belarusian citizens was connected with Lithuania's preparations to accept the Schengen *acquis*, it had happened four years before the country actually joined Schengen. Consequently, for this group the situation changed not after Schengen but beforehand. Another category of active travellers across the Belarus–Lithuania border consisted of people who exploited trans-border social networks to stay on the move. Most of them had close relatives in Lithuania, which allowed those people to obtain a multiple-entry Lithuanian visa every year. For that group of people alterations of the visa regime after Schengen were also not so significant. The cost of a multiple-entry Schengen visa only increased by a factor of two-and-a-half in comparison to the pre-Schengen level (from 25 EUR in 2005–2007 to 60 EUR after December 2007). The visa application procedure in the case of multiple-entry visas also did not change drastically. Therefore, people who had had a regular opportunity to obtain a multiple-entry Lithuanian visa before Schengen were not severely affected by the new visa and border regulations. In their interviews (Marina, Interview 5, September 2011; Olga, Interview 7, October 2011; Anastasija, Interview 11, February 2012; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012) they usually did not express particular concern in regard to the new border regime as well as in relation to the border existence in general. Neither did they complain about the negative influence of Schengen on their trade activities.

At the same time, the enlargement of the Schengen area had an actual impact on the mobility of those Ašmjany inhabitants who did not have adequate grounds to apply for a multiple-entry visa before and after Schengen. However, before 2007 those people could have relied on cheap (5 EUR) and easily obtainable (the application did not require a personal visit to a consulate) single-entry Lithuanian visas. For this group changes in the visa regime were indeed substantial. The cost of a single-entry visa increased by a factor of 12 in comparison with the pre-Schengen level. Moreover, the application procedure also became more complicated. To apply for and get a single-entry visa a person had to make at least two trips to Hrodna, which made the whole visa enterprise even more expensive and complex. Such time and money investments seemed unreasonable to Ašmjany dwellers who aspired to get a Schengen visa primarily for visits to neighbouring Vilnius.

A single-entry Lithuanian or Schengen visa was never considered by Ašmjany residents as a sufficient condition to engage in petty trade activities since the expenses would have been excessive. In other words, only a multiple-entry visa made petty trade activities a manageable business and was considered a worthy once-a-year investment by Ašmjany inhabitants. Schengen brought new opportunities to obtain multiple-entry visas. There were at least three women in the sample who started their shuttle trade at the last stage of the border's development. Although they all resorted to different tactics for obtaining Schengen visas, the ways to exploit those visas were similar. Regardless of which EU Embassy they went through to obtain a visa, it was primarily used for their regular visits to Vilnius. Those three women belonged to the group of traders which is designated as casuals in Chapter 1. For casuals, trade was not the primary aim of their trips to Vilnius. Enjoying their new visa status, they usually visited Lithuanian shops and markets as consumers. However, following the tradition established in the town, they also brought some orders for their 'visa-less' friends and colleagues. Thus, the activity of casuals represented a mixture of favours for friends and colleagues, the practice of self-consumption and the embryonic stage of trade business. A precarious visa situation probably would have not allowed those women to develop their sporadic activity into a serious trade strategy. Nevertheless, when they had an opportunity to make a small amount of revenue from their cross-border trips to Vilnius, they seized it with a particular readiness.

Shopping Pilgrimage: Trade and the Roman Catholic Church

The first case represents the story of Elena (Interview 1, September 2010; Interview 1_add, March 2011), a middle-aged Ašmjany teacher who had started her regular trips to Vilnius shortly before the first interview in 2010.[5] Elena did not have close relatives in Lithuania and therefore, except for three tourist trips, she did not visit the neighbouring country for 15 years after the visa regime between Belarus and

5 On the analysis of this case see also Sasunkevich, 2014.

Lithuania had been established in 1994. At the same time, being a teacher and an active member of the Ašmjany Roman Catholic community, Elena visited Poland almost every year for mostly cultural reasons. Usually she either accompanied groups of schoolchildren on their Polish trips or took part in pilgrimages to holy places in Poland organized by a Catholic priest for Ašmjany people. As Elena claimed, in recent years the interest in pilgrimages intensified among Ašmjany dwellers. The woman ironically stated that before Schengen there were not so many of those who wanted to travel abroad. However, people's desire to go on a pilgrimage blossomed when they realized that after one trip to Poland they could use their multiple-entry Schengen visas for regular visits to Vilnius. This tendency led to some tensions among parishioners who now had to compete for the opportunity to obtain a visa. The situation was usually solved through a toss. But, according to Elena, the priest was afraid that after people obtained visas, they could avoid participating in a pilgrimage because their primary motivation was to get a visa.

Elena herself started to use her visa not only for religious excursions to Poland but also for shopping pilgrimages to Lithuania. The leading aim of her trips was consumption for her own needs. Elena mainly bought clothes, foodstuffs and household chemistry in Vilnius, i.e. the goods which were supposed to be cheaper and of a better quality there. However, she also brought from Lithuania some commodities which were pre-ordered by her friends or colleagues. Actually, contact with Elena was made through the mother of one of her students who was also a part of the informal network of Elena's 'customers'. As Elena stated, she included a slight commission on the final price at which she sold the goods upon return. However, according to her, this commission was very modest and suited the economic as well as social expectations of Elena's fellows.

Thus, conceptualizing her trips to Vilnius, Elena did not designate them as a trade practice. Rather, she saw her activity as a way of doing a favour to her less fortunate counterparts who did not have Schengen visas. As she noted, people had eagerly asked her to bring particular goods when they found out that Elena had been going to Vilnius. Therefore, Elena considered her activity more as a reciprocal good than as an economically determined practice. As she mentioned, 'it is good for me but at the same time it is good for those who buy because we do not have such low prices'.[6] Moreover, the revenue, which Elena gained for her service, was not the main motive behind Elena's regular trips. Although she specified that she went to Lithuania for mostly economic purposes (she referred to the low salary of a schoolteacher), foremost she went to buy cheaper goods for herself and her family, which consisted of Elena and her retired mother. The structure of Elena's regular trip did not resemble a regular business enterprise either. She willingly combined her trips with modest entertainments such as visiting a café or meeting an old Vilnius friend, for instance. Therefore, the form of Elena's 'pilgrimages' had more in common with tourist trips accompanied by additional economic possibilities

6 *Xorošo i mne, i xorošo tem, kto pokupaet, potomu čto u nas takix cen netu.*

and represented a leisure activity rather than an entrepreneurial practice. In this sense, it is simultaneously reminiscent of the Soviet way of daily consumption in Vilnius, 'Polish trade' during the same period and of the spontaneous cross-border trade practice which Elena knew from the early 1990s. Since consumer and leisure aspects prevailed in Elena's regular trips to Vilnius, she was very interested in the border disappearance. As she stated, she would have preferred to enjoy her cross-border mobility without any restrictions rather than trying to convert a sudden trade possibility into an additional source of income.

Between Polish Identity and Economic Pragmatism: Karta Polaka

Another story was presented by Elena's friend and colleague Galina (Interview 2, August 2011; Interview 2_add, September 2012). Galina's trade experience was similar to that of Elena's. She also did not consider herself to be a trader but at the same time she did admit that she had been bringing commodities from Vilnius and selling them to her school colleagues. Additionally, Galina also helped her sister's family living in Minsk. In the interview she mentioned several times that she had bought many things in Vilnius primarily for her niece. Galina did not have her own children and was not married. Galina's spontaneous trade had the same structure as Elena's. She did not plan her activity properly nor did she make any preliminary calculations or market investigations. Galina simply followed some basic rules which she did not consider to be specialist knowledge for an average Ašmjany person due to their taken-for-granted character. On her way to Vilnius, Galina usually took the quantity of cigarettes (two boxes) and alcohol (two bottles of vodka) which were officially allowed. Probably, Galina exceeded those limits from time to time, but the violation was barely significant. As she noted, she had not been ready to take a serious risk by smuggling alcohol and cigarettes; however, the legal amount allowed her to cover transport expenses. In Vilnius Galina usually sold her goods to acquaintances at one of Vilnius markets. Afterwards, she bought clothes, footwear or foodstuffs for herself and her family and also obtained some additional commodities for sale in Ašmjany. Like Elena, Galina combined her trips with some leisure activities. Moreover, she condemned those people who saw shopping or trade as the primary aims of their visits to Vilnius.

Galina, just like Elena, had a Polish visa. However, her connections with Poland were much deeper. First of all, Galina insisted on her Polish origin, which she stressed as an important part of her identity. She also underlined that Ašmjany was foremost a town with Polish history. Moreover, part of Galina's family (namely her aunt) resettled in Poland in the late 1940s. Although the family almost lost its connections with Polish relatives, in Soviet times Galina's mother travelled to Poland regularly (Chapter 2). The Polish past of the family also played a role in Galina's attachment to the Polish language. As she recalled, during one of her family's visits to Poland, her aunt criticized her mother severely because the latter did not teach her children their native language. Galina herself blamed

her mother for this omission. However, although Galina's family members spoke Russian with each other, they also knew Polish at a certain level primarily thanks to the Catholic Church. Galina was the most advanced in her language skills in the family. She passed several pedagogical courses for teaching the Polish language and taught it in her private lessons.

Galina's Polish origin and her active involvement in the life of the Polish community in the town allowed her to obtain *Karta Polaka* (a Polish Card), a document which Poland started issuing to Polish minorities in the former Soviet Union in 2008. The idea of *Karta Polaka* was initially developed by *Wspólnota Polska* (Polish Community), a public association that aimed at supporting cultural contacts with minorities abroad but primarily in the former Soviet Union together with the Senate Commissions of Emigrant Affairs and of Connections with Poles from abroad (Wasilewski, 2011). As it is argued in the preamble to the Law on the Polish Card, *Karta Polaka* is a way to pay a moral debt to those Poles in the East who 'lost Polish citizenship in the course of changing fate of [Polish] Fatherland' (RP. Sejm, 2008). Hence, in accordance with the mainstream idea, *Karta Polaka* is supposed to prove that its possessor belongs to the Polish nation, notwithstanding his or her residence in and citizenship of another country. A Polish identity is also the primary basis upon which the whole idea of Polish Card possession is built. To obtain *Karta Polaka*, one has to prove knowledge of the Polish language and of Polish culture and history as well as to express consciously they belong to the Polish nation with a written statement to a Polish consul (RP. Sejm, 2008, Article 2).[7] Moreover, there are also some formal requirements to confirm Polish origin. In particular, applying for a Polish Card, a person has to submit official documents which prove that either one of the applicant's parents or grandparents or both of their great grandparents had the Polish nationality or citizenship (ibid.). However, when the latter cannot be confirmed, the person can provide evidence of his or her active engagement with the development of Polish culture and language in Belarus (Ambasada RP w Mińsku, 2015).

In return for the open claim of one's Polish identity, a Polish Card gives its possessor some of the privileges of a Polish resident (however, not a citizen). For example, a person with a Polish Card can work in Poland, has a right to get a higher education there and can count on free-of-charge medical help in the case of emergency (RP. Sejm, 2008, Article 6). Moreover, *Karta Polaka* allows its possessor to obtain a national Polish visa (type D) which presupposes a prolonged period of stay in Polish territory (RP. Sejm, 2008, Article 6). Since April 2010, when the EU Regulation concerning the movement of persons with a long-stay visa came into force, national visas issued by Member States, including Poland, have permitted their possessors to travel inside of the entire Schengen zone and to cross the external EU borders irrespective of which country has issued a visa (EU. Regulation 265/2010, 2010; Yeliseyeu, 2012). That is how the Belarus–Lithuania

7 On the importance of self-identification for the designation of the Polish minority in Belarusian and Lithuanian border regions see Chapter 2.

border re-opened for Galina and other Ašmjany dwellers who managed to prove their Polish origin.

Although Galina regarded *Karta Polaka* as symbolical recognition of her Polish identity, it was not particularly clear when exactly she had applied for it since in an additional interview one year later she specified a completely wrong period of 2004, three years before the Law on the Polish Card had been actually accepted. However, she seemed to be quite sincere when, answering the question on why she decided to apply for the Polish Card, she stated,

> Because my roots are there, because I always regarded myself as a Pole. Therefore, I didn't have an alternative. When there is such an option, then why not?[8]

Therefore, obtaining the Polish Card for pragmatic reasons was not particularly evident in Galina's case, although she did not hide her particular satisfaction with a stable visa situation which she started to enjoy after obtaining the Polish Card. At the same time, Galina also mentioned that for her sister, who had initiated the application procedure in 2012, the visa situation and the possibility of travelling to Schengen states had been the primary reason for obtaining the document. Moreover, in regard to her Ašmjany counterparts Galina also stated that economic reasoning often prevailed in their motivation to apply for Polish Cards and Polish visas. Simultaneously she admitted, however, that there were probably not so many possessors of Polish Cards in the town due to the negative attitude to such people from Belarusian officials (for example, Belarusian civil servants were formally forbidden to have a Polish Card, therefore, as Galina stated, the latter could be a reason why people avoided applying for *Karta Polaka* even when they had such a possibility).

Notwithstanding that for Galina the Polish Card has been indeed an identity issue, there is also the 'Schengen' or 'EU pragmatism' behind some people's choice to obtain the document. For example, in Lithuania where the Polish minority can also apply for *Karta Polaka*, the interest in the document is comparatively low. According to Polish data, by October 2011 there were 75,912 applications for Polish Cards in Polish consulates in different countries. 37,310 of those applications came from Ukraine; 29,142 from Belarus; and only 5,500 from the Baltic States – mostly Latvia and Lithuania (Wołłejko, 2011, p. 156). According to Polish historian Michał Wołłejko (2011), the unpopularity of Polish Cards in Lithuania can be explained not only by the fact that the Lithuanian government has perceived it as a violation of the Lithuanian Constitution, but also by the lack of particular favours which the Card can potentially provide for citizens of the European Union, in particular for the Polish minority in Lithuania. The economic pragmatism of Belarusian people in claiming their Polish identity has been also debated in the

8 *Potomu čto u menja korni, potomu čto ja vsegda sčitala sebja, ja čuvstvovala sebja pol'koj. Poètomu drugoj al'ternativy ne bylo. Kogda est' takaja vozmožnost', to počemu net.*

Belarusian media. For example, in 2011 *Asmjanški vesnik* (2011) published the letter of a woman from Hrodna who complained that her neighbour was actively involved in shuttle trade across the Polish border. As the author of the letter stated, the woman obtained her Polish Card unfairly and did not even know the Polish language. What she did know, the letter continued, was the currency exchange rate and the difference in price on cigarettes between Belarus and Poland. Although the letter could be fake and probably part of state propaganda against border trade and the Polish Card simultaneously, it nevertheless was built upon a widespread idea about how people actually exploited their Polish Cards in border regions. While writing this chapter, another publication appeared in the national non-state newspaper *Naša Niva* (Astraŭcoŭ, 2013). Although it represented the view from an opposing political camp, the reasoning was similar. The author, a Belarusian journalist, complained about people who used their Polish Cards not for cultural reasons but for disrespectful involvement in the cross-border smuggling business. Both of the publications saw such misuse of *Karta Polaka* as an abuse of Polish generosity and grace to Belarusians.

