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Transformation of the 'University-in-Exile': Academic Identity of the Scholars from European Humanities University (EHU)

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The rapidly changing educational environment transforms the nature of academic work and poses challenges to identity of academic professionals. However, little attention is paid to self-identification at the universities that exist in complex political or social context. The analysis of European Humanities University (EHU), a Belarusian 'university in exile' in Lithuania, aims to cover this gap. Its activities of a private Lithuanian university and the only university in Belarus, oriented at liberal civic education, prompted the research question: how do EHU scholars construct the identity of the university and that of themselves as academic professionals? Basing on narrative analysis of academicians' professional lives, I applied Jenkin's (2008) concept of 'three orders' to differentiate between individual, interaction and institutional levels of identity discovered in the course of the interviews.

Empirical analysis revealed that politicized existence in the contexts of two countries made fragmentation a distinctive feature of the EHU identity. It appeared in several identity binaries drawn from scholars' accounts – EHU as (1) a political and educational 'project', as (2) a university 'integrated' into Europe and 'isolated' in Lithuania, as (3) an 'academic community' and a 'family business'. Secondly, the spirit of liberal academic community became the core of collective identity of interviewees, and the loss of it in Lithuania resulted in an identity crisis of the academics. Finally, professional stories showed the diversity of responses to this identity crisis. While some still found EHU a better place to develop an academic career in comparison to other Belarusian universities, others preferred to distance themselves and find new ways for asserting their academic identity.

This research aims to contribute to the studies on academic identity in the context of Eastern Europe and calls for more attention to the analysis of political and social context in higher education studies.

1. Introduction

Rapid changes in educational systems have significantly challenged the identity of academics in the contemporary university. Since the 1980s, external trends in higher education of Western countries and respective changes in academic daily life inevitably influenced scholars' understanding of their position in academia. Under the government and market pressure, the universities have been increasingly pushed to combine roles of public entities and business enterprises at the expense of their traditional autonomy. They started to resemble the latter in management, efficiency, and the tendency to streamline activities, while orienting at research areas prioritized by the state (Henkel, 2005: 163). Moreover, influence on the part of the state ('politicization') and the market ('commercialization') lead to a drift towards external control and became a prerequisite for research to be evaluated as relevant and high-quality (Becher & Trowler, 1996: 168-169). To secure a place in the new competitive environment, universities engaged in identifying external groups of stakeholders and establishing partnerships with them (Jongbloed et al., 2008: 304). The new policy also had profound implications at the micro-level, specifically, led to changes in basic academic beliefs and values (Ylijoki, 2005: 557). Academics continued to advocate the value of self-defined and self-directed research and the recognition within professional community rather than with external groups (Henkel, 1997: 142). Scholars started to perceive a 'schism' between the ideal versions of themselves, their employment institution, and their profession, and the real ones.

The concept of identity becomes an important tool for analyzing how academicians can assert their professional 'self' in the context of policy and organizational changes. Addressed in a number of studies, this context was especially challenging for local niche universities and colleges and forced them to shift from their regional and teaching-oriented identity towards a more prestigious status of a national (research) university, a phenomenon known as the so-called 'institutional striving' (O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011). However, such institutional change is not always compatible with the academicians' interpretation of the aim, mission, culture, and working life of their institution – which can potentially lead to conflicts between academic staff and managers (Gioia et al., 1994).

For example, in Rush and Wilbur's case-study of a business college, its striving for status and prestige through accreditation led not only to changes in working life of academics towards more research and teamwork, but was also accompanied by contradictive fragmentation of staff into those able to do research and those not. Moreover, institutional change can be linked to attempts of senior managers to redefine power relations at the university and authorize a new version of identity. A unilateral decision to shift from 'traditional, teaching-oriented and parochial institute' to 'modern, research-led university with a national profile' could come into conflict with academic staff's vision of university identity (Humphreys & Brown, 2002).

Identity of academics from the universities placed in specific ethnic, racial, or political context presents another puzzle. One of such examples is provided in Gonzales's study of the 'mission creep' of one of regional US universities which experienced organizational change from a regional teaching-focused university to a research vanguard (Gonzales, 2013). The change, albeit an ambitious one, faced resistance on the part of faculty members who saw it as inconsistent with the SWU identity of a border university and an access point for local underprivileged Hispanic students.

In scholarly literature, little is said about changing identities of academicians from CIS educational systems. One of the recent studies on academics from one regional research university in Russia demonstrates no specific pattern of academic identity construction under the new national policy of raising global competitiveness of domestic research. For some, increasing workload and requirements became a chance to be introduced to the international academic community. For others, the experience was related to physical and mental burnout (Anikina et al., 2020). Unexpectedly, some references to identity issues can be found in literature on academic freedom, since what is perceived as an assault can lead scholars to better articulation of what constitutes the values and meaning of academic work for them personally. Some findings show that a scholar's disciplinary domain (disciplinary identity) is not such a strong aspect for shaping their personal sense of academic freedom as their affiliation with a specific university (organizational identity) (Potapova, 2019). Other studies even show that organizational identity is not only related to a specific university, but to the philosophy of being in academia. This ideological division in Russian social sciences represents two groups of universities and employees of these universities, one of which is committed to advanced research methodology, international contacts, and non-conservative political views (e.g. liberal or leftists) while the other part is present mainly in regional/national research and is explicitly supportive of the official political course (Dubrovskiy, 2019; Sokolov & Titaev, 2013). The case of Belarusian academia, which will be discussed below, is even more representative in this sense. Hence, it is possible to claim that academic identity might be consolidated around ideological affiliation of the university the scholar is employed in.

In this paper, the case of a university where organizational change was accompanied by constraints of socio-political situation is represented by European Humanities University (EHU), a private Belarusian university that moved to Lithuania in 2005 as a result of a conflict with Lukashenka's government. In Belarus, EHU scholars comprised a small community which positioned itself as completely different from other universities – methodologically, professionally, and ideologically (Semenov, 2005: 119). It presented itself as an elite, merit-based university keeping up with the European research agenda and advocating for liberal and democratic values, thus comprising an "alternative symbolic space… outside of official [Belarusian] academia" (Gapova, 2009: 282). In the context of Belarusian academia of mid-2000s, the divisions between "state-led" and "non-governmental" research

institutions were even deeper than in Russian academia. Notwithstanding the problems specific for each of the groups, identification with one of them automatically meant total disregard towards the colleagues from the other one:

> "The Belarusian community of political scientists consists of autonomous, weakly interactive elements. The composition of participants in research seminars and conferences crucially differs depending on the organizer. In the annual report of the Belarussian Association of Political Science, you would not find the names of those who work at independent research centers... In return, non-governmental Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian colleagues 'forget' to invite those distinguished coryphées … who hold degrees in official political science" (Naumova, 2010).

In 2004, the Ministry of Education tried to replace EHU's rector with an appointed person, which resulted in a conflict over institutional autonomy and finally led to withdrawal of EHU's educational license. EHU was re-opened in Lithuania as a 'university in exile' backed up by international donors. Until now, the university exists both as an educational entity and a symbolic alternative to the educational and political model of Belarus.

When fleeing from their home country, EHU teaching staff found it challenging to combine European educational requirements with orientation at educating Belarusian students. In its capacity of a Lithuanian university, EHU tried to maintain its public presence in Belarus, albeit its relations with Belarusian civil society and academia remained ambiguous. The second challenge came from exposure to more competitive European research and educational environment. These problems of EHU's politicized existence have led to significant changes in the organizational life of the university and the scholars' understanding of work at EHU, which put the question of "how to sustain its [EHU's] unique sense of mission as a free Belarusian university, while also adapting to the realities of the higher education market in Lithuania and the policy mandates of the European Union" on the agenda (Johnson & Tereshkovich, 2014: 246).

The above prompted the research questions of this paper:

1) How do EHU scholars construct the identity of a 'university in exile' and themselves as academic professionals?

2) How do identity perceptions influence professional trajectories of EHU scholars?

The outline of the paper is structured as follows. The first chapter introduces a theoretical framework and provides a brief literature review on academic and university identity. The second chapter describes the research design of the paper, describes the data collection process based on eighteen interviews with EHU scholars, and provides a brief description of EHU development in Belarus and Lithuania.

The third chapter presents empirical findings based on Jenkin's concept of 'three orders', which enables us to define several binaries of the EHU identity constituted in national and organizational context (Jenkins, 2008: 41-45). The scholars' reflections on their professional development at EHU helped to reveal their vision of the ideal university. The final part provides an overview of professional strategies of EHU scholars, which demonstrates how scholars'

constructions of their identity impact their personal actions. The conclusion links empirical findings with the theoretical framework and demonstrates future prospects for research.

1.1. Theoretical framework

Identity is a cross-cutting concept in social sciences, which found appreciation in numerous disciplines from psychology to political science. It integrates both micro- and macro perspectives where the meaning of self can be articulated and reproduced in social interactions.

This paper relies on the minimal definition of identity by sociologist Richard Jenkins: "identity' denotes the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities" (Jenkins, 2008: 18). Since the need to highlight similarities and differences arises both at micro- and macrolevels, the reference to the concept of identity could be found in different disciplines.

Group identities are inherently a product of *collective internal* definition based on similarity-difference distinction. An important implication is that membership simultaneously generates identification of 'others' who do not belong to the group and shape relations with them (Cohen, 2008: 105). A metaphor of 'community' which is often applied to collective identity touches upon the internal dimension of membership that refers to signs of identification, such as symbols, beliefs, and ideologies. Altogether it contributes to a community's distinction from other groups and provides the group members with a sense of self (Cohen, 2008: 16-17). Moreover, symbolization is what facilitates a similar 'sense of things' among its members, which is supposed to be different from elsewhere. A shared symbolic domain whether in the form of artifacts, signs, shared concepts, or language used to produce and reproduce the knowledge about collective identity is mental constructs to which people are committed. Albeit the meaning of community is inherently local, technological changes made it applicable to different collectives: community of interests, religious communities, occupational communities, and so on, which supports the argument that in times of diminishing face-to-face communication physical interaction is less important for sustaining a community than the symbols shared by its members (Calhaun, 2019: 118).

Another question lies in the position of an individual who participates in construction of collective identity and asserts one's own by means of it. However, shared collective identity does not invoke homogeneity in interpretations: members of one community can react similarly to some phenomenon while keeping different interpretations of it. In their turn, interpretations are produced not only in a specific social context, but in interaction within the community and beyond its boundaries (Cohen, 2008: 17-18). As summarized in a classical work of Berger and Luckmann:

> "the identities produced by the interplay of organism, individual consciousness, and social structure react upon the given social structure, maintaining it, modifying it, or even reshaping it. Societies have histories in course of which specific identities emerge; these histories, however, are made by men with specific identities" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

Other strands in identity theories also address the link between personal agency and the outside world. For example, structural symbolic interactionism sees society as a complex combination of groups, communities, and institutions, both cooperative and conflicting. Large-scale structures (e.g., class or gender), together with intermediary structures (e.g., school or neighborhood) influence the content and organization of individual identity. A person has multiple identities that are ordered in an identity hierarchy and can be referred to in specific situations. Personal commitment to a specific role is a source that makes one identity stronger than another one (Stryker, 2008). In contrast, the social identity theory highlights the importance of intermediary level between an individual and society, which is group identity. Internal hierarchy and power provide a structure that penetrates group relations, but attachment and self-definition shape a group identity that makes the structure alive. It is important that group identity is responsive both to power struggle inside the group as well as contextual factors, which accounts for identity change (Spears, 2011: 220).

To bridge the gap between different levels of identity construction, Jenkins provides a model which brings together different levels of identity analysis (Jenkins, 2008: 41-45). It consists of three 'orders': individual, interactional, and institutional. The individual order focuses on the cognitive construction of 'self' rooted in symbolic interactionism. A step further, the interactional order deals with the representation of 'self' to the external world and daily interaction with others, which sheds a light on interrelation between the self-image and the public image – we identify ourselves, identify others, and are identified by others. Finally, the institutional order is related to established patterns of actions, recognized by actors. Organizations represent the most advanced form of institutions – organized groups with a hierarchy of statuses and positions and labor division among members. Although collective identities are shaped in the process of interaction with others, the established network of membership positions inside them is what makes them stable and distinctive. This model goes in line with what Vignoles et al. defined as individual, relational, and collective:

> "irrespective of levels of content, any given aspect of identity can be viewed as defined by individual, relational, and collective as the subjective understanding or experience of individuals, as an interpersonal construction, and as a sociocultural product" (Vignoles et al., 2011: 9).

Two implications drawn from this section are important for the case analysis of this research. First, three levels of identity are also applicable to the study of the university, which can be treated (1) as a place where one academic trajectory develops, (2) as an organizational entity constituted in communication and power distribution of daily interactions, and (3) as a social actor influenced by political and cultural processes and embedded into the networks with other social actors. Secondly, the internal collective identity is not assigned, but symbolically

constructed: it is a community whose members share a common 'sense of things' and symbols (such as ideas, concepts, values) that help to assert one's group similarity.

1.2. Academic identity and university identity

Universities as study objects inspired social scientists to analyze their organizational identities starting from the 1960s (albeit the term itself was coined in 1985). Clark's writings pioneered in this field: his concept of 'organizational saga' refers to the institutional narratives about organizational history and culture shared by colleges' members, which help to boost organizational spirit (Weerts et al., 2014: 240). This emotional aspect is front and center to the 'saga' and plays an important role in the endurance of a university: 'institutionalized myth' is not only accountable for commitment of university members and a sense of community; it is a source of survival in turbulent times and a representation of the university's image to the outside world (Clark, 1986: 110).

Theoretical approaches to university identity followed the development of the general concept of organizational identity. Scholars distinguish strategic, cultural, and marketing approaches (Steiner et al., 2013). The strategic strand focuses on the implications that interaction with the external and internal environment had on the long-term development of the university (strategic level) as well as its daily activities (structural level). In its turn, the cultural approach is centered on how individuals perceive the university, its organizational culture, and symbols. In this approach, loyalty to or, vice versa, disagreement with the university's management, the scholars' ability to adapt to and accept the changes is what matters in the institutional development. The marketing approach emerged in the wake of the 'new managerialism' of the 1980s. Reflecting the need of universities to compete for funding, these studies analyzed university identity for marketing purposes and communication with resource providers.

Finally, proponents of the postmodernist approach to university identity reject stability and endurance of identity and instead claim it to be fluid and constantly changing. The perception of a university is under constant change as its members change their identity perceptions in interactions with each other. Hence, it does not make sense to focus on what constitutes identity. Postmodernists analyze the process of identity construction and reproduction through the use of language and other symbolic tools within an institutionalized setting (MacDonald, 2013). An example of practical application of the post-modernist approach to a study of higher education is provided in the article by Gioia et al. (1994). This ethnographic study of a public research university going through strategic change documented the process of how the university community adopted and internalized changes in the university strategy. Issues of meaning-making, symbols, and culture important in the constructivist paradigm and post-modernism are not reduced to solely internal identity formation: instead, identity is formed in the interaction between insiders and outsiders to an organization, which makes the latter a party of identity formation (Mills et al., 2005: 599).

Universities as organizations also act as sites for identification of their members. In Jenkin's model, an organization is the manifestation of institutional order, but it expands beyond it: an organization does not only draw a distinction between members and non-members, but also represents an established network of positions and statuses, which allows to distinguish members inside the organization (Jenkins, 2008). The task-orientated nature of organization is an aspect that organizes the identity of its members. However, individuals do not only assert themselves through membership, but also ascribe some stable characteristics to the organization. Following Albert's and Whetten's definition, organizational identity is "central, enduring, and distinctive features that distinguish it from other organizations", which allows to treat an organization as a solid social actor albeit constructed as social artefacts of human actions (Whetten, 2006: 220). Interestingly enough, the concept of organizational identity was drawn from the case of a university suffering from financial cutbacks: "what seemed to be a marginal budget cut by state legislators escalated into a full-blown crisis for the university, forcing it to define what it was and what it should be as an organization" (Stensaker, 2015: 106).