State-Sponsored Business

The last story is that of Anna (Interview 10, February 2012), a middle-aged woman who occupied an administrative position at Ašmjany Musical School.[9] Anna and her husband came to the town in the late 1980s escaping the ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, unlike Elena and Galina, Anna did not possess any of similar local resources to obtain a visa – she neither belonged to the Ašmjany Catholic community nor did she have Polish family history. However, Anna's professional position allowed her to obtain her first Schengen visa in 2008. Anna applied for a visa among other school employees, primarily teachers, who had to accompany students in their foreign trips to youth music competitions. Every year Anna and her colleagues applied for Schengen visas in different embassies, depending on which country held the competition. After the main journey for which visas were issued, they were chiefly exploited for regular consumer or trade trips to Lithuania. Moreover, in the period when our interview took place Anna was particularly happy that she was able to get a free-of-charge Lithuanian visa which the country started to issue extensively to Belarusian citizens after 2010.[10]

9 The school where Anna works has another specialization. It is changed here in favour of musical school in order to preserve the respondent's confidentiality.

10 Free-of-charge visas for participants of cultural, scientific, humanitarian or sport events were presupposed by a Temporal Agreement on Mutual Trips of Citizens. However it was only after the EU visa code came into effect in 2010 that these bilateral regulations were harmonized with general requirements of the European Union. According to Yeliseyeu, the latter allowed Lithuania to intensify its activity in issuing visas for free to Belarusian citizens (Yeliseyeu, 2012).

Although for Anna, as for Galina and Elena, the visa was a stimulating factor to start a trade activity (before her first Schengen visa Anna had not visited Lithuania for 15 years); her trade practice was substantially different. Anna's engagement into trade also had a spontaneous character. Similarly to Elena and Galina, Anna started her 'business' activity fulfilling particular orders of her friends and colleagues. However, she quickly realized that, firstly, her trips to Vilnius required some expenses and, secondly, that those expenses could be covered by the final price at which Anna might sell the orders. Moreover, she also discovered that besides covering expenses, she could also earn some money from her trips. Hence, Anna overcame a moral barrier, which distinguished trade from non-trade practices, and started to bring goods primarily for selling. She herself described the transformations which her 'business enterprise' had gone through over three years as the following,

> Of course, it is an issue to cross this boundary, when I bring, well, when I earlier brought, in the beginning, please, as a friend. But then I began to think. I go to Grodno, I pay two, or sometimes even three times I have to go there, I pay 60 EUR for a visa, then an insurance, and, finally, I pay for a trip [to Vilnius]. I cannot afford myself, I have a child, I have to provide for him, so I cannot bring something for 'thank you', for just to be nice … And when, you know, when you start feeling money, you feel independence, you feel that you can afford more, and then, naturally, you want to earn.[11]

Anna's orientation towards a more professional way of doing business was particularly evident from the way her enterprise was organized. Unlike Elena and Galina, who did not seem to put particular effort into planning their trips to Vilnius, Anna prepared herself more scrupulously. First, she studied special bonuses and prices which were available at Vilnius supermarkets at the time of her trip via the internet. Secondly, she was well aware of the price situation in the town. She calculated in advance which goods were worth bringing and which did not deserve any attention. For instance, coffee from Lithuanian supermarkets was always in demand in Ašmjany. Both Elena and Galina willingly brought it from Vilnius. However, coffee did not have a particular interest for Anna. As she explained, a pack of coffee was quite heavy and the revenue was negligibly low even to cover travel expenses not to mention the possibility of an additional income. The same also concerned household chemicals and hair cosmetics. Therefore, Anna chose to focus primarily on second-hand clothes in her business. The latter also

11 *Konečno, čto perestupit' ètu čertu, kogda ja privožu, ran'še kak privozila, pervoe vremja, požalujsta, po-družeski. Potom načala zadumyvat'sja. Ja s"ezdila v Grodno, ja zaplatila dva, a to i tri raza s"ezdit', zaplatit' za vizu 60 evro, zaplatit' straxovky, ja plaču za dorogu. J uže ne mogu sebe pozvolit', u menja rebenok, mne nužno ego soderžat', i privezti komu-to čto-to za 'spasibo', za krasivye glaza … A kogda, znaete, ešče počuvstvueš' den'gi, ty počuvstvueš švobodu, čto ty možeš' čto-to bol'šee kupit', to, estestvenno, chočetsja zarabotat'.*

distinguished Anna's strategy from the trade tactics of Elena and Galina who did not care about any particular specialization in their commodities.

Despite the fact that Elena and Galina also brought clothes from Vilnius, they mostly bought them at the most popular and therefore least reasonably-priced place, notably *Gariūnai* market, where many Ašmjany women went for shopping. Anna, on the contrary, tried to find less well-known suppliers such as special wholesale warehouses where second-hand clothes could be obtained at the most advantageous prices. Although Anna's finances did not allow her to buy the necessary amount of goods in such places, she cooperated with another person from Ašmjany who traded on a more advanced level and shared with Anna part of commodities which she bought at wholesale prices. Full concentration on trade during her trips to Vilnius did not permit Anna to combine her journeys with any kind of leisure activities. Moreover, what also distinguished her case from the other two stories was that Anna carefully calculated not only travel costs but also food and other related expenses which she incurred in Vilnius. Even a cup of coffee was carefully considered. Anna's trips were also more regular than those of Elena and Galina. While the latter tried to visit Vilnius frequently, they, nevertheless, usually made a maximum of two trips per month, whereas Anna avoided missing any weekend. As she stated, when she had to do so for different reasons, it affected her monthly income markedly.

Upon return Anna mostly sold her goods to a circle of 20–25 permanent customers. Usually they came either to Anna's apartment or to her work place in the town centre. One of her clients came, for example, when Anna was being interviewed there. However, this circle seemed to be too narrow for Anna. She not only tried to involve me in her trade as a customer but also considered possible ways to develop her business. Among one of her potential strategies she mentioned importing IKEA furniture from Poland. Simultaneously, she admitted that she would have needed more substantial investments to implement such a strategy. A detailed account of necessary expenses and prices given by Anna demonstrated that she had seriously thought about such development. Besides the limited customer network, another factor which, according to Anna, negatively influenced her trade business was her official occupation in the state sphere. As Anna mentioned, her strict working schedule kept her from making more frequent trips to Lithuania which otherwise would have allowed her to make more profit. Due to work and family obligations Anna was able to travel only once a week, on Saturday. Sundays were usually dedicated to her preschool child and household duties.

Through her once-a-week travels to Lithuania Anna managed to earn 50–100 per cent of her monthly income in the formal sector. Consequently, trade made up a significant part of Anna's family budget which primarily depended on both her formal and informal earnings. However, Anna did not even consider the possibility of leaving her official job in favour of her trade business. Foremost, being low-paid, Anna's position nevertheless gave her a sense of stability which was particularly important to her as a single mother. At the same time, Anna's attachment to formal employment also had important 'entrepreneurial' reasons.

First, it gave Anna the possibility of obtaining a multiple-entry visa to Lithuania. Secondly, it was a convenient 'market place' where Anna could sell her goods. Being located in the heart of the town, Anna's personal office was a suitable space for an improvised 'boutique' where Anna's customers could pick up some clothes, chat with the 'owner' and even drink a cup of coffee kindly offered by the 'hostess'. Thus, being unable to leave her work place for trips to Lithuania, Anna still found a way to combine her formal and informal activities where the latter and the former were closely interlinked and to some extent mutually determined.

Hence, all three cases shared one aspect in common – Elena, Galina and Anna did not plan their trade preliminarily as a conscious entrepreneurial practice but rather seized an accidental opportunity which was foremost determined by favourable visa conditions. In all three cases the possibility of obtaining a visa depended on the women's social characteristics such as belonging to the Catholic Church, being of Polish origin or the occupation of a particular professional position. In two of these cases social characteristics were significantly shaped by locality and the specificities of history of the Ašmjany region. Nevertheless, there was a substantial difference between the stories of Elena and Galina on the one hand and the story of Anna on the other. While for Elena and Galina shuttle trade had a more 'tactical' meaning, Anna's trade was dominated by 'strategic' aspects such as careful calculation, preliminary planning and market investigations.

The differentiation between 'tactical' and 'strategic' trade refers to Michel de Certeau's idea of the distinction of 'strategic' and 'tactical' everyday practices (see Introduction). Applying it to petty trade activities, Bruns et al. (2010) argue that all of them might be represented as a continuum between strategies and tactics. In other words, different trade activities can combine strategic and tactical elements to a various extent, depending on a particular practice. While trade where the 'tactical' aspect dominates is characterized by a spontaneous situation, which is rather determined by external circumstances, strategic trade is more rational. According to de Certeau (1988, p. xix), a strategy describes different types of rationality including an economic one and 'represents the calculus of force-relationships when a subject of will and power can be isolated from the "environment"'. At the same time,

> A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions and secure independence with respect to circumstances. […] … a tactic … is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing" (de Certeau, 1988, p. xix).

To put it differently, strategic trade has more in common with a trader's ability to keep control over a situation, whereas tactical trade relies heavily on particular circumstances and places over which one cannot hold control but which one can use

in her or his favour. As the analysis of these three cases has demonstrated, tactical trade was deeply embedded in the daily life practices of Ašmjany inhabitants. All of the women started their trade with predominantly spontaneous practices which they learnt from their day-to-day experience. To carry alcohol and cigarettes to Vilnius and to bring an order on the way back was considered to be a '"popular" ratio, a way of thinking invested in a way of acting' (de Certeau 1988, p. xv). Unlike strategy, tactics could not be isolated from 'the environment' – a set of peculiar features of social life in the town. As Anna pointed out, to make her trade more strategic she had had to break with 'the environment', or local expectations, according to which the woman brought the orders to her acquaintances in the beginning.

Despite this difference, the readiness with which all three women started to operate cross-border petty trade in the favourable visa circumstances indicated another important development in the region. It demonstrated that during its more than 20-year history shuttle trade in Ašmjany underwent important changes. It emerged as a sporadic informal activity during the Soviet period, blossomed as a survival strategy in the early 1990s, lost its mass character with the border strengthening and in the end established itself as an integral part of daily life in the town. In other words, shuttle trade has become a normal practice, a taken-for-granted aspect of Ašmjany everyday consumption and cross-border travels. People learnt this practice without any particular efforts as if it was poured in the Ašmjany air. A peculiar lack of hesitation to be engaged into cross-border smuggling was vividly presented in the case of my youngest respondent, a 25-year old woman whose story will conclude this chapter along with the historical overview of shuttle trade development in the Belarus–Lithuania border region.

Shuttle Trade 20 Years On: Normalization of Trade in the Border Region

Since the early 2000s the body of literature which considers survival to be an insufficient explanation of cross-border petty trade activities in the post-socialist region has been growing. Among the first scholars who noticed the persistence of petty trade practices after Soviet socialism were economic geographers Allan M. Williams and Vladimir Baláž (2003). In their article published in 2003, the authors argue that petty trade practices 'are not necessarily short-term strategies for surviving transition in [Eastern and Central Europe]' but rather 'a deeply embedded into economic structures […] alternative site of economic activities' (Williams and Baláž, 2003, p. 324). The scholars see post-socialist petty trading as deeply rooted in state socialism which 'persist[ed] in changing forms before and during transition' (p. 324) but also afterwards. To explain the enduring nature of not only petty trading but the informal economy in post-socialist societies in general, geographers Adrian Smith and Allison Stenning (2006, p. 192) suggest considering economic practices as 'part of a regular set of activities undertaken and used by individuals, households and communities to try to sustain livelihoods but also to sustain a sociality to economic life which requires mutual, reciprocal and embedded forms of economic

activity'. Understanding economic activities, both formal and informal, in this way, we can examine 'different, and at times divergent, forces' which constitute them (Smith and Stenning, 2006, p. 193). The accent on the diversity of leading factors that determine economic practices means that they cannot be explained by a single reason, notably economic necessity, but that their understanding needs a more nuanced interpretation. Smith (2010, p. 53) suggests that in order to approach economic activities in their complexity we should reconsider economy as a practice of everyday life with a 'range of economic and resource activities' attributed to it.

The embeddedness of informal economic practices into social life stressed by Smith also raises a question of their normalization. If these practices do not disappear with the emergence and development of capitalist and market relations, which presuppose a clear distinction between formal and informal spheres, then they should be seen as an integrative, i.e. normal, part of daily life in non-capitalist (or not entirely capitalist) societies. Such logic explains in particular why 'transborder small-scale trade and smuggling are an everyday border phenomenon which is a part of the normal routine at many borders' (Bruns and Miggelbring, 2012, p. 11). The integration of petty trading into daily life in border regions makes this activity highly legitimized and acceptable among border inhabitants, notwithstanding whether they are or not engaged in trade themselves (Bruns and Miggelbring, 2012). Wagner (2010) designates this phenomenon as a moral economy of smuggling, which he sees as tolerance to illegal trade from the local population considering it as a necessary reaction to the state's incapability to cope with economic and social problems in border regions. A similar argument is given by Müller and Miggelbring (2014) who claim that informality is a normality in the border region between Ukraine and Poland.

Trade as a normal and necessary practice, an activity which is equally good for traders and their customers was constantly stressed in the course of my interviews as well. The women saw their trade not as a primarily economically pragmatic enterprise but rather as a set of *normal* reciprocal relations among traders themselves as well as between traders and their customers. As Elena (Interview 1, September 2010) noted, for example,

> people do good to others. Try to buy today something for 40–50,000 [BYR], there are no such prices today. When people ask you for an order, it is *normal* (author's emphasis), you do good to people, what is wrong about it?[12]

Galina, answering my question on how people perceive petty trade today, also stated, 'normally, normally, normally. You normally get on the bus and normally go'.[13] Anna (Interview 10, February 2012), however, gave a more nuanced picture arguing that a negative attitude to trade in Ašmjany was still tangible.

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12 *Ljudi delajut dobro drugim. Nu kupi segodnja za te 40– 50,000. Takix cen netu. Kogda pod zakaz kto vot poprosit, normal'no, ljudjam delaeš' dobro, čto tut ploxogo.*

13 *Normal'no, normal'no, normal'no. Normal'no sadiš'sja, normal'no edeš'.*

Simultaneously she admitted that among young people this negative interpretation of shuttle trade was negligible since, as Anna saw it, the younger generation was more pragmatic and made its choice foremost based on the criteria of whether there was something to gain from it or not.

This pragmatism of the young stressed by Anna was represented in a striking story from Julija (Interview 9, December 2011), a 25-year old woman who was obtaining her second higher education in Vilnius. Julija was the daughter of Olga, a professional trader whose story is told in Chapter 4. Julija was almost a peer of the border. When the family moved from Homel' to Ašmjany in 1989, Julija was only three years old. Consequently, the development of the border that started a year later occurred in front of Julija's eyes. She remembered the illegal crossings across the forest which she and her family (mother and brother) made in the early 1990s when Julija was a child. She also recalled the period when she obtained a visa free of charge, according to the 1994 Temporal Agreement on Mutual Trips of Citizens which presupposed favourable conditions for older (above 65) and younger (under 16) people. Julija was also excluded from regular cross-border mobility for some time when she became 16 and was not able to obtain a free visa anymore. In that period her aunt and uncle in Vilnius could not provide her with an invitation for a multiple-entry Lithuanian visa since Julija was not considered to be their direct relative and only one of Julija's family members, her mother, could go to Vilnius freely. After Julija graduated from university in Minsk, she decided to obtain another education in Vilnius. Not only a European education but also free movement within the Schengen area were mentioned among Julija's reasons for moving to Vilnius. Indeed, since her studies began, Julija had a temporary resident permit in Lithuania which allowed her to travel easily across the Belarus–Lithuania border in both directions as well as inside the whole Schengen area. Though Julija's studies were close to finishing, she was not going to give up on her mobility. At the time of the interview Julija was married to a Lithuanian citizen with Belarusian roots and hoped to obtain permanent residence in the European Union.

Julija was never directly involved in her mother's business. However, she helped her mother from time to time carry goods across the border, especially after Julija had moved to Vilnius and started to travel regularly between the town of her childhood and her new place of residence. Due to her age and health conditions, Julija's mother could not come to Vilnius frequently. Neither could she bring a large consignment of goods across the border at one time without paying import duties which she insistently avoided. Therefore, when Julija's mother came to Vilnius, she bought all that was necessary for her trade and left it with Julija. Afterwards, the latter gradually imported those commodities (perfume and clothes) to Ašmjany. During her trips Julija became well aware of the cigarette smuggling business. She was regularly asked to help carrying a couple of cigarette packs by other local women on a bus from Ašmjany to Vilnius. Julija as well as many other passengers considered such requests as an annoying attribute of border crossings. Nevertheless, as Julija admitted, she never refused to assist those women. Moreover, as she self-critically noticed, after being involved in smuggling

herself, she actually became like those women, the only difference being that after her marriage she travelled to Ašmjany by car with her husband, unlike most of the other female petty smugglers who mainly relied on public transportation.

Thus Julija was well aware of the smuggling business blossoming in the region. However, the idea of running her own enterprise came to Julija by accident. In this sense, her activity was a classic example of a tactical practice based on 'an appropriate moment' which, according to de Certeau (1988, p. xix), predominates in everyday life. As she herself narrated,

> I don't know how it happened. I have studied four years at the university (Laughs) and never even thought about it, to carry at least two packs. I mean I could carry two packs and two bottles on a bus, but I never did it. And we knew that it was profitable, that everyone carried constantly. Well, by accident, now I've recalled why. Because we did not know whom to bring it to. We did not have clients, no one ever asked us. You would not approach everyone and ask, "Do you need cigarettes?" But once we just walked with mum at *Gariūnai*, and a woman approached mum, she said: "Excuse me, woman … " I guess she saw that we were from Belarus. Mum asked her what happened. And she said, "Do you probably have cigarettes or alcohol?" Mum told her that we were not engaged into it. We were moving away but I said, "Mum, let's return (Laughs) and ask whether she will take if we bring her". We returned and she said, "Yes, of course". That's it. We had the first client … .[14]

Julija's story about starting her smuggling was quite remarkable. First, she did not seem surprised that an unknown person approached them at *Gariūnai* with such a question. Neither did she express any concern about a strong association between 'Belarusianness' and cigarette smuggling, moreover, ethnicity was seen by Julija as a criterion which allowed a person to recognize potential smugglers.[15] Secondly, the readiness with which Julija responded to the woman's request vividly demonstrated to what extent petty smuggling was considered by her as a normal, taken-for-granted part of the border reality where Julija strongly belonged. Had

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14 *Ja daže ne znaju, kak tak slučilos', 4 goda učus' v universitete [smeetsja]i ni razu ne prixodilo v golovu, čtob kak-to tak, xotja by dve pački. To est' na avtobuse možno bylo by dve pački i dve butyločki vezti, nikogda takim ne zanimalis'. Pri tom čto znali, čto èto očen' vygodno i čto vse postojanno vozjat. A, slučajno, vot, ja vspomnila, počemu. Potomu čto my ne znali, komu voobšče. Klientov ne bylo, nikto nikogda ne sprašival, i kak-to ne budeš' že k každomu podxodit' i sprašivat': "Vam nužny sigarety?" A odnaždy my s mamoj šli po bazaru v Garjunai, i ženščina kakaja-to podbežala, mame govorit: "Ženščina, ženščina … " Vidno, vidno, navernoe, čto my iz Belarusi. Mama sprosila, čto slučilos'. Ona govorit: "Možet, u vas sigarety ili vodka est'?" Mama skazala ej, čto my ne zanimaemsja. Nu i vse, i my otxodim, ja govorju: "Mama, davaj vernemsja i sprosim, budet li ona brat', esli my privezem". Vernulis', ona govorit: "Konečno, budu brat'". Nu i vse. Pojavilsja pervyj klient.*

15 Buying cigarettes from Belarusian visitors in Lithuanian markets is indeed a well-known practice (see Harboe Knudsen, 2012).

she not had any preliminary knowledge and observation of this practice (which she herself mentioned), she would have been barely able to start smuggling so willingly. It was also worthy of attention that Julija's reasoning for engaging in smuggling was not determined by economic necessity. Both Julija and her husband were employed in the private sector in Vilnius; moreover, Julija also gave some private language lessons to schoolchildren. However, as she admitted, money from smuggling allowed the couple to make some savings. Although the amount was not outstanding, it helped the young family obtain financial stability and invest, for example, in their leisure activities. To put it differently, the opportunity to smuggle anticipated economic needs and not *vice versa*. Since the family did not entirely rely on the profit from smuggling, their trips to Belarus were not regular and were primarily aimed at visiting Julija's mother. On their way back the couple carried alcohol and cigarettes but also gasoline. The irregularity of cross-border trips as well as the uncommonness of their social profile allowed Julija and her husband to avoid customs inspections. As Julija stated, two young men on a 'gasoline auto' (Volkswagen Passat improved for gasoline trade) provoked more suspicion than a young married couple on their way to or from Belarusian relatives. Julija was also relatively indifferent to the financial risks (a high penalty) with which smuggling is associated. However, she was afraid that if they had been caught once, they would have been checked by customs every time afterwards.

What was also interesting about Julija was the fact that she did not attach any particular negative meaning to shuttle trade and cross-border smuggling. For example, when asked whether she would not have liked to trade as her mother, her main argument against was not moral hesitations or consideration of trade as a non-prestigious practice, but the low profit which Julija mother's type of business could possibly bring. On the one hand, since Julija's mother as well as her aunt and uncle had been involved in the trade most of Julija's life, such an attitude might be determined by family history. On the other hand, however, it could be also an example of the normalization of trade practices in the view of border inhabitants. Julija's attitude to informal trade was everything but contempt. Moreover, she was also sure that her retired mother liked the bazaar and remained engaged in trade because otherwise it would have been boring for her to stay home.[16] When I asked Julija whether her university fellows of Belarusian origin were also involved in smuggling, she replied,

> Well, people I study with they barely do this. I suppose that simply because they also don't know to whom. If there were someone here who would take it, I think they would carry. Because such idea does not occur until you do not know whom to offer.[17]

16 Julija's mother actually saw the situation as quite the opposite (see Chapter 4).

17 *Vot, te, s kem ja učus', oni takim, po-moemu, ne zanimajutsja. Prosto, navernoe, tože ne znajut, komu. Esli by byl kto zdes', kto by bral, ja dumaju, vozili by. Potomu čto takaja ideja ne prixodit, poka ne znaeš', komu možno predložit'.*

In other words, Julija did not even conceive any other possible reasons behind the choice of her colleagues besides the lack of particular knowledge to engage in the smuggling business. Furthermore, Julija was one of those rare people (especially of her generation) who did not hesitate to help female smugglers carry cigarettes across the border on a bus. Although, as mentioned above, she was sometimes annoyed by these requests, she simultaneously noted that she always assisted.

Julija's story was to some extent a literal and metaphorical embodiment of the border's existence. Her life narrative absorbed the main periods of the Belarus–Lithuania border's history – from illegal crossing in the early 1990s; through age-determined facilitation of cross-border mobility and the four-year interruption in it; to free cross-border movement not only across the border between Belarus and Lithuania, but also within the entire Schengen zone as a Lithuanian resident. Her story was also as ambiguous as the history of the border. As the Belarus–Lithuania border challenged predominant ideas about the porosity and persistence of borders, including Schengen frontiers, which were neither entirely porous nor completely persistent but kept *selective openness*; so Julija's story disputed the stereotypical image of a female cross-border petty trader – a poor middle-aged woman who engaged in smuggling purely due to unfavourable economic circumstances. On the contrary, Julija was a young attractive woman with almost two sets of higher education and the knowledge of foreign languages. She was married and did not have children whom she would have had to sustain financially. Consequently, smuggling was for Julija just another economic opportunity on a par with her primary employment and other informal practices, such as private lessons in particular. Additionally, just like the Belarus–Lithuania border's history, Julija's story had traces of global and local influences. As the development of the border occurred at the intersection of local practices and global geopolitics, so Julija's life was shaped by both local and global experiences. On the one hand, her rationality was deeply embedded into the specificities of the border region. Her knowledge of smuggling as well as a taken-for-granted attitude to informal cross-border activities was strongly determined by Julija's life in the border town of Ašmjany and her family's history. On the other hand, Julija had 'global' ambitions. As a student, she worked in the US twice and, as she confessed, fell in love with this country. She moved to Lithuania in order to be 'closer to Europe'. At the same time, she did not plan to stay there forever and was considering moving further to the UK together with her husband. Thus, unlike most of her Ašmjany counterparts, Julija was not going to use her mobility potential exclusively for an immediate short-term profit based on arbitrage practices but attached to it more global aspirations.

Despite the distinctiveness of Julija's story against the background of the other women (at least from the angle of age), there was also something in common between her and the rest of the respondents. Their willingness to be involved in petty trade as well as the clear predominance of women in this activity brought to light the gender dimension of shuttle trade. It raised questions of why women more readily chose trade as an economic practice, which resources they possessed and

how trade influenced their identity and self-perception. Moreover, the experience of female traders had a deeper embeddedness into the gender structure of post-Soviet Belarus. Notwithstanding the popular idea about the dependent status of women in patriarchal societies, including post-Soviet ones, Julija, as well as other Ašmjany women, played an active role in providing for their families financially and in initiating different types of informal economic practices. Thus, conventional roles of men as breadwinners and women as housewives were constantly challenged in the cases of Ašmjany women. Was it a matter of their conscious choice or foremost a response to unfavourable circumstances of life in Belarusian regions? This issue will be considered in the concluding chapter.

Conclusions

This chapter has been dedicated to the last period of the Belarus–Lithuania border history – the period of the Schengen Agreement. Lithuania as well as other European neighbours of Belarus accepted the Schengen *acquis* in December 2007. The research demonstrates that despite a widespread criticism of the influence of the Schengen Agreement on the mobility of people from outside of the EU, on the local scale of particular border regions the situation may seem more nuanced and different. As the case of Ašmjany shows, Schengen has not only barely interrupted petty trading practices in the Belarus–Lithuania border region but, on the contrary, stimulated new groups of the borderland inhabitants to get involved in it. People who are able to obtain Schengen visas through other EU Embassies (Polish in particular) can use these visas for their regular trips to Lithuania within the framework of the Schengen Agreement. Through this strategy some Ašmjany inhabitants have resumed their regular visits to Vilnius after a long break in this practice.

The readiness with which Ašmjany women seized their accidental opportunity to travel to Vilnius and used it to gain slight revenue from their trips brought to light the question of what shuttle trade actually means for Ašmjany people. Cross-border petty trade as any other type of economic activity should be understood as a practice where economic rationality intertwines with social norms and expectations. The dominance of the economic over the social or *vice versa* depends on particular economic practices, but both aspects – market and mutuality – are always there. Depending on which type of reasoning prevails in particular economic practices, they might be closer either to daily tactics or to economically rational strategies. In the case of shuttle trade in Ašmjany the former were represented by the activities of casuals, while the latter were rather associated with the business of professionals. The case of Anna considered in this chapter demonstrates that the transition from casual to professional types of trade can be a gradual process, which presupposes the establishment of the clear boundary between economic and non-economic forms of rationality.

In general, the 20-year history of shuttle trade development in the Belarus–Lithuania border region led to the normalization of this activity in the perception of Ašmjany dwellers. Shuttle trade is considered to be an integrative part of daily life in the region, the taken-for-granted activity which everyone would operate if they have the opportunity to do so. The case of 25-year-old Julija demonstrates that the disdainful attitude to cross-border trade practices has been replaced by more neutral interpretation of this activity in the eyes of Ašmjany inhabitants. For the young woman whose socialization fell during the time of shuttle trade development this activity as well as the border existence is an inalienable part of normal life in Ašmjany. In this sense, the border and cross-border economic practices have become an undeniable attribute of social reality in the region where no one could have even imagined the border 20–30 years ago.

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Chapter 6
Shuttle Trade and Gender Relations: A Female World in a Provincial Border Town

The concluding chapter is dedicated to gender relations and gender differences in the formal and informal economies of Ašmjany. Since cross-border petty trade has turned out to be a predominantly female economic activity, such issues as the gender segregation of the labour market, gender and strategies of livelihoods and female resources of empowerment have inevitably appeared in the course of this study. This chapter attempts to consider three main issues. Firstly, departing from the Ašmjany case, a broader picture is drawn of how everyday economic practices in Belarusian small towns are organized in accordance with gender roles and gender segregation. Secondly, a more nuanced reading is given of the general idea about women as victims of patriarchal structures which dominate life in post-Soviet countries. Through the case of shuttle traders the specific resources of empowerment and agency which post-Soviet women possess is elaborated upon. However, it is also argued that female emancipation in Belarus (and to some extent in other post-Soviet countries) often has a forced character and is determined by the literal and symbolic lack of men in women's lives. Thirdly, the issue of solidarity is considered along with the boundaries in the community of petty traders and the process of how this community is constructed at the moment of border crossing. The data of this study is limited by the primary aim of the research; therefore, the conclusions are not always generalizable. Nevertheless, the purpose of this chapter is to outline some significant issues in relation to gendered economies in contemporary Belarus which can be developed and verified in further empirical studies.