Identification with an educational institution is inherently linked to individual identities of academic professionals. The claim for special privileges and liberties, which is not a rare case in academia, points to the distinction that scholars draw between academia and other professional fields. Values of independent work, academic freedom, and professionalism comprise the core of academic identity; however, it is not organized exclusively around work discretion, since identity "can be interpreted as a sense of sameness and of being recognized by others of the same kind" (McInnis, 2009: 160).

In his classical work, Clark defined disciplines and institutions as the key structures that scholars tend to associate themselves with (Clark, 1986: 46). The disciplinary area and institutional affiliation constitute specific cultures, and membership in academia remains more emotion-laden and symbol-laden, with its special procedures, stable beliefs about profession and behavior, compared to state or business organizations. Altogether they provide a source which allows its members to interpret external tendencies and requirements in more or less same manner and communicate with the rest of society (Clark, 1986: 99). The metaphor of 'community' (disciplinary, university, or academic) remains stable in higher education as a reference point for identity and loyalty, thus, confirming that community as "a symbolic construct upon which people draw symbolically and strategically" (Kogan, 2000: 210).

However, scholars have multiple identities, apart from disciplinary or institutional ones. According to Välimaa, scholars are integrated into a system of smaller and larger reference groups which impact self-image and the sense of belonging (Välimaa, 1998: 132). These four groups include disciplinary (e.g., social scientists) and professional communities (all scholars of respective country), institutional communities (university members), and national communities. With this fragmentation of academic profession in mind, she suggests analyzing each specific situation basing on which identity aspects are of more importance (Välimaa, 1998: 133). To some extent, it is consistent with Sampson's bottom-up

standpoint on an individual in a globalized world, which possess multiple identities and which should be viewed as 'embedded' into a network of communities (Burr, 2006: 95).

Thus, theoretical and empirical studies support usefulness of the identity concept for understanding academics and universities. Two basic groups, disciplinary community and institution, are crucial in constructing the academic self and appear at interactional level, in daily professional life. However, the notion of 'embedded individual' remains true in relation to an individual scholar that belongs to various communities and shares multiple identities. At the organizational level, formal affiliation with a university and its culture that bonds its members allows to speak about organizational identity of the university.

2. Research design

2.1. Data collection

The data consists of 18 interviews with former and current EHU scholars, conducted between January and March 2020. Two of them took place in Russia, five in Belarus, three in Lithuania, and eight via Skype. The participants were contacted via e-mail; the snowball technique was employed to get the final number of interviewees.

Initial search of interviewees started from scholars that had held academic positions or had done a PhD before the university in Minsk was closed in 2004. The list of interviewees was further diversified by adding scholars who joined EHU after 2005 – e.g., after completing a Master at EHU. Among interviewees, five people are currently employed at EHU while others left the university in different years. In line with the university's focus on humanities and social sciences, the interviewees have background in philosophy (8), social sciences (5), law (1), cultural heritage (3), and history (1). The academic positions they hold now or held in the past vary from lecturers to the (vice)deans.

During interviews, the participants were asked to provide accounts of their professional lives at and after leaving EHU to see how their academic identity is represented in narratives. Questions posed to interviewees covered the following topics: the start of the job at EHU and the reasons to continue working after EHU closed in 2005 (if applicable), own professional development at EHU, personal stance on university development during their stay at EHU, the reasons to leave the university (if applicable) and further professional life. The final section of the interview did not contain any biographical questions: respondents were asked to reflect on the definition of academic freedom. This question was included for two reasons: first, the issue of academic freedom played an important part in the scholars' accounts, since the breach of the university's autonomy in 2004 triggered a conflict between EHU and Belarusian authorities, and re-opening in Lithuania symbolized the scholars' victory in the fight for academic freedom. Secondly, the question, which was not explicitly related to any personal story, could motivate interviewees to share their full-fledged speculations. The interview guide is available in Annex.

Each interview lasted 40-90 minutes on average. Due to the variety of backgrounds and professional stories, the time allocated for sections was distributed unevenly: in some interviews, the respondents paid more attention to the organizational life at the university, while others focused on their own professional story. The search of available information about academic biography of each interviewed scholar and respective adjustments to the guide preceded each interview.

The recordings were further transcribed and coded in MAXQDA. Each interview was thoroughly read and re-read and coded according to the interview guide. New categories also emerged in the process of data analysis. Apart from the content of the interviews, I analyzed figures of speech (adjectives, metaphors,

etc.) that scholars used to describe their feelings or give interpretations of some events. To capture how respondents understand EHU's identity, I identified frequent statements which scholars used to describe the topic.

Several research limitations should be taken into consideration. First, the sample is in no way representative of EHU staff composition. Second, the diversity of interviewees' backgrounds, positions, as well as current status (employed vs. dismissed) provided rich and nuanced data but made the findings challenging to generalize. However, generalization was not a goal of this research due to its contextual embeddedness.

All participants were informed about recording. All mentioned names were removed both from transcripts and the final paper. To protect the respondents' anonymity, the real names are not provided in this paper and their current affiliation is not specified. The indication of academic position at EHU and the interviewee's field of study are used to support quotes in the text.

2.2. Narrative approach to understanding identity

This research relies on interpretivism as a methodological approach which strives to discover meanings humans put into their own actions and the outside world: "this type of social science aims at understanding (verstehen) the motivations that lie behind human behavior" (della Porta & Keating, 2008: 26). Interpretivism seeks to find explanations from the agent's perspective rather than to identify causes that a researcher thinks to be objective. Interpretive research places the studied phenomenon within its cultural and situational context, which means rejection of predictability and hypothesizing, the premises on which positivism is built (della Porta & Keating, 2008: 26-27). However, the subjective and situation-driven nature of knowledge does not invoke mistrust to the holder of this knowledge; indeed, interpretivism provides more freedom than positivism as it shifts expertise from the researcher to the situational actor of the lifeworld (Yanow, 2006: 22).

Considering the role of cultural and political context in the identity construction, I applied the narrative method for data collection and analysis. The minimal definition of a narrative is "a construction, in speaking, of sequence or consequence" or in a more descriptive fashion – "a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Taylor, 2006: 97; Elliott, 2012: 281). In each case, a narrative represents a personal life story or a specific part of it in which past experiences constitute a plot of events. The importance of narratives in analyzing identity is undeniable. According to McAdam, identity represents a narrative: "an internalized and evolving story of the self that provides a person's life with some semblance of unity, purpose, and meaning." (McAdams, 2011: 100) Personal stories allow to understand people's experience and bridge the gap between a thought and an action since "narratives explain actions and practices by reference to the beliefs and desires of actors" (Bevir, 2006: 285). Finally, narratives provide a researcher with rich, nuanced, context-based information, in which presence of daily life became "less filtered" (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2006: 319).

From a constructivist standpoint, narratives cannot be treated as a plain source of information that mirrors 'reality' or a detailed description of events of one's biography. Rather they represent integrity of personal experience and meanings behind the experience: in Taylor's words, "the understandings of ourselves and others commonly referred to as 'identity' are equally "an artifact of communal interchange" (Taylor, 2006: 102). In their turn, produced and reproduced narratives about groups contribute to collective sense-making and provide a normative system of a community thus playing a role in group identity (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013: 1137). Organizations are not an exception in this sense, since people tend to identify themselves with their place of work. Given the power structure inside the organizations, identity narrative can be a result of interplay of politically motivated groups and individuals within the organization. At the same time, centrifugal forces inside organization resist to imposition of one single narrative by a power group, since "all participants in the organization have some capacity to read and author their own reality and thus oppose to centralizing impositions" (Humphreys & Brown, 2002: 424).