Gender and the Economy of Everyday Life in a Belarusian Small Town

Gender relations established during Soviet socialism have significantly influenced the gender order in contemporary Belarus as well as in other post-socialist countries. Gender equality and women's emancipation was a cornerstone of the Soviet system. From the initial emergence of state socialism after the October Revolution, women were seen as an important resource of socialist development. They were considered as workers, mothers and effective housekeepers at the same time. Nevertheless, despite women's mass participation in paid labour and a high level of education, Soviet gender equality was controversial. Anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee (2004, p. 27) calls it 'lop-sided' since, as she argues, socialist ideology about the liberation of women 'somehow posit[ed] that women's freedom

was something that could be granted to them without changing men's social roles and duties'. This asymmetry in the Soviet state's approach towards men and women caused what scholars designate as the 'double' (work and household) or even 'triple' (work, household and public activities) burden of women under communism (Ghodsee, 2004; Zdravomyslova and Temkina, 2003). The pressure which Soviet women experienced combining all of their expected roles, made them consider emancipation as a dubious achievement of the Soviet period (Kiczková and Farkašová, 1993). Nonetheless, the mass involvement of women in paid labour, the available social infrastructure of childcare and economic independence from men played an important role in women's life strategies and identity during and after socialism.

After the collapse of the Soviet system the socialist gender order began transforming. The transition from socialism to capitalism brought into life new patterns of gender relations and new forms of social inequality determined foremost by the new economic system. Although the transition did not evolve similarly in all of the former Soviet bloc countries, it had some general features concerning gender relations. They are summarized by Sarah Ashwin (2000, p. 2) who argues that 'the analysis of gender relations during political transition proceeds from the idea that the collapse of the Soviet state has removed the institutional underpinning of the gender order forged in the Soviet era'. This relates, foremost, the erosion of guaranteed paid labour for women and the collapse of the socialist welfare system that allowed women to combine their public and private responsibilities during socialism. Having been accompanied by the so-called 'patriarchal renaissance' (Posadskaya, 1994, p. 4), gender transformations in the post-Soviet period have been regarded as particularly disadvantageous for women. Although such an interpretation has been criticized for its insufficiency in providing a more nuanced picture of women's capabilities and resources to deal with the transition (Buckley, 1997; Ghodsee, 2005); it has been recognized that the economic situation was indeed less favourable for women who experienced mass unemployment at least in the early years after the collapse of the socialist system (Buckley, 1997; Khotkina, 1994; Ghodsee, 2004).

Nonetheless, the situation in post-Soviet Belarus differs from that in other countries of the region. The main reason is that Belarus has not actually undergone substantial economic transformation to the market system. Even today the Belarusian economy is closely tied to the Soviet legacy. From a gender perspective, the primary distinction between Belarus and other post-Soviet countries (not to mention Eastern Europe in general) is that Belarusian women are employed *en masse*. In their quantitative study on the gender gap in Belarus, economists Francesco Pastore and Alina Vereshchagina (2011) demonstrate that during the period of 1986–2006 the rate of female employment in Belarus changed insignificantly. The scholars argue that unlike other former Soviet countries, in Belarus, where the state controls the economy, enterprises tend to keep the workforce but to reduce wage. This means that low-paid jobs predominate in the country while the unemployment rate remains at an extremely low level. According

to the official statistics, the rate of unemployment in 2011 was only 0.7 per cent (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2012b, p. 144).[1] According to Pastore and Vereschagina, women occupy low-paid positions more regularly than men do. As they show in their analysis, the wage gap between men and women was constantly increasing from 8 per cent in 1996 to 22 per cent in 2006 (Pastore and Vereschagina, 2011, p. 340). The latter is explained by the segregation of women in the least paid sectors such as education, culture and services, for instance, and by women's more intense commitment to housework and childcare.

The macro-studies of gender relations in the Belarusian labour market correspond to fieldwork observations in this study. Most of the women talked to had been formerly or currently employed in the state sector; teachers, museum keepers, librarians, salespersons and retired employees of state-owned enterprises. The worst paid state-financed sphere was occupied by women. All eight employees of the local museum were women. The library was also run by females. Women prevailed in Ašmjany schools, in the state-financed local newspaper (although the editor-in-chief was a man), at the cash desk of the town bus station and in the post-office. At the same time, the head of Ašmjany municipality was a man. The high-ranking customs officers interviewed were male as well. Gender segregation was also observed in private businesses. A small private agro-complex I stayed at once was owned by a man but all practical issues such as room reservation and registration were run by a female administrator. The waitresses in Ašmjany cafés were women, however taxi drivers were exclusively men. Car trade was regarded as a predominantly male business while petty trade in clothes and foodstuffs as a female one. Even smuggling was segregated in accordance with gender (see Chapter 1). Men usually operated the large-scale transportation of cigarettes in private vehicles. Meanwhile, women did the same but the scale was much less significant. Moreover, women usually operated their trade using public transportation. Thus, Ašmjany represents a perfect case for more careful studies of what gender segregation actually means for women and why, being statistically better educated than Belarusian men, they still tend to end up at low-paid and time-consuming positions primarily in the budget sector.

The most evident answer would be that in a small provincial town a well-paid job is hard to find for both men and women. However, women's commitment to unpaid family work and childrearing makes their position in the labour market even less advantageous. Even if women manage to find a good job in the first years after the accomplishment of their education, they may lose-out in their experience and qualifications during parental leave which in Belarus is mainly taken by women. This explains, for instance, why young women earn similar or even higher wages

1 The statistics, however, count only those people who are registered as unemployed in the state agencies for social protection. Alternative studies show that the rate of people who apply for job placement in 2010 was 7 per cent of the economically active population (World Bank, 2012, p. 23).

than men the same age do and why the gender gap between men and women increases over time in their careers (Pastore and Vereschagina, 2011). Thus, family obligations push women to stick to low-paid positions especially in the state sector. Such an occupation usually guarantees several advantages to women, namely stability, flexibility of work arrangements, a sense of professional identity and using the workplace for informal activities. These aspects are considered in further detail.

Stability, which is seen as the core of Alexander Lukashenka's long-lasting political success and as the main barrier to political changes in Belarus, plays a significant role in the employment strategies of Ašmjany women. Employment in the low-paid but stable budget sector not only brings a steady (though small) monthly income and provides women with social security but also guarantees predictable work hours that can be crucial for women with small children. For example, respondents Elena and Galina (Interview 1, September 2010; Interview 2, August 2011) employed as schoolteachers mentioned that the 25-year work record of teaching gives them the possibility of gaining a pension ahead of the official age of retirement which is 55 for Belarusian women. This argument as the reply to the question on why the women do not shift into the informal economy if school work is not bringing enough income was mentioned not only by less advantaged women but also by the successful businesswoman Marina whose case is considered in Chapter 4. At the same time, Anna (Interview 10, February 2012, see Chapter 5) regarded stable work hours as a more substantial reason to continue working in the budget sphere. Though Anna constantly complained about the insufficiency of her official income, she, nevertheless, did not even concede the possibility of quitting her job. For the divorced single mother a stable income as well as a fixed work schedule was a necessary condition to take proper care of her six-year-old son. Anna also regarded the unpredictability in the length of cross-border trips as the main obstacle in her way to more profitable forms of border business. According to her, flexibility and the lack of family commitments was the main explanation why Ašmjany men usually operated more profitable and successful cross-border enterprises (such as the car trade business) than Ašmjany women. A librarian of a preretirement age expressed a similar opinion. Comparing her job to the car trade business of her son-in-law, she stated that she preferred a low but stable income to the precarious work conditions which cross-border business required (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010).

Stability and fixed work hours, however, do not exclude the *flexibility* that employment in the state sector provides for women. When I visited the Ašmjany local museum for the first time, only three of eight employees were there (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010). It was early September, the beginning of the work season. Nonetheless, four persons were still on holiday including the director. Another woman was absent notwithstanding that the workday was in full swing. Only two employees took care of the whole museum. Since they had no other visitors at the time, they seemed to be effectively coping with their responsibilities. Thus, though budget organizations in general require the presence of people in their workplaces, the excess of employees in this sphere leaves enough

space for people to circumvent those requirements. The measures of control over employees are limited in budget organizations. Therefore, women willingly cover each other when they need to visit a doctor, to accompany a child to a private lesson or simply to go shopping in a nearby grocery store. This tradition has strong roots in the Soviet period when the only way for women to fulfil employment and family responsibilities was to use work hours for private matters such as searching for hard-to-find goods or standing in queues, in particular. However, even when women cannot leave their workplaces easily, they still spend a lot of time on non-professional activities such as chit-chatting, reading books and newspapers and even knitting. Such behaviour, which I constantly observed in the local library, for example, is a logical response to the lack of workload in the budget sphere.

Combination of work- and *non-work activities* as well as the importance of *a workplace for the socialization of women* is the third reason why they may stick to their positions even when the material reward is negligible. For example, in the case of Marina not only her work record but also professional identity were important reasons to keep her school position. When asked what kept her at her school, she said,

> Well, at school, I guess, love of children, enjoyment from the profession, I feel some relief when I come and they are with you, we communicate … And in general, to appear as a person, to dress up, to make myself look properly. Because if you are in business, you will lose yourself, you will look like I look today, because after a night of travelling. But when you go to school – it is communication, children look at you. That is why (Interview 5, September 2011).[2]

In other words, although Marina was satisfied with her business, she still preferred to identify herself as a teacher than as an entrepreneur or a trader. Marina associated teaching with an appropriate and decent career for a woman while business was seen by the respondent as a profitable but a less morally rewarding activity.

Marina's case, however, was rather an exception. For other women their formal employment was more a matter of necessity than just a way to experience professional identity. *Official employment* in the state sector was often *a space for implementing informal activities*. As it has been stressed in Anna's case in the previous chapter, a workplace could serve as a trade place simultaneously. Moreover, in Anna's example her formal employment gave her an opportunity to get a multiple-entry visa. Another way of profiting from a formal work position was involvement in the social networks of colleagues who, due to gender segregation in the state sector, were also primarily women. Casual petty traders

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2 *V škole, navernoe, ljubov' k detjam, lubov' k professii, nu otdušinu polučaju,vot prišla, vot oni s toboj, vot oni poobščalis', vot. Nu i voobšče, vyjti, kak čelovek, i odet'sja, i privesti sebja. Potomu čto esli budeš' v biznese, to togda ponikneš', v biznese vot budeš' takoj, kak ja segodnja, potomu čto posle noči v doroge. A kogda ideš' v školu – èto vse-taki obščenie, i vse, i detki smotrjat na tebja, poètomu.*

used this resource to operate their trade activity. Simultaneously, for women who obtained goods through social networks a formal workplace was an important space of consumption. It is worth mentioning that non-employed petty traders often plied their goods between budget organizations in the town selling to women who worked there. One day in the library I observed that in a short period female traders came round twice (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, October 2010). Social networking also mattered for teachers who gave private lessons (Galina, Interview 2, August 2011). They found their 'clients' through the network of their students' parents. Free time during the workday, which those employed in the state sector possessed, was another important resource for informal activities. For example, some of the interviews, which were paid, took place during respondents' work hours and at their workplaces.

The advantages which state sector employment gives to Ašmjany women make it more understandable why women in Belarusian regions prefer to remain in this sphere for most of their professional career. However, it poses the question of how those women survive taking into consideration that the salary in this sector can be insufficient. For example, in 2010 the average nominal wage in Ašmjany was 1,018,000 BYR, or approx. 260 EUR (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2012a). At the same time, the wage of a museum employee was three times below this level and constituted only 300,000 BYR or approx. 80 EUR (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010). These data, however, do not include additional payments which employees in the state sector are regularly paid. As Pastore and Vereshchagina (2011) stress, such benefits, which may include various forms of monetary and in-kind payments, are as important a reason to hold a formal job as the primary wage. These payments, nevertheless, may have a non-regular character. Therefore, women have to employ other strategies to sustain themselves and often their dependents on their official salary. Departing from the case of Ašmjany, several such strategies can be distinguished.

The first one is the reliance on their husband's income. For example, one of the interlocutors, a middle-aged woman, did not work at all since she and her two children were primarily sustained by the profit from her husband's growing business (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010). One of the employees of Ašmjany museum was in a similar position. Although she worked, it was evident that the life-style her family led did not correspond to the salary she could earn in the museum. As it turned out, the woman was married to a local entrepreneur who had his business in Lithuania (Focus-group discussion, February 2012). But even when her husband did not earn much as in the case of the respondent Vera (Interview 14, September 2012), families with two breadwinners seemed to be more economically sustainable than single, divorced or widowed women, who represented half of the sample. In such cases women relied on other livelihood strategies such as kin networks and informal economic activities.

The help of relatives (mainly parents) and extended families was another strategy for women to sustain themselves. For example, two single teachers in their 40s lived with their parental families. In one case (Elena, Interview 1,

September 2010), the family consisted of a daughter and her retired mother, whose pension was a source of income in addition to the daughter's teaching salary. The mother also cultivated a plot of land outside the town. The daughter at the same time got involved in petty trade as soon as she got an opportunity. All in all, the family managed to live quite decently. The daughter, for instance, could afford to go on holiday to either Crimea or the Baltic Sea coast at least once a year. In another case (Galina, Interview 2, August 2011), a woman lived with two parents. The father was a drinker but still contributed his pension to the family budget. The mother was a 74-year-old retiree. However, she had also kept a part-time position until very recently and cultivated a plot, which was located in the town. The daughter herself was engaged in petty trade activities but also gave private lessons to schoolchildren. Combining all of their incomes, the family was even able to support the respondent's younger sister who lived in Minsk with a husband and a teenage daughter. Since her family had to rent an apartment in the city and support the child, her situation was seen as less favourable than the situation of the rest of the family who stayed in Ašmjany.

Besides extended families, informal activities were also an important means of economic stability for Ašmjany women. The leading one was land cultivation. Most of the respondents used this strategy notwithstanding whether or not they had other sources of income besides formal ones such as an official wage or pension. Some specific activities were also mentioned. For example, one woman operated a small catering enterprise (Vera, Interview 14, September 2012). She helped organize banquets and cooked for people unofficially. Other women (Anna, Interview 10, February 2012; Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010) were involved in the car trade business as mediators. They did not buy cars in Lithuania and sell them in Belarus themselves, but they helped carry cars across the border in the role of temporal owners. This scheme allowed male car traders to reduce tax burdens. Retired women also frequently operated petty trade business in order to have an additional source of income (see Chapter 5). The pension might be low but being combined with additional money earned from trading it gave women some space for manoeuvre. They could more easily invest the additional income into house refurbishment or help sustain their grown-up children (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011; Nina, Interview 8, October 2011; Jadviga, Interview 12, February 2012).

Thus, petty trade in Ašmjany should be seen in a broader context of livelihood strategies which people resort to in order to organize their lives at a proper level. Appealing to other scholars of post-socialist transformations (Burawoy, Krotov and Lytkina, 2000; Kiblitskaya, 2000), Anne White (2004) argues that livelihood strategies are mainly part of the women's sphere because they are more responsible and adaptable and ready to take any activity which can help earn some additional income. This reasoning partially explains why women dominated the Ašmjany petty trade business. To some extent, it was a female way to deal with unfavourable economic conditions especially when men were lacking for various reasons. In other words, the involvement of women in petty trade can be explained

by negative and positive factors simultaneously. On the one hand, some women were forced to take the responsibility for their families, especially when they were the only breadwinners. On the other hand, their flexibility helped them cope with a disadvantageous situation more easily. Moreover, due to the gender specificities of Ašmjany's daily economy some particular resources which petty trade required were more available to women. Below these two lines of argument are considered.

Absent Men and Forced Emancipation

In 2013, shortly before the Day of Fatherland Defenders, which is also an informal men's day in Belarus, one of Minsk's kindergartens held a drawing competition among the children. The children were supposed to depict their fathers and to write short stories about them. One boy pictured only a green bus and wrote, 'My father is a bus driver but he is absent in the picture. He has gone away. My father is a real man because he is kind and strong' (Xrolovič, 2013). It is hard to say what laid behind this touching story in reality. Nevertheless, it is mentioned as a prelude to the discussion of female/male relations in the narratives of Ašmjany women because the idea of the absent man, represented by the six-year old boy so literally, resonated with the experiences of the symbolic and literal underrepresentation and even absence of men relayed in conversations with Ašmjany women. It is not that men were completely missing from the sources in this study. However, their presence in the fieldnotes and interviews as well as in the general experience of daily life in Ašmjany was indeed negligible.

On the one hand, such a disproportion can be explained by the limitations which the aim of this research presupposed. Firstly, the primary interest was in the female experience of informal economic activities. Secondly, it was expected that petty trade would be a predominantly female practice so more attention may have been intentionally paid to women. On the other hand, there were also objective reasons. In particular, the public spaces visited were female rather than male ones. This concerned not only the library and museum visited for professional reasons, but also the bus station, the post office, the grocery stores and markets which were frequented for private matters. The active period of participant observation usually fell in the daytime. That time was in general less crowded in the town; however, women visibly prevailed in the town centre. They accompanied children from school, paid telephone bills or went shopping. When observing this aspect more attentively, it was noted that women were more numerous on public transport. Men were also present there though they were mostly older. Thus, the daily life which was observed in the town was preoccupied by women. At the same time, men were also underrepresented in the stories that women related. This was connected not only with the literal lack of men in the lives of particular respondents, who were single, divorced or widowed, but also to men's insignificance for the leading motive of the talks, namely petty trading, which was seen by the respondents as an exclusively female activity. As far as the interviews were often concentrated on

daily life practices and the private sphere, men did not seem to play an important role there either, since this sphere was also primarily female.

The phenomenon of absent men is not, however, just some ethnographic zest of Ašmjany life, but an indicator of a particular demographic process which not only Belarus but also the entire post-socialist region is known for.[3] This process concerns the high rate of male mortality in post-socialist countries, that is often associated with socioeconomic crisis, the social pressure of market reforms and mass privatization (Grigoriev and Grigorieva, 2011; Stuckler, King and McKee, 2009). Although the slow-path scenario of economic transitions has affected the trend of male life expectancy in Belarus less dramatically,[4] life expectancy at birth is approximately 12 years longer for Belarusian women than for men (Table 6.1). The coefficients of mortality among the working-age population are also higher for men than for women (Table 6.2). The number of retired women is more than twice as high as the number of retired men (Table 6.3). When we add the problem of poor health conditions, alcoholism and a lower level of education and life expectations among male population to this picture,[5] it becomes clear where and why men disappear from the lives of Belarusian women and why the latter are expected to stay alone at least at some point of their lives and to take care of their children. According to statistics, single mothers represent 18.8 per cent[6] of the general number of Belarusian families while single fathers only 1.8 per cent (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2013, p. 41; RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2013a, p. 62). At the same time, the number of single women (persons who are neither married nor live with their partners) has also increased in Belarus. Single women represented 13.8 per cent of female population in 1999, 15.7 per cent in 2009 and 18.6 per cent in 2012 (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2013, p. 41; RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2013a, p. 62). However, even when husbands exist *de jure*, they do not always play a significant role in the life of women due to alcohol and health problems, as was the case for several respondents.

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3 On 'missing' men in Latvia, see Eglitis, 2010; in Lithuania, see Harboe Knudsen, 2012.

4 On comparative analysis of the Belarusian situation with that in Russia and Lithuania see Grigoriev et al., 2010.

5 Among people suffering from alcoholism men represent 79.5 per cent (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2013a, p. 155). Men also prevail among drug addicts (83.5 per cent) (ibid., p. 156). The death rate from particular diseases is significantly higher among working-age men as well (ibid., p. 176). Women are healthier not only in a physical but also in a psychological sense. According to the survey on female and child living conditions in Belarus, young women are more optimistic about their life than young men are. 52.3 per cent of female respondents in the age range of 15–24 think that their life has improved during the last year and will improve further during the next one. The percentage of men who think similarly in the same age cohort is 41.9 per cent (RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2013, p. 221–22).

6 This number includes single-mother families (15.9 per cent) and extended families of single mothers, a child (children) and mother's parents (2.9 per cent).

Table 6.1 Life expectancy at birth (2001–2011)

Years	Male	Female
2001	62.8	74.5
2002	62.3	74.1
2003	62.7	74.7
2004	63.2	75.0
2005	62.9	75.1
2006	63.6	75.5
2007	64.5	76.2
2008	64.7	76.5
2009	64.7	76.4
2010	64.6	76.5
2011	64.7	76.7

Source: RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2012, p. 197.

Table 6.2 Age-specific death rates for working-age population (2011) (the number of cases per 1,000)

Age	Male	Female
15–19	0.8	0.4
20–24	1.8	0.5
25–29	2.9	0.7
30–34	4.7	1.3
35–39	6.5	1.7
40–44	9.0	2.6
45–49	12.3	3.4
50–54	18.4	5.3
55–59	26.4	

Note: Working age is 15–54 for women, and 15–59 for men.
Source: RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2013a, p. 26.

Table 6.3 The number of women per 1,000 men

Years	Under working age	At working age	Above working age
2009	945	938	2432
2010	945	934	2437
2011	946	930	2441

Source: RB. Nacional'nyj statističeskij komitet Respubliki Belarus', 2012, pp. 335–6.

The absent men phenomenon causes what can be designated as the *forced emancipation* of Ašmjany women. Most of the respondents were self-reliant persons who could provide for themselves and their families (children or older parents, in some cases) and take care of the household. For some of the women the most popular patriarchal ideas such as the division of household labour between men and women and the vision of men as breadwinners and women as housewives did not have any practical sense since there was no one to take 'male' responsibilities except for the women themselves. Nevertheless, this self-reliance hardly brought outstanding moral satisfaction to women whose independence was primarily driven by unfavourable life conditions instead of deliberate aspiration to personal autonomy and self-determination. Thus, female singleness, which is seen as a symbol of postmodern values and self-actualization in Western and Northern Europe (Eglitis, 2010), was barely proclaimed as a conscious choice by Ašmjany women. Rather, some of them believed in a man-as-a-breadwinner family model but due to life circumstances could not implement this model in their personal experience. In some interviews the respondents explicitly recognized a more active role of Ašmjany women. However, again, this active position was seen not as the reason but as the consequence of male absence and/or irresponsibility. For example, Olga (Interview 7, October 2011), a 64-year-old entrepreneur (see Chapter 4), claimed that she was able to do all kinds of housework from firewood provision and house refurbishment to cooking and cleaning. Moreover, Olga had operated her petty trade business for the last 15 years. Nonetheless, these activities were not a matter of Olga's deliberate decision but rather a necessity-driven response to the disadvantageous position she had been put in after the death of her husband. When asked about her opinion on the prevalence of women in the trading business, she replied abruptly,

> Why women? Because women are more eager, more responsible. They have to [provide] for children. Women are everywhere now. What are men? Almost exclusively drinkers are around. He had a drink – and he is done. He does not care about anything. But a woman has to feed children, to teach them, to take them to kindergarten, to take care of them.[7]

Another respondent (Anastasija, Interview 11, February 2012) claimed that women were more 'hauling' (*tjagučie*) because they 'hauled' everything on their shoulders, including a formal job, housework and informal economic practices.

Perceptible dissatisfaction with women's active position which some of the respondents expressed in relation to themselves could be explained by two interconnected reasons. The first one is that some women clearly shared the

7 *Počemu ženščiny? Nu potomu čto im bol'še nado, bol'še otvetstvennosti. Im detej nado. Kak-to vezde vsjudu ženščiny počemu-to sejčas bol'še. Mužčiny čto? Von pjanicy odni počti. Vypil – i vse. Ničego ne nado. A ženščine nado i detej, i učit', i kormit', i v jasli vodit', smotret' ix.*

traditional idea about male and female roles in society.[8] For example, respondent Elena (Interview 1, September 2010), a single woman in her 40s, noted that shuttle trade was a destiny of single or divorced women who did not have any support from their ex-husbands. As she claimed, women 'from *normal* families' did not have to be engaged in this activity because 'men *had to* earn money'. Another woman, Žanna (Interview 13, March 2012), who had to operate courier activities since her official salary at a Vilnius supermarket was negligible (Chapter 4), believed that her salary 'was *normal* for a woman' as if admitting that ideally it should have been supported by male provision. Nevertheless, this belief in a man as a breadwinner does not have only ideological reasons. The interpretation of singleness as an unfavourable condition has also been determined by the economic structure which prioritizes a two-breadwinner family model. As Pastore and Vereshchagina (2011, p. 353) argue, in Belarus this model is constituted through 'low wages for both men and women coupled with fringe benefits for public sector jobs'. Moreover, due to the gender segregation of the labour market in the country and female predominance in low-wage positions, the potential of a negative economic effect from singleness is higher for women. Not accidentally, single women and single mothers are regarded among the most vulnerable social groups in a report on poverty in Belarus prepared in 2012 (Issledovatel'skij Centr IPM, 2012).

While men were missing from the stories of many respondents, children (especially daughters) occupied a significant place. Those women who had children saw them as an important driving force 'to stir'. As a single mother Anna (Interview 10, February 2012) claimed,

> I have a child now and for the sake of my child, if he needs anything, I don't care, I will clean toilets or, I beg your pardon, I will prostitute but I have to provide for my son![9]

Even retired women whose children were grown-ups already still thought that to support them was mother's responsibility. 'I don't have myself, but you know, mother has to help',[10] said 74-year-old Natalija (Interview 4, September 2011) who cultivated a plot in order to provide her daughters with self-produced vegetables.

Although, as sociologist Jennifer Utrata (2011, p. 621) argues concerning family relations in Russia, parents 'provide more pragmatic help to adult children than

8 The broader study of male and female attitude towards traditional gender roles in the case of Latvia demonstrates, however, that Latvian women are less supportive of the idea of a traditional family than Latvian and Russian-speaking men (Eglitis, 2010). Nevertheless, breadwinning as a fundamental masculine characteristic is usually not questioned by women (ibid.).

9 *Vot seičas u menja rebenok, i esli moemu rebenku čto-to, čego-to ne xvataet, to mne plevat', ja budu tam ili sortiry myt', ili, izvinite, xot' na trassu pojdu, no mne nužno obespečit' rebenka.*

10 *Sama ne imeju, no znaete, mat' dolžna pomogat'.*

vice versa', the debt is, nevertheless, expected to be paid by children, primarily by daughters. Two women (Anastasija, Interview 11, February 2012; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012) took care of their sick elderly mothers themselves, without any social service assistance. Žanna (Interview 13, March 2012) provided her widowed mother with particular foodstuffs, which the latter could not afford to obtain herself in Ašmjany because they were too expensive for a retired woman. When Žanna's mother was interviewed, she generously offered coffee, sandwiches with smoked salmon, cookies and oranges. As she herself mentioned, her daughter brought all of the products from the neighbouring country. Some women (Galina, Interview 2, September 2010; Valentina, Interview 6, September 2010; Julija, Interview 9, December 2011) also maintained that they stayed or returned to Ašmjany or nearby because of their mothers. For example, the youngest respondent Julija (Interview 9, December 2011) talking about her work in the US during her student years stated, 'Of course, when I came there, I was eager to stay, but my mom is here, therefore, mom said, "If you stay, I am going to die"'.[11]

Mutual dependence and emotional connections between mothers and daughters is not an exclusively Ašmjany phenomenon. Anthropologist Francis Pine (2001) describes a similar tendency in relation to rural Polish society. According to Pine, the high value of motherhood can be seen as the legacy of Slavonic culture and Polish Catholicism with its emphasis on the figure of Mary as Mother. As Pine argues, the centrality of motherhood for Polish women is often regarded by feminists as problematic due to its strong association with women's oppression and their attachment to the private sphere. Nevertheless, depending on the particular cultural context, motherhood can be

> far less about biological reproduction, maintenance of the domestic sphere, or even care than […] about a range of obligations, skills and capacities ascribed to adult women within the world of kinship, a world which itself mediates between the public and the private domains, and calls for active agency in both (Pine, 2011, p. 58).