Apart from being a genre, a narrative also represents an approach in the domain of interpretivist research. This is reflected in Bamberg's definition that "narrative as a method implies a general approach that views the individual within their social environments as actively conferring meaning onto objects in the world, including others and themselves; the way this happens in everyday situations, as well as in interviews or surveys, is necessarily subjective and interpretive" (Bamberg, 2012: 87). Finally, a narrative encompasses a set of techniques, such as in-depth/semi-structured interviews or biographical interviews, which aim to overcome the tendency to de-contextualize content in narration and take a glance at personal meaning-making of experience instead (Bamberg, 2012: 89).

Hence, the strength of narrative approach to identity analysis is that it views a personal story as a construction of self and others in a specific social and cultural context. In this case study, the narrative approach was used to process professional biographies of EHU scholars drawn from semi-structured interviews to get a sense of how they construct the university identity, give interpretations to organizational events, and place themselves in it.

2.3. Case description

This section provides a brief overview of the history and context of European Humanities University in Belarus and Lithuania based on publicly available documents and media sources. It gives contextual information necessary for understanding of empirical findings.

Development of EHU in Minsk (1992-2004)

European Humanities University is a private university founded in Minsk in 1992 – in the aftermath of 'perestroika' that triggered deviation from the Soviet model of education. The idea of the university belonged to a small group of scholars from the philosophical faculty of Belarusian State University (BSU) who further took the lead at the EHU. By 2002, the university comprised eight faculties (philosophy, law, economy, arts, psychology, theology, IT, and political science) and ranked among the best Belarusian universities in social sciences and humanities (EHU. *15-year history of EHU European Humanities University. New History,* 2008). The university positioned itself as a body of "intellectuals, as a cultural mediator between East and West, and as a driving force for the integration of Belarusian academia into European discourses" (Gapova, 2009: 272). Exercising the two main principles – academic excellence and university autonomy – was possible thanks to generous support of European and US foundations (Gapova, 2009: 272). EHU became a flagship university joining Bologna system in 2002 (Belarus itself entered it in 2015).

The authoritarian tendencies of late 1990s-earlier 2000s (e.g., 2001 was marked with student protests against the second re-election of Lukashenka) had an impact on Belarusian higher education as well. The year 2004 was noticeable because of the crackdown on non-state and state educational institutions such as Belarusian Centre for Constitutionalism and Comparative Political Research, International Institute for Political studies, BSU International Humanities Institute, and Belarusian Humanities Lyceum (Pravozashchitnyj centr "Vesna", 2004). Officially, EHU was closed in summer 2004 after a long-lasting conflict with the Ministry of Education over rector's appointment. Reluctance of the EHU community towards replacement of the legitimate rector with a person appointed 'from above' resulted in difficulties with accreditation and final withdrawal of university status.

The university gave its students a chance to continue education in remote learning format with the help of around a half of EHU academics who continued to work at the university. In June 2005, the donors' conference in Vilnius passed a resolution to re-establish EHU in Lithuania and start studies in the fall of 2005. The re-establishment of the university was supported both by European countries and institutional donors, especially the Nordic Council of Ministers and the European commission (Dounaev, 2007: 500-502). In 2006, EHU got the status of a Lithuanian private university.

Development of EHU in Lithuania (2005-…)

In Lithuania, EHU retained its academic focus on humanities and social sciences. It represents a teaching- rather than research-focused university, which is also reflected in its mission: "Student-centered University for promoting civil society development through Humanities and Liberal Arts for students from Belarus and the region by bringing them together and offering international experience in study quality" (EHU Strategy 2019-2024, 2018). In 2014 and 2017, the university

did not pass accreditation and faced the risk of being closed. However, in 2019 Lithuania granted EHU a special status that exempted it from general rules applied to other Lithuanian universities (Belsat.eu, 2020).

As of 2020, EHU offers nine programmes in media studies, political science, cultural heritage, law, design, as well as a PhD programme in Philosophy (EHU. "Study Programmes", 2020). Most of the programmes are provided both in offline and online format. Following the period after re-establishment, the university experienced significant changes in the programme portfolio: one the one hand, it managed to revive (e.g., political science) or establish new programmes (e.g., visual studies) in Lithuania; one the other hand, some areas (e.g., philosophy, Belarusian studies) were excluded from the curriculum.

EHU remained a small university with the annual number of students never exceeding 2000 people. The enrollment rate shows significant negative dynamics: in 2010/11, it hosted 1900 students including 1180 distant learners, in 2014/15 – 1071 and 571 respectively, in 2017/18 – 812 and 417 respectively (EHU. Annual Report of European Humanities University for the Period October 1, 2010 to September 30, 2011). The donors' funding constitutes the major source of the university budget (up to 80%) while contributions from tuition fees make up the second largest source of EHU's revenues (20%) (Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education, 2017). The Nordic Council of Ministers which was a major donor terminated its mandate in 2016 due to the corruption affair over rector's expenditures and transferred it to Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) (Naviny.by, 2020).

In the current organizational structure, two bodies (the General Assembly of Part-owners and the Governing Board) represent the interests of donors. General Assembly of Part-owners (GAPO) is the EHU's highest decision-making body comprised of the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (Lithuania), the Eurasia Foundation (US), and the Open Society Foundations (US) (EHU. "General Assembly of Part-Owners", 2020). Strategic and financial management is exercised by the Governing Board. Rector and representatives of Rector's office are accountable to donors but, in fact, their stance on university affairs has a great influence on the Board's decisions. The President, who is also a de-facto member of the Board, is a position created specifically for first EHU rector that played and continues to play an important role in the university life (EHU. Statute as of July 25, 2019). The Senate is a collegial body of university staff that has an advisory voice in study and research policy (EHU. Statute as of July 25, 2019). Over the years, the Senate's membership and decision-making scope have been significantly reduced. Tensions between EHU scholars and the administration over participation in academic governance and status of teaching staff at the university resulted in conflicts that attracted media attention in different years (2009, 2014, and 2018).

3. Empirical findings

3.1. Identity binaries of the 'university in exile'

The very situation of the 'university in exile' that operates in Lithuania, targets students in Belarus but does not formally belong to Belarusian higher education, presents a complicated case for identity analysis. I apply Jenkin's framework of 'three orders' – three levels at which humans construct and experience the world around them (Jenkins, 2008: 39-46). The 'institutional order' that focuses on collective identification in a broader network of groups fits the analysis of how interviewees construct university position internationally and in Lithuania. The 'interaction order' conceptualized as "the human world as constituted in relationships between individuals" provides a way to analyze the impact of daily interactions and organizational transformations within the university (Jenkins, 2008: 39). Finally, the 'individual order', or how people construct their own identities in interaction with others, is essential for analysis of how the situation at the university changed their perceptions of their own academic identity. The next three subsections are organized into 'binaries' that reflect the extremes of the views in the interviews.

3.1.1. EHU as a political and educational 'project'

The first identity binary of EHU lies in the combination of an educational institution and a political initiative that became a distinctive organizational feature of EHU. *The political* in EHU history is not reduced to the conflict with the Belarusian Ministry of education that led to the university closing in 2004. In fact, its re-opening was financially facilitated by international involvement from the side of EU countries and foundations. Until today, support of donors comprises up to 75-80% of the university funds, which is a significant share of international funds channeled to Belarusian civil society. The contradiction between the *political* and the *educational* appeared in the very language of the interviews: frequently, the scholars naturally called EHU not a 'university', but a 'project'.