In this sense, motherhood and mother/daughter relations can be interpreted as the most basic level of female solidarity and reciprocal reliance as well as of social networking of help and support, which women may count upon and which makes it easier for women to cope with unfavourable life conditions (Gibson, 1996). Returning to the case of petty trade in Ašmjany, it is worthy of note that men (sons or husbands) were very seldom mentioned as companions on trade trips to Vilnius, while daughters regularly helped their mothers at different stages of trading – from buying and carrying goods across the border to selling them in Ašmjany or Vilnius. In other words, the female character of petty trade can be explained not only by disadvantageous conditions, which drive women to take

11 *Konečno, ja kogda tuda poexala, očen' xotelos' ostat'sja. No u menja mama zdes', poètomu mama skazala: "Esli ty ostaeš'sja, ja umiraju".*

part in the least profitable economic activities, but also by women's possession of specific resources which men may not have access to. Moreover, participation in this activity requires involvement in some social rituals together with other women, which could be at odds with men's presence. These aspects of female shuttle trade will be considered in two concluding sections.

Female Resources for Shuttle Trade

The prevalence of women in petty trading may be seen as a consequence of gender segregation, which extends beyond the formal labour market to informal economic activities. As studies demonstrate, in the informal sector women tend to occupy the same niches which are usually associated with extensive female participation in the formal one (Windebank and Williams, 2010). In particular, women are broadly involved in informal service activities such as commercial cleaning, childcare, domestic help, i.e. activities which are usually understood as 'female responsibilities'. Therefore, as Jan Windebank and Colin C. Williams argue (2010, p. 85), the difference in male and female engagement in the informal economy should be considered not only through 'the lens of the gender segmentation of the formal sphere' but also through 'the gender division of domestic labor'. This means that in the informal sector women 'carry out tasks […] for which they are largely responsible as far as the gender division of domestic work is concerned' (Windebank and Williams, 2010, p. 85). This argument can be equally applied to the understanding of women's domination in petty trading, which in many senses is built upon women's responsibilities for daily provision and family consumption. The latter, however, should not be necessarily seen as a disadvantage for women. On the one hand, it is true that women are often 'ghettoized at the lower end of the segmented informal labor market' (Windebank and Williams, 2010, p. 89) *inter alia* for the reason of their prevalence in traditionally female activities, which are seen as an extension of women's unpaid labour and, therefore, are usually lower paid. On the other hand, women's domestic responsibilities turned into an informal economic activity can be understood as 'the weapon of the weak' (Scott, 1985), or a capability to turn into an advantage the resources women possess at the moment. Although women as a group might be less fortunate in holding such assets as money or important social connections, they can be more privileged concerning reliance on non-material resources extracted from their everyday knowledge and experience. To explain this line of argument, I consider three main sets of resources which Ašmjany women rely on in their shuttle trading.

The first set of resources is connected to women's more active engagement in daily life practices such as food provision and family consumption. In the Soviet Union, this part of household obligations was entrusted to women (Reid, 2002). Women held responsibility for the day-to-day supply of the entire family as well as for the provision of every family member. To buy clothes for husbands and adult sons still remains a common practice among Belarusian women. Being a

time- and labour-consuming practice under the circumstances of the Soviet deficit, daily consumption required some proficiency from women. Under state socialism the goods were not simply bought – they would have been carefully searched for and obtained. Ašmjany women gave their own response to the shortages which the provincial town regularly experienced re-directing their consumption practices towards neighbouring Vilnius. Consequently, when the early shuttle trade activities across the newly emerged Belarus–Lithuania border appeared, they were largely built upon this previous experience. Ašmjany women heavily relied on their knowledge of consumer spaces in the capital city. Notwithstanding the fact that Vilnius has changed significantly since the Soviet period, its Soviet-time markets such as *Kalvarijų turgus* and *Halės* remain highly popular among Ašmjany petty traders.

Another result of female involvement in daily shopping activities is 'intuitive marketing' which casual and professional groups of petty traders strongly rely on. In particular, this concerns women who trade in foodstuffs and clothes. As a rule, Ašmjany women have a good knowledge of prices as well as an informed feeling for which goods are in demand. The former arises from the constant need for careful calculation of daily expenses due to limitations in the family budget, which many of the respondents have themselves experienced. It is remarkable that some respondents could not recall particular moments of their life stories but at the same time gave a detailed account on how much foodstuffs cost in Ašmjany 10–20 years ago. The intuition for goods in demand was also a part of women's daily experience. Since they themselves had to obtain goods in Ašmjany, they knew exactly what people preferred to buy in the town and what would be worth bringing from Vilnius. Therefore, Ašmjany women usually operated trade in those goods (such as clothes, household supplies, foodstuffs and baby toys) which they felt the most competent about thanks to their daily experience and family responsibilities. Some respondents (Nina, Interview 8, October 2011; Anna, Interview 10, February 2011; Anastasija, Interview 11, February 2012) depreciated the importance of this knowledge, saying that the reason why women prevailed in petty trading was that men simply would not deal with such trifles. Others, however, explicitly admitted the advantage of women in this business. Marina (Interview 5, September 2011) noted that 'not every man [was] capable to trade'.[12] Elena (Interview 1, September 2010) specified that 'women had a better knowledge of this stuff [products for trade]'.[13] The social expectations which attribute consumption and family provision to female experience also help women carry goods across the border. Women who transport clothes or any kind of 'female' stuff might cause less suspicion because it is easier for them to prove that goods are carried for personal needs, especially when the amount of goods is negligible. Marina (Interview 5, September 2011) mentioned, for instance, that when she and her husband travelled to Poland and tended to split goods in order

12 *Ne každyj mužik možet torgovat'.*

13 *Ženščina nu razbiraetsja v tex veščax.*

to avoid customs duties, customs officials never believed that a man transported female underwear on his own.

Women's involvement in social networks determines the second set of female resources for trade. Ašmjany shuttle trading is a business carried out by women, with the help of women and for women. Most of the respondents hardly had any useful contacts among border guards, customs officials or local authorities which might be necessary for implementing a large-scale business. Nevertheless, the help of coequals – family members, neighbours and colleagues, relations with whom are built in the course of day-to-day interactions and work experience – had a significant meaning for petty traders. In this sense, Ašmjany women often exploited those networks which were already available to them. Such networks should not have necessarily had a clear gender nature. Nevertheless, in some cases their determination by gender division of labour and household responsibilities was evident.

To begin with, many women obtained their visas with the assistance of close relatives living in Lithuania. Family members also provided women with help in carrying goods across the border or selling them in Ašmjany or Vilnius. This support was so deeply embedded into the logic of the trade practice that people could take it for granted and even not notice it. For example, Olga (Interview 7, October 2011) claimed that she preferred to count on herself in her trade activity. Nonetheless, as it has later appeared in the interview with Olga's daughter (Julija, Interview 9, December 2011), she somehow forgot to mention that it was actually her daughter and sister who often brought goods to Ašmjany when they came to visit her. Besides relatives' assistance, women often counted on their female friends or neighbours to arrange trips to Vilnius. If acquaintances were more experienced in trade, they could provide information on where and how to buy products more profitably or how to cross the border without problems. However, travelling in groups, women also provided each other with important emotional (see Chapter 4) and organizational support, which is, as considered in the next section, what petty trade is built upon in principle.

Social networks also had a significant meaning for selling goods in Vilnius and Ašmjany likewise. Relatives, colleagues and neighbours were an integral element of petty smugglers' and casual traders' activities. Women who smuggled cigarettes to Vilnius preferred to rely on regular customers since the risk of being caught by Lithuanian police was much lower then. Those who had relatives in Vilnius often sold cigarettes to their friends or neighbours. For casual traders social networks were the only way to distribute the goods they brought from Vilnius. Unlike smugglers, who in the beginning might build their network of permanent customers from accidental buyers, casuals rather relied on existing social ties which were often the result of women's employment in the state-funded sphere. Since women with small salaries occupied this sector, it was not a problem for casual traders to find consumers for goods they brought from Lithuania among their co-workers. Moreover, female colleagues themselves stimulated informal activities by asking counterparts who were fortunate with visas to bring particular products from Vilnius. In this sense, social networks had an ambivalent meaning for the female

trade practice. On the one hand, they gave women entrepreneurial advantages. On the other hand, they simultaneously limited women's capability to gain from their business, since petty trade in such a case was understood as not merely an economic activity but also as a part of social relationships. According to Windebank and Williams (2010), this duality characterizes the specificity of female participation in informal economic activities in general and, among other reasons, explains why women's informal work is more often low-paid than men's work.

Cultural norms regulating appropriate behaviour for women and men can be seen as another resource that women willingly use in their informal practices. It was more culturally acceptable and therefore easier for women to coax other passengers to take a couple of cigarette packs and to carry them across the border or to cry in front of customs officials or Lithuanian police to make them sympathize with the traders (see Chapter 4). Compassion to women as a reason that the traders were not penalized on different occasions was stressed by several interlocutors and especially by elderly women (Natalija, Interview 4, September 2011; Valentina, Interview 6, September 2011; Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, October 2010). Sometimes the traders pretended to be completely unprofessional and naïve in order to persuade customs officers that they were not involved in trading regularly. To put it in the words of Žanna (Interview 13, March 2012), 'men [could not] do this because they [were] more serious'.[14] Once it was observed how border guards started laughing at Ašmjany women and allowed them to go across the border after they had noticed how ridiculously the latter tried to hide some goods on the bus at the very moment of customs and border control (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, October 2010). As specified in Chapter 4, communicational and emotional skills, however, did not always help women. Their effectiveness depended also on the particular situation and the person on duty. Being aware of this, traders preferred to cross the border when customs officers who were more agreeable were on duty.

Though female resources of petty trading might seem insignificant in comparison with more traditional assets such as money or useful connections, it can be argued that Ašmjany shuttle traders are anything but victims of unfavourable life circumstances. On the contrary, the creativity and enthusiasm with which women turn their basic resources to the informal economic activity can be seen as a constitutive part of their agency. Agency, however, should not be confused with such concepts as 'decision-making', 'self-liberation' and 'self-empowerment'. Some feminist authors (Mahmood, 2001, 2005; Borovoy and Ghodsee, 2012) criticize the tendency to define agency in terms of individual autonomy and resistance to social norms and order, since such an interpretation 'limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions' (Mahmood, 2001, p. 203). Instead, Mahmood (2001, p. 203) suggests thinking of agency as of 'a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create'. In other words, agency could be seen as 'a way to mobilize one's options for fitting into the structure rather than opposing it' (Harboe

14 *Nu, mužčiny ne budut takim zanimat'sja, oni bolee takie serjeznye.*

Knudsen, 2012, p. 27). Such interpretation of agency refers to de Certeu's ideas on everyday tactics, which he also sees as the potential of the weak to 'turn to their own ends forces alien to them' (de Certeau, 1988, p. xix). Following this logic, one could suggest that agency is an inevitable part of people's everyday practices based on manipulation with events in order to turn them into advantages. Agency, however, is not only about clever tricks to circumvent the structure; it is also about the moral satisfaction of those who implement circumventing practices. As the study on female agency in the informal economy of India argues, worker's agency is determined not only by personal resources of self-satisfaction but also by 'the moral quality of social relationships' as well as by the mutual recognition and respect which the community of informal workers is able to provide (Hill, 2010, p. 116). In this vein, it could be seen that the self-satisfaction among Ašmjany traders, which was explicitly presented in some interviews and implicitly embedded into the logic of traders' actions, is caused not only by women's financial achievements but also by their social ties with other traders who find themselves in a similar situation. The last section elaborates on the importance and specificity of the community of Ašmjany traders as well as on the moral and material resources which this community provides to its members. Particular situations of border crossings where women's self-confidence was most vividly represented are also considered.

Constructing the Community: Boundaries and Solidarity among Shuttle Traders and Beyond

The heterogeneity of shuttle trade in Ašmjany makes it problematic to consider petty traders as a solid collective. Many traders are involved in this activity only occasionally. Some traders have permanent work positions in the state sector and an established professional identity, so they might never agree that they have something in common with petty smugglers, whose activity is seen as the most dubious and least legitimate one. Professional traders also tend to distinguish themselves from both casual and petty smugglers, considering the activity of the former as too unserious and of the latter as too suspicious. Nonetheless, approaching community as a group of people who '(a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups' (Cohen, 1987, p. 12), one can argue that petty traders form a particular community at least at some point during their informal practice.[15] As

15 Byrska-Szklarczyk (2012, p. 104) makes a similar conclusion in relation to 'ants' on the Ukraine–Polish border arguing that '[d]espite the significant diversity ants seem to be a community cemented by their identification with the region, homogeneity of actions, self-sufficiency and the awareness of being different' (Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2012, p. 104). The anthropologist also underlines that one of the most important features which makes petty traders a community is 'common experiencing of the border which shapes a specific perception of the world' (ibid.).

emphasized in Chapter 1, being invisible in the course of daily life in Ašmjany, traders, however, are highly visible at the moment of their shuttling between the town and the city of Vilnius. Sharing the common experience of border crossing under constant suspicion from border guards and customs officers, shuttle traders of different types express their solidarity and take part in specific ritual-like actions,[16] which make them recognizable and distinguishable from other people on a bus or a train. However, not only social interactions and common interests bind shuttle traders together but also their contraposition to 'outsiders' whether they are other passengers, border guards or the local population. Thus, two important processes should be regarded: firstly, how and why petty traders are connected to each other; and, secondly, how they are treated by others, or, to put it differently, how symbolic boundaries between shuttle traders and others are brought into being by 'the exigencies of social interaction' (Cohen, 1987, p. 12).

Solidarity between traders occurs on many occasions. When they smuggle cigarettes from Ašmjany to Vilnius or transport clothes and foodstuffs from Vilnius to Ašmjany, they rely extensively on each other's help. Smugglers, couriers and casuals usually travel in groups. Professional traders prefer to rely on themselves; however, they cannot completely avoid the assistance of others. The function of traders' cohesion is, foremost, rational. Petty traders need each other in order to succeed in their business. Important information circulates through word of mouth. Women who have crossed the border earlier on the same day report to others whether it is worth going and how favourable the situation on the border is. They also help each other hide cigarettes on a bus or a train. Travelling from Vilnius to Ašmjany, traders also take part in intense *exchange action*. Since the Customs Union regulations limit the number of similar goods which one can bring to Belarus across the border, petty traders prefer to mix commodities sharing them among each other. The exchange action means that one woman gives another two pairs of jeans, for example, and gets two packs of coffee in return. Participation in the exchange action is an obligatory practice for community members. Only outsiders (non-local passengers) can afford not to take part in it.

The exchange action, however, goes beyond mere rational functioning and possesses a meaning of symbolic action. It symbolically binds women into a distinguishable collective and provides them with a sense of commonality. Rationality does not rule women when they offer help to an unlucky counterpart who has been removed from a bus by customs officers for transporting too much (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, October 2010). Women readily take her stuff, even though at this moment their own success is at stake. They also cheerfully say,

16 I refer here to sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander (2006, p. 31) who argues that 'at both the micro and the macro levels, both among individuals and between and within collectivities, our societies still seem to be permeated by symbolic, ritual-like activities'. According to Alexander, ritual-like activities differ from traditional rituals in a way that 'they affirm validity and authenticity and produce integration [but] their effervescence is short-lived' (ibid.).