The two parts of the university identity seemed to be in conflict with each other, leading to disagreements over the university mission, its strategy, and the structure and content of the studies. What caused discrepancies in the interviewees' accounts was the question which of the two identity parts prevails:

> "Unfortunately, EHU is not academia in its conventional sense. EHU is a real **project**…. This is a project with very high goals, a very good idea, which is implemented very weirdly. And if you want to be in **academia**, this is, unfortunately, **just a waste of time**" (Lecturer, Social Sciences)

> "You know, this is our old discussion, i.e., they support us as a **political project**. [...] We always stress that we are an **educational project**, all in all. [...] In my opinion, I am sure that we are **a university**. A small one, of course, but we are a university basing on tasks we set in education, goals we want

to achieve, the way we work with the students – we try to preserve somehow this solid background, although it is very complicated in the contemporary educational system". (Professor, Philosophy)

A play of political and educational identities has a practical application in communication with external donors over funding. Basing on circumstances, it allowed to represent the university either as an alternative educational model for Belarus or as a democratization initiative. As for the financial situation, the narrative of financial constraints, 'commercialization', and interference of donors in the educational processes of EHU was a common topic in the interviews. Over time, the donors' funding became conditioned by the number of enrolled students, which led to the closing of some valuable, but unpopular programmes. It was painfully perceived by lecturers of the respective disciplines since the closing led to reduction of their workload and the essence of their work at EHU. As some shared, the issue of programmes' survival was not contingent on its research value or democratization potential, but tended to be a trade-off between the donors, the administration, and the academic staff:

> "I spoke up rather critically against those changes [...] due to the fact that they closed the [philosophical] faculty in 2011 – why? There were study programmes comparable to the programmes in political science and history in enrollment figures, but those were not closed. As it turned out, the donors favored more those in political science. And as for history, there was strong pressure from the Belarusian diaspora [...], and it was important to reduce criticism from the side of the 'third sector' and lobby of the Belarusian diaspora – EHU decided to strike such kind of deal". (Associate Professor, Social Sciences, Philosophy)

The topic of the university's ties with the Belarusian society was not referred to as frequently as the relations with donors, but remained an important identity issue and a justification of EHU's existence to some extent. On the one hand, the university was heavily criticized by Belarusian NGOs and media for the lack of clear value for Belarusian society. Indeed, physical absence of the university in Belarus coupled with competition among Belarusian NGOs for donors' funds ('conflict of interests of cosmic scale', as an interviewee put it) complicated the presence of EHU in Belarusian public life. Yet scholars asserted EHU value from a different perspective: it was EHU graduates that constituted the most important, although not clearly measurable contribution of the university to Belarusian society. Open and active EHU graduates were very different from graduates of other Belarusian universities and were welcomed by any employers in the home country. As one of the professors expressed it, "there is no EHU as an institution, but 'EHUdents' as graduates that do lots of interesting things there [in Belarus] – they are present".

Relations with Belarusian academia remained rather complicated, although interviewees did not look dissatisfied with this aspect too much. Formally, EHU was not a part of higher education in Belarus in its capacity of a Lithuanian private university. EHU scholars undoubtedly have to communicate with Belarusian colleagues, but could experience some ousting strategies at the institutional level: e.g, it was hard to combine positions both at EHU and another university and

more than hard to integrate back into Belarusian education after previous employment at EHU (this aspect will be addressed in section 3.3). Hence, EHU and Belarusian universities (at least, those focused on social science and humanities) represented two disciplinary, ideological, and even geographical communities with poor relations with each other.

To sum it up, the political and educational duality of EHU was an issue that both facilitated and complicated its relations with external stakeholders. The 'political face' of the university, important in terms of negotiations over funding, had negative implications for the educational value of the university and academic identity of the scholars. At the same time, lack of political impact was the very reason of EHU criticism from Belarusian civil society. However, for many scholars, the impact of EHU was unquestionable, albeit related to educational, rather than political identity of the university – the quality of EHU graduates. Relations with Belarusian academia remained deliberately underdeveloped.

3.1.2. EHU as an integrated and an isolated university

This section focuses on the country-level aspects of EHU life in Lithuania. Since 2006, the university is officially a part of the Lithuanian educational system, while its target audience comes predominantly from Belarus. 'Integrated into Europe, but isolated in Lithuania' is the second identity binary of EHU.

Compared to the situation in Belarus, EHU re-establishment in Lithuania opened more opportunities for individual and institutional development. For scholars, integration of EHU into Bologna system implied access to European projects, grants, and exchange programmes in partner universities. However, while scholars treated the university as a part of European education, they were more ambiguous about EHU position in Lithuanian academia. EHU's 'isolation' in Lithuania, as some described it, was an outcome of its status of the 'university in exile' and the circumstances of its re-opening. Apart from that, EHU found it difficult to comply with the Lithuanian standards – the fact that did not get enough understanding of Lithuanian authorities:

> "The system here operates pretty tough: first, there is such a body in Lithuania as the Centre for Control of Quality of Education, which, I think, has 'sucked all blood' from us. Because EHU is a very small university. It *was* very small, and it *is* very small now. We are absolutely unable to meet the requirements for academic efficiency or the number of specialists in one discipline when we create programmes, which any other large Lithuanian university meets easily". (Professor, Visual and Cultural Studies)

Two negative evaluations of accreditation authorities in 2014 and 2017 put the university under the threat of license withdrawal, which was resolved by the law that exempted EHU from standard accreditation procedures. However, some interviewees painfully perceived it as the new law that de-facto deprived EHU of the status of a 'normal' European university. Thus, a call for recognition of EHU 'specifics' was difficult to combine with recognition of EHU educational value:

> "We got an accreditation [and] a special status now: the Ministry of foreign affairs interfered, the Seimas [Lithuanian parliament] adopted a law, and the administration sees it as an achievement –as a researcher, as a person from academia, I see it rather negatively. It means we can now write whatever we want, publish it however we want, without thinking about academic quality, because the Seimas will support us, and the Ministry of foreign affairs will support us. It should not be so. **We are academia after all**: it is clear we are a political project, but… it is so often puffed out as if a wacky person boasts about something". (Lecturer, Political Science)

Albeit scholars were not very inspired about EHU's isolation in Lithuania, some interviewees implicitly justified explaining EHU distinctiveness from other universities in Lithuania. In such interpretation, EHU aims to educate Belarusian students and tries to preserve the link to the home country through Belarus-oriented topics and study programmes. Since the graduates are prepared and inspired to come back to Belarus, the study programmes fail to satisfy the Lithuanian job market – the situation that finds little understanding on the part of Lithuanian bureaucracy. Moreover, the process of 'lithuanization' [substitution of Belarusian staff with Lithuanian] taking place at EHU threatens its Belarus-focused research and teaching, since Lithuanians have no expertise in Belarusian language or context.

However, critical voices described this call for exceptionalism as a defense strategy – a result of inability to comply with neoliberal rules of Lithuanian higher education:

> "[...] the 'university in exile', in fact, gathered intellectual migrants, which came from a completely different country, from a completely different context, from the world of absolutely different cultural, educational, or other standards – they found themselves [...] in Europe. It means **competitors. Pragmatic. Technical. Transparent in something** […] It came to the situations of the 'outlaw', so to say: when a person de-facto drops out of the familiar context, and nobody offers them another one" (Associate Professor, Cultural Studies)

> "…neither the university administration, nor the academic community felt this very rapid transition of Lithuanian academia to neo-managerialism with all those things, [such as] Web of Science. [...] Thus, we have a wonderful project of the 90s with the infrastructure of the 90s and a wonderful family community that **did not survive in many aspects this neoliberal transit**". (Associate Professor, Social Sciences)

To sum up, the 'isolation' characterized EHU's status in Lithuania. On the one hand, it was an inevitable outcome of living in a foreign setting. On the other hand, scholars found it important to preserve EHU's isolation deliberately for the sake of Belarusian identity. Such perspective on isolation justified EHU's failure to fit into the rules of Lithuanian 'academic capitalism' and "transformation of universities through performance of management initiatives" (Cannizzo, 2018: 78).

3.1.3. EHU as a 'community' and a 'family business'

Moving from the 'institutional' to the 'interaction' order of university identity, it should be noted that changes in internal organizational environment of EHU was a topic that triggered the most emotional response of the interviewees. Since academic identity is first and foremost linked to a scholar's discipline and institution, it is no surprise that organizational changes that constitute everyday life of the academics have a profound impact on academic identity. At the level of interactions inside EHU, the main identity binary was the widening gap between scholars' vision of the university as an 'academic community' and its long-lasting drift towards a 'business enterprise'.

Regardless of background and academic position, most interviewees agreed that high level of solidarity and human capital was a distinctive feature of EHU in Minsk. In fact, solidarity and cooperation was a source that enabled survival of the private university under constant regulative pressure in Minsk and facilitated its quick re-establishment in Lithuania. They admitted that re-creation of programmes and faculties from 'scratch', notwithstanding financial and other constraints, would be impossible without enthusiasm of people committed to the idea of EHU as a small, democratic and high-quality university (Semenov, 2005)).

However, the "family" feeling at EHU started to evaporate several years after re-establishment with the growing division between the academic staff and the administration from among the same EHU academics. Formalization of organizational structure absent in Minsk made the scope of rights and duties shared between the Senate (academic governance), the Rector's office (the administration) and the Governing Board (donors) an issue of hot debates and protracted conflicts within the university. The long-lasting tendency to change power distribution in favor of the administration faced scholars' resistance, since the university's drift from an 'academic community' to 'managed academics' downgraded the status of academicians at the university. Moreover, it questioned the scholars' contribution to EHU re-establishment in Lithuania and the risks they took to work at a Belarusian outlawed university:

> "When EHU moved from Minsk to Vilnius, there was a clear understanding that **we were EHU**. There was a community, a classical academic corporation: students, lecturers, the administration – [..] we care about each other, we build a bright future together. But then all these questions start to appear: relocation, why this is allowed, why we can't, why this is so, why that is different. Constant revisions of some conditions [and] rules under which we are working [...] All that led to the questions: hold on, what is the 'EHU project', what are we talking about? [...] when you pose questions to the administration, they say: you see, **we are a small private university** [...] this is our private matter. And when the university speaks to the world, with donors, we hear that it is a hope, it is a Belarusian democracy, educating people for future" (Lecturer, Media Studies).

In the interviews, scholars addressed the alienation between administration and academic staff both in economic terms (e.g., the administration's "ineffective management") and political terms (e.g., "authoritarianism", "repressions" as a

dominant style of communication). They rarely pointed out the role of specific people in internal EHU politics using instead the general 'the administration'. However, some described the situation as transformation of the university into a 'family business' or a 'private firm', which implicitly underlines the influence of the rector who takes the lead of the 'business'.

Over time, EHU scholars started to accept the position of 'managed academics', thus departing from the model of spirit-driven and voluntary contribution to the university's development. Accepting the division between academia and management, they put on the agenda the revision of working conditions and decent remuneration comparable to other European universities. They often mentioned that until 2014, most lecturers had to agree with short-term contracts to cut tax and insurance costs of the university and commute between Belarus and Lithuania on a tourist visa, which was a mutual breach of Lithuanian labor legislation. Unsecured contracts and working 'shifts' marginalized lecturers' positions at the university, which contradicted their academic status:

> "I had such full-time job: i.e., I had to teach, I had to be present on- and offline, supervise term papers, be on the thesis defense committee plus do volunteering of different kinds. And plus, of course, I had to submit a research report. I had no problems with the research report; I participated everywhere and went [to the conferences] very actively. I had no problems with the research report – but interestingly, they required it from us. It means that despite [that we had to travel under] a tourist visa, we had to submit a research report. **As if we were tenured employees** with employment contracts" (Lecturer, Cultural Studies)

Thus, economic rights became an issue not less relevant for professional self-esteem and asserting academic status than participation in the university governance. Altogether, claims for academic self-governance, working conditions, and transparent decision-making manifested in the conflict between the EHU administration and a group of lecturers during university elections in 2014. Their dismissal and swift reform of labor contracts and governance as a response from the administration's side had led to polarization not only between the management and the lecturers, but within the academic community as well, which continues to grow.

This finding is in line with Kogan's statement that external threats and challenges could strengthen academic communities, but external and multiple pressures and stress could challenge communitarian values as well (Kogan, 2000: 211). The organizational transformation of EHU supports this argument: the identity of the 'academic community' consolidated against Belarusian authorities changed with the perception of the university as an enterprise managed by administration. The shift in organizational identity experienced within a short period after re-opening in Lithuania could not but result in an identity drift of the scholars, which appeared during the conflicts over academic self-governance and working conditions.

3.2. Sources of identity: Nostalgia and academic freedom

As illustrated in the previous parts, EHU scholars did not necessarily perceive the rapid transformation of the university after its re-establishment in new country as smooth or explicitly positive. For many, external and internal processes changed the university to the extent incompatible with their understanding of organizational identity and own academic identity. In its turn, this poses a question: what constitutes the role model of EHU identity for its academics.

The first source was found in reflections on the university's "golden age" in Minsk. Despite differences in individual stories and conflicting visions on EHU current situation, the nostalgic image of EHU in Minsk shared similar features across interviews. Their reflections comprised a nostalgic narrative of an exceptional university, a vantage point for young ambitious lecturers in Belarus, a place where research and teaching life were in full swing. The metaphor of a "golden age" refers to the frequently expressed view that the heights EHU reached in Minsk never repeated after its re-opening in Lithuania.

As pointed out by Cohen, symbolizing past plays an important role in sustaining identity of a community especially in times of intensive social change, and rhetorically remind about common goals, values, and culture (Cohen, 2008: 102). In Yljioki's words, collective narrative in rapidly changing environment:

> "strengthens collective identity as to where the organization is coming from and where it is going [...] Likewise, it provides individuals with resources to orient in and make sense of their daily work, to construct their identity as a part of the organization and to find their own respective places in it" (Ylijoki, 2005: 557).

Scholars' accounts allowed to define some features that made EHU distinctive from other universities in Belarusian educational and political context of 1990s-2000s. First, it was a high quality of education and research, which put EHU in the top-list of Belarusian universities in humanities/social sciences. Availability of funds from international foundations provided the basis for intensive research development: as one interviewee recalls, "the 'project' [EHU] was so interesting" at that time that it motivated him to choose Belarus over Germany to continue academic career. 'Experiment' and 'innovation' were also an integral part of the university identity: e.g., the interviewees often recalled that university closing facilitated quick adjustment to the remote learning format, which appeared in other Belarusian universities much later.

The contrast between EHU and conventional Belarusian education was intensified by personal experiences of working or studying at the flagship Belarusian State University, which produced many future EHU academics. Albeit the reasons to move from BSU to EHU should not be constrained to those of identity choice – they could include personal or pragmatic reasons as well – there was a certain convergence in how interviewees contrasted BSU to EHU: rigid, bureaucratized, hierarchical in the structure and communication, not open to new research areas that proliferated in social sciences at that time.

Another feature that attracted academics to EHU in Belarus was the ability to communicate as equals with colleagues, the administration, and students – not a common case in other post-soviet Belarusian academia. Excessive presence of the state in daily life of a private university was also a consolidating factor of EHU community, be it mobilization to pass accreditation or running remote classes during a gap year after the closing. Nostalgia for EHU spirit appeared in the democratic atmosphere, the ability to speak up and criticize regardless of the opponents' status, rather than in equal participation of staff and students in academic governance, which further became a topical issue for EHU in Lithuania.

Altogether, these features served as a source of commitment – feeling of working in something more than a university:

> "Picture this: [...] a very nice period of life that was focused only on EHU. **Work** – **at EHU, research** – **at EHU, friends** – **at EHU, art value and different joys** – **at EHU.** It was **everything**. It was a small planet, where we existed for some time. That's why when they closed us after the long-lasting resistance [...], I came [to the university] on October 4, there was nothing left. No job prospects, no students, everything was cut off. [..] And for a year, yes, for a year I did not work, although there were too many offers: from BSU, from the Academy of Science, i.e. my colleagues remained here, they invited me to different universities, faculties. For some reason, I... I was not capricious, I stuck to my guns: no, and that's it, I did not want to change the place, since I believed that it would be a sort of moral betrayal against my university**. I believed that it was my university**". (Professor, Law)

The second reference point for true EHU identity appeared in scholars' perceptions of ideal academic life – in other words, in understanding of academic freedom. Academic freedom can be treated as an essential component of academic identity – "the ideology of profession-across-disciplines, the profession created out of the common circumstance of an academic appointment in a college or a university" (Metzger, 1978: 107). In case of EHU, "academic freedom was turned into an important element of EHU's collective identity" (Gapova, 2009: 275).