'Go with us next time, you will never have problems with us!' (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, October 2010).[17] The meaning of trips for community building is also supported by the fact that women use them as a socializing practice. After they have exchanged goods, they may have a bite to eat, which they share with each other, and occasionally some of them even have a drink. Meanwhile, they discuss their daily concerns such as the wedding of someone's son, a home loan, prices, currency exchange rates and so on. Women also talk about their (ex-)husbands, sometimes in very pejorative terms. Thus, the practice of socializing is highly female. The issues women discuss as well as the drinks and the food they consume (cheap sparkling wine and sweets) are to a large extent a part of a female daily realm where men may find themselves uncomfortable or even unwanted.

The participation of women in the symbolic actions of exchange and socialization has an important meaning for their feeling of mutual respect and support. Though those involved in petty trade often see it as a morally and physically harmful activity, it also provides participants with the sense of reciprocity and reliance which is achieved by female traders in the course of their collective trips. The solidarity between women at this moment influences women's perception of this activity. The satisfaction with the trade practice, and even more so with its social component, has been pronounced in several interviews and summarized by Vera (Interview 14, September 2012) who claimed, 'And we survive, and it is fun, and it is normal. And when you go back, you buy something there and you sip 100 grams and get a bite, well … '.[18]

However, the positive influence of petty trade practices on women's identity has been even more remarkable through the comparison of women's actions at the moment of cross-border trips and their behaviour in the more private situation of being interviewed. The most striking case in this regard is the case of Žanna, whose story is considered in Chapter 4. The difference between Žanna in the private environment of her apartment and Žanna while crossing the border was outstanding. In normal life, Žanna was a low-paid salesperson at a Vilnius supermarket. She did not speak Lithuanian fluently, though she had lived in the country for almost 30 years. Neither did she have a higher education. Hence, in Vilnius Žanna was disadvantaged. Žanna's social position was reflected in the way she talked about her life. She did not complain but tiredness and dissatisfaction was palpable during the interview. Žanna's manners and the way she represented herself differed substantially from her behaviour during the trips between Ašmjany and Vilnius. When Žanna appeared at the Vilnius bus station to take the bus to Ašmjany, she was not a poor uneducated woman who was stuck in a job position with no prospects. On the contrary, she was an active possessor of useful qualities and a professional in her business. Žanna always talked very loudly and in a commanding tone and in general behaved very confidently. She was courageous

17 *Ezdi s nami, s nami nikogda problem ne budet.*

18 *I vyživaem, i veselo, i normal'no. I edeš' nazad, i čto-to tam kupiš', i po 100 gramm vyp'eš', i zakusiš', tože.*

and creative to a certain extent. Once it was observed how Žanna pretended to be asleep when customs officers approached the train carriage. To make her sleeping more credible, she snored in a way people usually do when they imitate slumber (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010). It seemed Žanna used it as a spontaneous tactic to avoid questions on what she carried across the border.

Nevertheless, interviewing Žanna, it became clear that she actually did not have any kind of special knowledge or connections which would differ significantly from what other women told me about their experience. Žanna relied on the same resources and information as other women did. However, what really seemed to reinforce Žanna's self-confidence during cross-border trips was the support of her counterparts. Žanna, who experienced the lack of friends in her regular life in Lithuania, greatly enjoyed the company of women from her native town of Ašmjany. Literally celebrating the reunification with her counterparts through collective food and alcohol consumption, Žanna seemed to revel in escape from the routine and oppressive reality of her daily life which was so vividly represented when she was interviewed in her apartment. Thus, Žanna's – as well as other petty traders' – agency was manifested in these actions and was determined not only by financial satisfaction and a sense of control over the situation with the resources available but also by social ties and mutual support which women established and experienced through their participation in the trading practice.

Other passengers of cross-border buses or trains usually do not share the joys and sorrows of shuttle traders. Moreover, Ašmjany women are often considered to be an annoying attribute of border crossing; the *Ašmjanskaja cëtka*, the vulgar, impudent and tricky person who bothers other passengers by trying to involve them in informal practices. The passengers' engagement is another tactic to carry goods across the border without being caught. Ašmjany women usually resort to it on their way to Vilnius when they smuggle alcohol and cigarettes. In order to reduce the risk, they ask non-local passengers to take two legal packs of cigarettes and two vodka bottles with them through the customs control. Many passengers, however, refuse to take part in this action, since they see neither a reason to support smugglers nor do they want to have any additional trouble on the border (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010; August 2011). Petty smugglers indeed may sometimes act very annoyingly especially when they approach people more than once or react aggressively when their request is turned down (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, August 2011). At the same time, by refusing to help Ašmjany women, passengers establish a clear symbolic boundary 'which marks the beginning and the end of a community' (Cohen, 1987, p. 12) of shuttle traders. These symbolic boundaries are only strengthened at the moment of customs control when residents of Ašmjany are constructed as a particular group of border crossers by customs officials. If local and non-local bus passengers are mixed, customs officers may ask a driver how many Ašmjany people travel on the bus (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, March 2011). Otherwise, they just follow their idea about what Ašmjany petty smugglers should look like and inspect 50–70-year old women in modest clothes more scrupulously. When travelling with smugglers on a transit bus where local

and non-local residents were presented, customs officers who, it could be supposed, regarded me as a non-local person never inspected me.[19] However, when taking a local bus, my bag was investigated as carefully as the bags of other passengers from the town.

The symbolic boundary, which non-local but also some native people establish between themselves and petty traders, not only shapes the community of traders but also serves as a way of self-identification of those who cross the border regularly but do not belong to this community. For example, one employee of the Ašmjany museum was apparently quite negative about traders. When informed that this study was about the female informal economy, she sarcastically replied, 'Huh, that is how speculators are politely called today. Well-done, you found a good designation – informal economy' (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, August 2011).[20] At the same time, that woman herself went to Vilnius regularly but for personal needs, mostly shopping. Needless to say, her husband was a successful entrepreneur and the woman relied on his income substantially. Another example belongs to a different geographical context but is also revealing. In his media interview a Belarusian intellectual from Hrodna says,

> I often travel on a budget, on an electric train, so-called 'transformer' which is disassembled on the way to Poland and people put cigarettes into the walls. I do not see a lot of *Europeanized Belarusians* (emphasis is mine – O.S.) there. There are a lot of impudent faces of cross-border smugglers there who have very specific values (Šota, 2013).[21]

Defining petty traders and smugglers in negative terms such as *speculators* or *non-Europeanized* persons, 'outsiders' not only designate these people as a particular group whose practice of mobility differs from that which a local middle-class woman or a Hrodna intellectual themselves experience, they also contrast this practice to their own mobility which is seen as more appropriate and decent.

To conclude, it is worth stressing that no matter how *non-Europeanized* Ašmjany petty traders and their Hrodna counterparts may seem to a Belarusian intellectual, they are probably the most real agents of Europeanization from below for the local society. Intense human interactions between Belarusians and EU citizens, which are supposed to be achieved through the gradual visa liberalization, are seen as a

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19 When people pass customs control on their way to Lithuania by bus, they usually do not hold their passports. Passports are collected by border guards who check them separately and bring them back when the entire control procedure is over.

20 *Axa, èto tak segodnja spekuljantov vežlivo nazyvajut. Xorošo pridumano, xorošee opredelenie Vy našli - neformal'naja èkonomika.*

21 *Ja časta ezdžu takim bjudžètnym varyjantam, èlektryčkaj, transformeram tak zvanym, jaki raskručvajuc' pa daroze i ŭ sceny zapixvajuc' bloki cygarèt. Ja ne vel'mi šmat baču tam eŭrapeizavanyx belarusaŭ. Tam takija naxabnyja tvary peravozčykaŭ cygarèt, jakija, skažam, majuc' specyfičnyja kaštoŭnasci ŭ toj samaj Pol'ščy.*

core point of the Union's policy towards democratization in Belarus. Belarusian citizens have indeed received an outstanding number of Schengen visas in the last couple of years. As political scientist Kiryl Kascian (2013) argues, however, these quantitative changes do not necessarily bring qualitative ones. In this scholar's view, the question is whether 'this world's highest number of Schengen visas per person can be transformed into the increase of international and interregional contacts' effectiveness in business, culture, civic society and all other relevant spheres of life' or these visas are primarily used for more pragmatic reasons such as cross-border shopping, petty trading or smuggling (Kascian, 2013). Nevertheless, it is not completely clear from Kascian's arguments why the two ways of using Schengen visas which he distinguished should be necessarily seen as opposed to each other. From the bottom-up perspective, the contacts with the EU citizens as well as daily life observations, which shuttle traders experience in their practice, are no less relevant than those between businessmen, scholars or intellectuals. Petty traders indeed rarely bring ideas of human rights and democratic values on their way back from Lithuania, however, they are an important source of information on different aspects of everyday life in the neighbouring country – from what modern Vilnius looks like to the kind of social problems experienced by Lithuanian friends and relatives of the shuttle traders. Therefore, the pragmatism of Belarusians in EU countries which is regarded as a disreputable aim of cross-border mobility also deserves some attention from EU policy makers as well as from national pro-European elites. Female petty traders tend to criticize different sides of daily life in Lithuania from mass emigration to beggars whom they observe on Vilnius streets (Sasunkevich, Fieldnotes, September 2010; Anna, Interview 10, February 2012; Vera, Interview 14, September 2012). At the same time, they unequivocally praise costs on clothes and foodstuffs as well as the variety of choice of different commodities in the EU countries. In this sense, being unable to disseminate European democratic values, petty traders actively facilitate EU consumption patterns. Ašmjany inhabitants eat Lithuanian bread, Norwegian salmon, Polish cheese and German sweets, drink Finnish coffee, and wash their hair with German shampoo. All of these are obtained in French and Scandinavian chains of supermarkets which are as different from Ašmjany grocery stores as heaven and earth. This experience is no less important for the image of the EU among ordinary Belarusians than that which different types of the non-state elites are supposed to produce.

Returning to the issue of attitude to petty traders in the town, it should be mentioned that women who do not have the opportunity to cross the border themselves appreciate the activity of traders. Except for smugglers, whose business does not bring any evident benefits to Ašmjany dwellers, other types of shuttle trade are seen as an important part of daily consumption in the town. The reciprocal benefits that were stressed by petty traders themselves but also by some of their customers (Focus-group discussion, February 2012) is key to understanding what this kind of informal economy means in the local context. Such interpretation of petty trade practices brings to the surface their social embeddedness into everyday life of the Belarusian provinces. It also undermines

a widespread idea about the female informal work which, being low-paid, is considered to be exploitative for women. Shuttle traders may indeed regard their activity in negative terms. However, its economic and social resourcefulness cannot be denied completely. Petty trade, on the one hand, allows Ašmjany women to cope with unfavourable life circumstances or help them improve their financial situation but, on the other hand, it also provides them with a sense of recognition by their 'colleagues' and the broader milieu of Ašmjany women who consume the goods which petty traders bring from Vilnius. Shuttle trade is also a remarkable experience for older women, who consider this activity as a way to add supplementary income to their pensions (especially for widowed women) but also as an opportunity to socialize with other people – something that may be in deficit for retired women. Thus, the case of Ašmjany women demonstrates the complexity of reasons why women are involved in informal economic activities as well as the duality of how they experience this involvement and what they gain from it. In this sense, it would be interesting to investigate a broader context of these practices, which are not necessarily connected to cross-border economic activities and border regions. Therefore, further empirical and analytical studies of Belarusian women's strategies to cope with the specificities of the labour market and gender segregation which exists in the country are needed.

Conclusions

This chapter has returned the reader to the contemporary situation in which cross-border petty trade practices exist in Ašmjany. Since shuttle trade appears to be a predominantly female economic activity, this particular case is used to draw a broader picture about why women resort to this practice, which resources they possess and how general social processes and gender segregation of the labour market in Belarus determine women's engagement in shuttle trade. Two main sets of reasons why women get involved in trading as well as other informal economic practices are considered.

On the one hand, unfavourable economic conditions force Ašmjany women to find additional sources of income. Shuttle trade, being the most popular due to the border proximity, is but one of the most common informal practices in the border region. The economic necessity of getting involved in informal activities is determined by two interrelated phenomena – the gender segregation of the labour market and the prevalence of the two-breadwinner model in the Belarusian economy and the lack of men determined by shorter life expectancy, high level of mortality and alcoholism among the male population of the country. In such circumstances women are often the only breadwinners in their families who take care of children, the household and other family members, such as elderly parents in particular. The family status of the respondents, at least half of whom were divorced, widowed or single, illustrates this social tendency. Therefore, to be involved in any kind of informal economic activities such as petty trade,

smuggling, private teaching or land cultivation is a norm rather than exception for Ašmjany women and is driven by economic reasons.

On the other hand, trying to overcome their unfavourable life conditions women often resort to the resources which are available to them from their daily life experience. In this sense, petty trade is understood as the extension of female responsibility for everyday consumption and family provision. Moreover, to implement their trade activities women often rely on social networks, which are also accessible to them through their work and life experience. Women also exploit their 'female' resources such as crying or begging when they carry goods across the border. Such behaviour might be seen as inappropriate for men who would most likely use other strategies to handle difficult situations with border guards and customs officials. However, to make a confident conclusion on this aspect comparative studies of male and female practices and strategies are needed.

Women's creativity and readiness to turn the assets they possess to their advantage can be seen as a part of their agency, which is understood as a skill to find a way to fit into a particular social situation. The feeling of capability in dealing with the situation provides women with a sense of self-confidence and satisfaction. This feeling is also supported by reciprocal relations among petty traders, which are especially intense during border crossings. In order to carry goods across the border women take part in ritual-like exchange actions, which not only help them deal with customs limitations but also provide the traders with the sense of mutual support and solidarity. While female petty traders have various social and professional backgrounds in their regular life, during the border crossing they form a bonded community whose collective identity is constructed as a contraposition to the identities and behaviour of other passengers. At such moments social boundaries between Ašmjany shuttle traders and other cross-border travellers are constructed with full intensity. In this sense, social boundaries determine not only *selective openness* of political borders but also the difference in people's experiences while they cross them. The way in which people are treated by border guards and customs officers as well as the aim with which people cross borders is an important experience of differentiation and perception of global inequalities determined, among others, by the regimes of political borders.

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Conclusion

The main aim of this research was to reconstruct the continuities and discontinuities in the practices of daily life which ordinary people from the Belarus–Lithuania border region had experienced during the more than 20-year history of the border's existence. Despite the changes in the border regime in the direction of its gradual strengthening, the persistence of shuttle trade practices throughout the whole period is remarkable. Shuttle trade, which had historically appeared as people's response to the Soviet economy of deficit and, later, to the post-socialist transition, turned out to be not just a contemporary activity people had resorted to in order to cope with economic hardship but a steady daily practice in the post-socialist region. While today's importance of shuttle trade can be less perceptible in post-socialist capital cities, some of which have developed into global metropolises, on the border peripheries cross-border petty trade continues playing an important role. Moreover, borderlands as spaces where practices of shuttle trade remain highly visible undermine the dichotomy between the centre and periphery. In some sense, the inhabitants of Ašmjany are probably to a greater extent the dwellers of the global village than other Belarusian citizens living outside of the border region. It is ordinary Ašmjany people who bring grains of global consumption from neighbouring Vilnius to their place of origin. And they are the ones who tell their counterparts unbelievable stories of 20-euro airplane tickets to European cities, which they mainly hear about from their Lithuanian relatives.

Notwithstanding the temptation to see petty traders as the agents of globalization, their experience of cross-border mobility remains highly rooted in the locality and rarely extends beyond the Belarus–Lithuania border region. The perception of Vilnius as a native city and as a part of daily life practices, which Ašmjany women expressed in their narratives, has nothing to do with the global elites' experience who are equally at home in New York, London or Singapore. Rather, Ašmjany women's attachment to Vilnius dates back to the Soviet period when the border between the two Soviet republics did not exist in the region and when people indeed commuted to the city on a daily basis. The mobility euphoria, which the fall of the Iron Curtain was supposed to bring to people, found little response in the narratives of Ašmjany women. On the contrary, their stories constantly returned to the feeling of loss and regret, even though some of them continued enjoying their regular trips to Vilnius.

The embeddedness of people's mobility into the local experience is also determined by the fact that throughout the border history local people who were born in the region have been more likely to get a permit to cross the border freely in comparison with those who resettled to Ašmjany at some point of their life history.

Most petty traders who have continued going to Vilnius even after Lithuania accepted the Schengen *acquis* are of local origin. Not only does Soviet-time mass migration from Ašmjany to Vilnius matter here but also a more general history of this region connected to the Polish and Catholic Church influence. In this sense, a highly educated upper-middle class woman who moved to Ašmjany from Russia is less privileged from the point of cross-border mobility than a locally born schoolteacher who obtains her Schengen visa thanks to belonging to a Catholic Church parish or a non-educated market trader with a Polish Card. However, again, the opportunity of cross-border mobility that people possess due to their origin is primarily used for trips to neighbouring Vilnius. Therefore, in applying for visas, people aspire to compensate for what they lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely their regular trips to Lithuania.

Origin is but one social characteristic which the cross-border mobility of people in the region is based on. Polish ethnicity also plays an important role notwithstanding that Ašmjany is located in the Belarus–Lithuania border region. Borderlands are often considered to be places where ethnic boundaries are more pronounced and visible than in the hinterland. Ethnic boundaries, however, are not just a symbolic construction of differences between various ethnic groups but also a substantial ground for the strengthening of social boundaries. As Lamont and Molnár (2002, p. 169) argue, 'symbolic boundaries can be thought of as a necessary but insufficient condition for the existence of social boundaries' which are seen as social differences determined by unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources. In this sense, the unequal access to cross-border mobility, which in the local context varies across different types of symbolic distinctions such as ethnicity or confessional belonging, may be seen as a mechanism which turns symbolic boundaries into social ones. In other words, by regulating access to mobility, the regimes of political borders are not simply built on the existing social differentiation among people but also bring this differentiation into existence, strengthening social boundaries between people. As stressed in some of the interviews, people who could not cross the border freely felt less privileged in comparison with those who could. Therefore, the social boundaries which political borders stimulate are not just a matter of theoretical suggestions, but the actual experience of the Ašmjany people.

Nevertheless, the social functioning of the political border has an ambiguous meaning for the inhabitants of the Belarus–Lithuania borderland. In the particular case of the Ašmjany women involved in cross-border petty trade, the selectivity of the border regime is an advantage and disadvantage simultaneously depending on the visa status those women have and the type of shuttle trade they operate. While for professional traders who have enjoyed their stable visa status throughout the entire border history, the filtering function of the border has turned out to be an important resource of business profitability; casuals whose visa conditions have been precarious have considered the border as a barrier. Moreover, the border regime can be favourable or, on the contrary, hostile to the same people during different periods of history. As the example of the aged women demonstrates, age,

which was a resource of cross-border mobility during the second period of the border history (1994–2007), has become an obstacle on the way to this mobility in the Schengen era. Although Schengen *acquis* does not contain any restrictions concerning cross-border mobility of aged citizens from third countries, it does not take into consideration the specificities of this mobility and the difficulties which aged people can experience on their way to obtain a visa. In this sense, political borders may strengthen social boundaries unintentionally when the documents which establish border regimes are developed without careful consideration of the specificities of particular countries and even particular regions.

The negative attitude towards the border that Ašmjany women (including those who openly admitted the importance of the border existence for their business) expressed in the interviews demonstrates how painful the border experience turns out to be for the local people. The inhabitants of the region who were used to crossing the border freely have still not entirely accepted the border's existence. The number of illegal border crossings by the local population dropped significantly in the early 2000s. However, the readiness with which people start operating informal and illegal cross-border activities allows one to consider them as a kind of circumventing experience that not only brings economic advantage but also provides people with moral satisfaction and a sense of victory over unfavourable and unfair conditions. Applying Michel de Certeau's ideas to the analysis of informal economic activities under post-socialism, Round et al. (2010, p. 1198) argue that from the point of de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics (the approach which has been used for understanding shuttle trade in this study), multiple informal economic activities can be regarded as 'spaces of resistance and coping tactics' in response to different types of marginalization. The reasons for this marginalization can be very different and should not be necessarily determined by low income or poverty. People may feel disappointed by the lack of consumer variety, high taxes and the border existence. Therefore, the persistence of shuttle trade practices on the Belarus–Lithuania border can be regarded as people's response to the general dissatisfaction with the changes which the border brought into their daily life. The aspiration to cope with this dissatisfaction is especially palpable through the case of casuals, for whom petty trade is not so much about economic profitability but rather about the continuation of the tradition of daily consumption oriented towards Vilnius.

The understanding of shuttle trade as an economic activity, which, nevertheless, is socially embedded into the daily life of the border region, raises the question of permanent and temporal elements of this activity throughout the history. As this, as well as other studies demonstrate, the motivation to operate petty trade can vary throughout different periods. Although economic profitability always lies behind people's decision to start this activity, it is not necessarily a survival strategy for people. For example, for spontaneous traders of the Soviet era shuttle trade was primarily an opportunity to cope with the Soviet shortages in basic goods such as proper clothes, for post-Soviet shuttle traders of the early 1990s trade became a survival activity. However, even when economic necessity started

playing a less pronounced role in the region, shuttle trade hardly disappeared, as the contemporary development of petty trade practices on the Belarus–Lithuania border (and also other post-socialist borderlands) shows. Another changing element of shuttle trade is the goods which are carried across the border. People's decision to trade in particular products depends substantially on the price situation in the neighbouring country and the country of their origin as well as on the price differences between the countries. For instance, shuttle trade in Belarusian foodstuffs at Vilnius markets, which had blossomed in the Belarus–Lithuania border region during the early 1990s, gradually disappeared over time. Moreover, today, on the contrary, many food products are brought from Lithuania. The same concerns, such popular smuggling items as cigarettes and alcohol, which in the early 1990s were brought to Belarus from the neighbouring country instead of being carried to Lithuania. Shuttle trade also varies in relation to the people who implement this practice. As the history of the phenomenon on the border between Belarus and Lithuania demonstrates, this aspect strongly depends on the border regulations and the *selective openness* of the border.

However, in spite of the changes which shuttle trade has undergone throughout its history there are several principles of this activity which have remained persistent through different periods. Since these principles do not depend on the favourable circumstances of particular moments in time, they can be considered to be the core of shuttle trade practices. The first principle is organizational. It concerns the ways in which shuttle trade has been organized at different phases of the border's existence. Notwithstanding that the scale of this activity and the financial profit it has brought might have varied substantially, the basic idea about shuttle trade as the exploitation of differences in prices through spatial mobility has persisted. The unpretentiousness of the method of gaining some economic profit from cross-border mobility may also explain why shuttle trade has turned out to be such a widespread economic activity in the region. The readiness with which Ašmjany women have been getting involved in petty trading during different periods underlines the taken-for-granted character of this activity for the inhabitants of the border region. The integration of shuttle trade into daily routine can be regarded as the second persistent principle of this activity. While the economic necessity seems to have a more temporal meaning and was especially visible during the first period of the border history, the casual aspect of the trade when people start operating it when they have an accidental opportunity to do so has been observed through the whole history of petty trade practices in the region.

The tactical rather than strategic character of cross-border petty trade activities brings to the surface the third principle of this practice connected to its economic profitability. Since many interviews demonstrate that people often do not put any effort into trade planning, it is important to underline that petty trade profitability has been mainly based on traders' capability to apprehend particular disadvantages which other people in the region have experienced. The most evident example here is cross-border mobility. Shuttle traders who bring goods from Vilnius play primarily on people's incapability of going to Lithuania themselves due to

border regime restrictions. Those who carry cigarettes to Lithuania exploit the same resource. People who buy Belarusian goods or gasoline cannot cross the border themselves since the Belarusian border is no less persistent for them than the Schengen one for Belarusian citizens. Therefore, the border's existence and, more importantly, the filtering function of the political border can be seen as the third core principle of shuttle trade as an activity which is operated spontaneously and over short distances. Even in the 1990s when shuttle trade was a mass activity and the border remained porous, the border still played a role in the development of this 'business'. Since the newly emergent border was usually crossed in specific places, which mostly local people were aware of, the residents of Vilnius who were the main customers of Belarusian shuttle traders might have had no idea of how to go to Belarus on their own in order to obtain the goods they bought from traders. It is noteworthy that selling Lithuanian goods to Ašmjany dwellers was not mentioned at all in relation to that period since local people had been still able to visit Vilnius themselves and to buy what they had needed there.

The gender disparity of cross-border petty trading also appears persistent. No matter which period the respondents implemented their activity, they were univocal in answering the question on who – men or women – prevailed in this practice. Women prevailed in the trade in foodstuffs and clothes as well as petty smuggling of cigarettes, medicine and alcohol throughout the more than 20-year history of this phenomenon in the Belarus–Lithuania border region. The embeddedness of this activity into daily life in the region and its spontaneous character explains to a greater extent why women started this practice more willingly. Except for professionals, other groups of traders did not possess any particular resources but rather tried to gain something from what was available to them from their everyday experience. Besides such resources as the knowledge of prices on basic products and the intuition for goods in demand based on women's responsibility for daily consumption of the entire family, women also relied on the network of their friends, colleagues or neighbours to operate trading activities. The meaning of networks was twofold. On the one hand, women used them to distribute goods they brought from Ašmjany or Vilnius. On the other hand, many shuttle traders preferred to travel in groups since by doing so they were more confident in the success of their activity. Some women started operating their trade precisely through accompanying their female friends or relatives who did not want to travel on their own and preferred to have some company during trips between Ašmjany and Vilnius. In some cases the relations among women which emerged in the course of trading activities extended beyond 'professional responsibilities' and grew into friendship. Therefore, the women often referred to their shuttle trade experience as not only to a physically and morally exhausting economic activity but also as to the means of socializing and getting new experience.

The peculiarities of the case-study research limit the possibilities of generalization. However, the theoretical approach to cross-border petty trade activities on the EU external borders that this book is based upon allows other scholars to implement it in the analysis of similar practices in other border regions.

The diachronic and synchronic analysis of shuttle trade in a particular locality sets up a new research perspective which can be useful for comparing different borderlands and figuring out which processes described in the book are universal for every border region and which are deeply embedded into their historical and cultural specificities. As this research demonstrates, no matter how global the village we live in at present is, the local experience may play a significant role for such an important attribute of globalization as transnational cross-border mobility. Therefore, it would be interesting to see to what extent the development of other borderlands support or challenge this idea. Hence, there is a need for comprehensive historical case studies of how *selective openness* of political borders works in other regions and what people may gain from the ambiguities of border regimes.

Appendix
Social Characteristics of the Respondents

		Age	Education	Family	Type of trade	Formal job	Visa situation	Place of the interview
1	**Elena**	41	University	Single, lives with mother	Casual	School teacher	Schengen visa (obtained with a help of the Roman Catholic Church)	Work place (school)
2	**Galina**	46	University	Single, lives with parents	Casual	School teacher	Polish Card	Work place (school)
3	**Irina**	mid-40s	College	Married w/ no children	Casual	Temporary unemployed	Polish Card	Interviewer's accommodation
4	**Natalija**	74	College	Married w/ two adult children	Casual	Retired	No visa, used to go to Vilnius when the border was porous	Respondent's apartment
5	**Marina**	45	University	Married w/ three adult children	Professional	Entrepreneur/ School teacher	Polish visa	Work place (Ašmjany market)
6	**Valentina**	77	College	Married w/ adult son	Casual	Retired	Visa for people over 65 (until 2003)	Respondent's apartment
7	**Olga**	65	College	Widowed w/ adult children	Professional	Entrepreneur	Visa for close relatives of Lithuanian citizens	Respondent's house
8	**Nina**	78	Secondary school	Widowed w/ no children	Casual	Retired	Visa for people over 65 (until 2003)	Respondent's apartment
9	**Julija**	25	University	Married w/ no children	Smuggler	Student, part-time job in private sector	Residence permit in Lithuania, Belarusian citizenship	Public space in Vilnius
10	**Anna**	46	University	Divorced w/ a 6-year-old son	Casual/ Professional	Low-rank administrator at school	Visa for attendance of cultural and sport events	Work place (school)
11	**Anastasija**	40	Secondary school	Married	Professional	Entrepreneur	Polish Card	Work place (Ašmjany market)
12	**Jadviga**	80–82	Secondary school	Widowed w/ adult children	Casual	Retired	Visa for people over 65 (until 2003)	Respondent's house
13	**Žanna**	55	Secondary school	Divorced w/ adult children	Courier, Smuggler	Salesperson at a supermarket	Lithuanian citizenship, Belarusian multiple-entry visa for people of Belarusian origin	Respondent's apartment
14	**Vera**	47	Secondary school	Married	Casual	A worker at a state enterprise	Visa for close relatives of Lithuanian citizens	Public space in Ašmjany

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Index

page numbers **in bold refer to figures*