One of the rare common points shared across interviews was that EHU continued to provide at least freedom 'in the classroom' – a teaching ability to create and run courses constrained only by Lithuanian legal requirements. The same applied to the freedom of participation in European research, public or educational projects run in Belarus or elsewhere, which many respondents attracted to EHU.

Despite expressed concerns about the decreasing ability and willingness of EHU managers or donors to provide financial support, at least they did not interfere into scholars' engagement outside of the university.

As was described in a section on 'interaction' order of EHU identity, scholars approached the expanding role of management in the university as an assault against their academic freedom. For some, both discontent over marginalization of the academics' status at the university and nostalgia for the EHU's bright past

resulted in an acute conflict with the administration. The comment of a lecturer who further left EHU illustrates this discrepancy between the 'desired' and 'the real' EHU identity:

> "[..] the highest manifestation of all that, of academic freedom, is when the university itself becomes an object of critical thinking. [..] In our case, **I was disappointed that academic freedom in my idealistic understanding of a student who applied to this university** and thought the point was in that. This is [other] Belarusian universities where they suppress you and say that something is not politically desirable.[..] And here [at EHU], not only do they confirm a topic [of your research] – they discuss it in broader, socially important contexts. And then, when the university becomes an object of this intellectual critical self-reflection, it turns out that EHU did not survive [..]: a class of administrators emerged who said that the 'project' was someone's property". (Lecturer, Social Sciences)

For others, EHU was still a more liberal institution where they are free to assert academic or civic identity, compared to other Belarusian universities. In this case, the departure point was a relative perspective across Belarusian academia rather than reference to the past EHU image.

> "There are many layers of my activities that I am describing [in the interview] that of an activist, a researcher, a civic activist... And that of a creative writer. And actually, **despite all the crises** that we are going through at EHU**,** I think that EHU, on the other hand, **helps me to keep and develop all my areas** [of interests]. I don't think that my colleagues in Belarus could combine those easily. Maybe, there should be such people, no doubts. But it is more complicated to do in Belarus, than at EHU in Lithuania" (Lecturer, Social Sciences)

Altogether, scholars referred to the two sources that shaped their understanding of the 'desired' university image – the past EHU life in Belarus and academic freedom. The first one referred to the times of EHU before the exile, whose distinctiveness lied in its dynamics, experimental nature, and egalitarian communication between colleagues and students. The latter was built on personal ideas of the university as a place where they can exercise academic freedom. While for some, discrepancy between the desired image and organizational change was strong enough to result in the final split with EHU, others described EHU as a better place to realize themselves as scholars and/or citizens contrasting it with the general situation in Belarus.

3.3. Professional strategies of EHU scholars

The findings of the previous sections showed that organizational identity of the 'university in exile' combines features that seem to be contradictory at first glance. This does confirm that identity-building in an organization is "complex and evolving, perhaps containing multiple inconsistencies and incongruities" (Humphreys & Brown, 2002: 424). If binaries of 'political' and 'educational',

'integration' and 'isolation' seemed to co-exist in respondents' narratives, the binary of 'academic community' and a 'family business' turned out to be the main source of conflicts that even impacted composition of EHU (In fact, 13 out of 18 interviewees left EHU either as a result of top-down dismissal or voluntary resignation).

However, construction of one's identity does not end with their withdrawal from the organization, which might be also true in the case of academics. Neither do they necessarily give up their disciplinary and professional status, nor discontinue membership in other communities they belong to. This section tries to explore the 'individual order' of academic identity: in other words, how EHU scholars assert their academic identity after cutting off affiliation with the university. I focused on cases of scholars who came back to Belarusian education after EHU, since it seemed impossible to summarize the biographies of all the respondents.

Integrating back to Belarusian academia, finding a job in home universities often posed a problem for EHU scholars, even if they had valid reasons to quit their employment at EHU. A former affiliation with EHU was the factor for domestic universities not to employ them for ideological reasons. As one of the interviewees who decided to pursue a PhD in Europe after EHU explained it:

> "[...] **I wanted to develop the university, I wanted to develop inside the university, I somehow clearly saw my position inside the university.** I realized that I offer an original research, an original topic, which is very adequate for a university in exile. [...]The only thing, of course, was that I had no [PhD-] dissertation [...] But then... I had serious problems with the head [of the department].
>
> [...] I started to look for a job outside of EHU. And only then I realized, let's put it this way: I could not settle anywhere in Europe without a dissertation. **In Belarus, nobody will hire me because I am from EHU**, nobody will take the responsibility. And outside of academia, I cannot earn money with the expertise in photography [...] At that time the situation at EHU became even worse, it worsened not only because of my conflict with XYZ, there was a conflict between the administration and lecturers due to various reasons. It was my great personal disappointment in my colleagues, when I realized that EHU, the university I would like to work at, did not exist anymore". (Lecturer, Cultural Studies)

For EHU scholars in general, quitting the university could result in pursuing an academic career at a university in Europe or in Russia, or working in Belarus, albeit in a non-education field. Others could find a position in regional Belarusian universities where affiliation with EHU did not matter so much so that they could join universities in the capital city after some time.

However, there were some exceptions as well. The citation below provides reflections of the professor who managed to find a position at one of the well-established state universities in Minsk after his resignation from EHU. Despite differences in the personal situations, it resonates with the previous comment: identifying himself as a successful academic was incompatible with the frustration over organizational belonging, which facilitated his withdrawal:

> "Last years it was very uncomfortable, unpleasant to work. At least, for me. I adore students. I liked teaching, students adored and adore me. My research activated because a lot of time appeared. But the psychological environment, the climate at the university changed so much, that each year it got harder and harder to be there. And now, observing, what is going on – some echo of events – I catch myself thinking: it is so nice not to be there. **It is not my university. It is not my team. These are, perhaps, not my ideas, not my concepts, not my vision**.
>
> [...] I was offered courses which do not belong to my specialization [...]. During the first semester, it took me a lot of time to work on these courses, etc. Now it [semester] is gone, it is not that complicated. Secondly, it also took me a long time to adjust. Because [..] academic freedom in Belarus is not cultivated. **Even now there are some things that embarrass me**, which I can't get used to**. But psychologically, I feel comfortable**. I do not see these dirty looks". (Professor, Law)

At the same time, integrating back in Belarusian education could provide interesting insights for scholars about their place and value in the Belarusian society, which confirms Välimaa's statement that national culture also plays a role in asserting academic identity (Välimaa, 1998: 133):

> "...if we talk about my personal changes, for example, here, in Belarus, after EHU, I came up with an idea: why not, I want to teach in Belarusian [language]. I would not say that it was inappropriate at EHU: yes, there were people that always spoke in Belarusian, they also taught in Belarusian. But the environment – I could not say that it did not enable – it was like: What for? Let's do it in English. We will have Erasmus students – they need it in English. And yes, I had to make a choice what to do next**: OK, [I] stay in education [...], but the idea was to teach in Belarusian. I mean, if teaching – then in Belarus, if not teaching, [or] if in Russian – what's the point?** It is not that interesting". (Lecturer, Media Studies)

A professor's story cited below illustrates interrelation of the academic, organizational, and civic identity. The conflict with the EHU administration followed by the scholar's dismissal eventually motivated him to co-create an "alternative to EHU" (and the general model of Belarusian education as well) – an independent private university in Minsk, again, focused on social sciences and humanities. However, despite the negative attitude towards EHU after dismissal, it provided him with practices that could be implemented at the new university – and with counterexamples that should be avoided:

> "EHU, let's say, was a rather good technology of study process management, which was… Well, we simply had to do it, because we follow the Lithuanian rules, including organization of remote learning. At EHU, it started long before it was adopted in Belarus. Secondly, I was preparing the university statute and tried to include some elements from the revised EHU statute, which existed in 2013. So yes, **we take something from it.**"

"[…] each Belarusian university has a formalized statute, which is very hard to bypass. And according to this statute, the chairperson of the Senate [a collegial academic body] is the university's rector by default. I mean, this is the first fundamental breach of academic freedom – it should not be so. But on the other hand, even such an undemocratic statute assumes that students should comprise 25% of the council. You see, such opportunities do exist. By the way, at EHU students never made up even 10% […] And the most important part is that we have a working group, **we have already enacted a mechanism of collegial decision-making,** which gives us hope that it will continue in the future". (Professor, History)

The presented cases support Kogan's view that professional (academic) identity is both individual and social, or in her terms – distinctive and embedded (Kogan, 2000: 210). In these stories, scholars' affiliation with EHU was an important part of their professional identification – "the setting that individual looks for esteem and recognition" (Kogan, 2000: 210). Hence, their trajectories after dismissal are not shaped in isolation but linked to their former life at EHU, even if the withdrawal was triggered by dissatisfaction or conflict. Difficulties linked to integrating back into Belarus have nothing to do with academic competencies of the persons, but with ideological opposition associated with their affiliation with EHU. Although asserting professionalism in Belarus was harder, it could unexpectedly provide room for exercising other identities: e.g., give more psychological comfort and personal time or provide insights for combining academic activities and civic engagement.

Conclusion

The context of rapid changes in educational policy and the shifts in the principles of academic work raise the question of self-identification for academics at universities. This paper offered a closer look at the non-trivial case of the so-called 'university in exile' stuck in-between the standards of competitive European education and the need to fulfill its social and political mission – produce European-minded graduates for Belarus while staying in another country.

Escaping Belarus for Lithuania after the conflict with Lukashenka's government, EHU retained its focus on Belarusian students and the image of the only Belarusian university aimed at democratic values and European education. Maintaining one's identity – "the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities" – presents a challenge in politicized context (Jenkins, 2008: 18). Understanding how EHU scholars make sense of the university and themselves as academic professionals was the goal of the research. Empirical findings were based on narrative analysis of 18 interviews with the former and current EHU academics.

The narrative analysis revealed that EHU's existence in several contexts (European, Lithuanian, and Belarusian) accompanied by internal organizational changes made fragmentation a distinctive feature of the university identity. Conflicting, even contradictive narratives appeared in the metaphors circulating across the interviews, which finally led to identity binaries: EHU as an educational yet political 'project', as an 'isolated' yet European university; as an 'academic community' yet shifting to a 'family business'.

- The binary of EHU as a political and educational 'project' was linked to the university's relations with international stakeholders. Political identity of EHU rooted in the conflict with Belarusian government and adherence to liberal ideology became important to secure donors' funding but was overused as the cost of educational quality of the university. Over time, educational value of the university deteriorated due to the donors' 'commercialization' policy and short-sightedness of the administration. In contrast, the identity interplay appeared differently in communication with the civil society: facing constant criticism in Belarus due to little democratization effect, the scholars asserted educational identity of EHU – producing high-qualified, initiative, and open-minded graduates.

- At the country level, identity duality of EHU manifested in the binary of 'isolated' and 'integrated' university. The scholars claimed EHU to be an integral part of European education yet saw it isolated in Lithuania. Neoliberal trends in Lithuanian education and increasing requirements to research and teaching productivity were often presented as a threat to EHU distinctiveness and its national focus. However, when the university was exempted from standard Lithuanian accreditation, this came into conflict with the professional self-esteem of scholars. The claim for recognition of EHU identity as a special Belarusian university in Lithuania collided with

their identities of academics, for whom the new legal status was an official confirmation of EHU's inability to comply with Lithuanian educational standards.

In Jenkin's concept of 'three (identity) orders', the binaries 'political vs. educational project' and 'integrated vs. isolated university' belong to the 'institutional order' of identity.

- EHU's collective identity was strongly organized around the metaphor of 'academic community' that served to consolidate scholars under political pressure in Belarus and position selves as methodologically and ideologically different from other Belarusian universities. In Lithuania, the gradual power shift in favor of EHU management threatened the sense of 'community' and resulted in scholars' resistance to the new model of university life. In their reflections, they repeatedly constructed EHU as shifting from governance of the 'community' to authoritarian rule of the EHU rector who 'owns' the university. The frustration over diminishing spirit of EHU was intensified by the feeling that internal 'threats' damage the university more than external state pressure. Recurring conflicts with the administration go in line with Cohen's interpretation of why 'communities' react so assertively to what they perceive as breach of their boundaries (Cohen, 2008: 109).

The binary of 'community vs. family business' represents the 'interaction order' of identity – shaped in communication and power struggle inside the university. This binary appeared to have a profound effect on how scholars perceive EHU and their own academic identity.

- Nostalgia about EHU achievements before its move to Lithuania and perception of academic freedom became two main sources of how scholars constructed their own vision of due individual and institutional development in academia. As confirmed in other studies, both sources serve as a reference point for asserting identity in the context of rapid changes in educational system (Henkel, 2005; Ylijoki, 2005). In case of EHU scholars, the reference to the 'best times' of the university in Minsk was important to preserve the collective identity of a small and advanced community, methodologically and ideologically different from other academic groups in Belarus. At the same time, their speculations on academic freedom revealed their personal understanding of an ideal place for unconstrained research, teaching and participation in the university's life – and why EHU does not fit their vision.

- Finally, the 'individual order' of the identity appeared in scholars' actions related to own professional trajectories at EHU and beyond it. No single answer can be provided on whether academic identities of all scholars were compromised by ambiguous changes that EHU experienced in Lithuania. For some, EHU was still a proper place where they can fulfill their potential as researchers or even citizens compared to the situation in other Belarusian universities. On the contrary, the stories of scholars who returned to Belarus show that their vision of the things at EHU was

incompatible with the personal self-esteem of a true researcher or lecturer. While integrating back into Belarusian academia was sometimes a challenging and non-linear process, shifting professional activities to the home country could instead provide new insights for civic self-realization.

Although these findings are challenging to generalize due to their contextual specifics, they provide several points that might be considered in similar studies. First, they call for more attention to political and societal context in analysis of identity and identification in higher education and, thus, for more convergence of the two disciplines. Secondly, they contribute to the studies on academic and university identity – the domain which became underdeveloped in research on Eastern Europe. Finally, they aim to contribute to regional studies and expand analysis of Belarus beyond the focus on its political regime, relations with Russia and the European Union and participation in regional integration.

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Annex

Interview guide

NB: The questions posed to each interviewee were adjusted to one's professional biography, working experience and academic background.

Topic	General Question	More Specific Questions
Start of the career at EHU	Please, tell me how you came to EHU.	How did you start working at EHU? In your opinion, was there anything that distinguished EHU from other universities in Belarus? What was your position/what did your duties include when the university was closing in 2004?
Closure of EHU in Belarus and re-opening in Lithuania	How did closing of the university affect your life and career?	Why did you decide to continue working at EHU? Did the decision involve any personal risks?
3.1 Professional life in EHU-Vilnius	How did you develop professionally at EHU-Vilnius? How did the university itself evolve?	How did you go through adaptation in Lithuania? Can you name any opportunities that the re-establishment invoked? Did you feel any changes from the point of professional development?
3.2 Transformation of the university		Can you name events or processes at EHU that, in your opinion, had a major impact on its development? Your development as an academic? *Possible topics to discuss:* *Relations with Lithuanian authorities and impact on the university activities*

		Relations with donors and implications for study process and financial sustainability of EHU
		Relations with Belarus society
		Academic staff-administration relations
		Economic status of academic staff at EHU
		Research and teaching life at EHU
Quitting EHU* (in case the interviewee left the university)	Under what circumstances did you leave EHU?	What were the reasons for dismissal? To what extent did the internal situation at EHU affect it? Did you have any alternatives? Why did you choose this country/university/ this job? How did you assess it?
Perception of academic freedom	How did you understand academic freedom?	With all your academic (and administrative) experience in mind, how do you understand academic freedom? What would you include in this notion?

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